Miki Kashtan:

Although there are forms of privilege that can be acquired (wealth and education are key examples), most of us acquire most of the privilege that we have before we are even born. Moreover, we don’t have much choice about whether or not to have the privilege. If I were to come from a super wealthy family, for example, I could conceivably give away my entire fortune. That wouldn’t do away with the way that the privilege I was born into affects who I am. I would be way more likely, still, than someone who grew up in poverty, to have levels of education and manners of behavior, thought, and attitudes that are likely to land me a decent job or the capacity to create a successful business which, once again, would put me in a position of greater material wealth than others. In addition, as Assata Richards, a community organizer and participant in a recent class, said, “What privilege means is that effort and activity have different returns for different people based on the privilege structures in our society.” Hard work, the cornerstone of the belief in a meritocratic society, doesn’t guarantee anything and only works at all in so far as systems of privilege allow it to.

We cannot run away from having privilege once we have it. The only choice I believe we have is how we engage with the privilege that we have. I have so far identified four negative ways of engaging with privilege, and four positive ways of engaging with privilege.

Engaging with Privilege: The Negative Path

Although I catalog below four distinct ways of engaging with privilege, in actual reality, they are often intertwined and blend into each other. I still find value in understanding, and supporting others in understanding, the differences between them and how they contribute to the perpetuation of systems of privilege.

**Denial/Invisibility.**One of the ways that systems of privilege continue to be transferred from generation to generation is by making the existence of the privilege invisible. What’s rendered invisible is both the gap between the experiences of those with privilege and those without it, and the relationship between the two. In the context of a commitment to equality and meritocracy, the latter in particular is obscured. It is easy, for many, to think that if others applied themselves, they, too, could reach wealth. Or, seeing how some few darker skinned individuals have “made it” economically or politically, to extrapolate to a claim that there is no more racism and that claims to the contrary are based on personal lack of taking responsibility, or lack of willingness to accept the results of fair play.

Denial contributes to systems of privilege by reducing the chances of people having conscious choice about what to do with their privilege.

**Guilt/Shame**. In the same way that lack of systemic perspective can easily lead to denial, so guilt and shame can emerge from the blending of privilege and attitude. Many people find it nearly impossible not to equate their own access to privilege with a sense of personal badness, a moral failure, when opening up to hearing about the reality of structures of privilege that benefit some at the expense and suffering of so many others. For example, in some segments of the population, people experience shame if they inherited large amounts of money and others in their communities are struggling, and they end up hiding the fact of their wealth from others.

This association of tragedy with moral judgment is directly an outcome of a culture steeped in right/wrong thinking rather than focusing on human needs and how best to attend to them.

Guilt and shame contribute to the continuation of privilege because they are paralyzing feelings that keep us spinning within them rather than mobilizing us to take action, individually or collectively.

**Defensiveness.**Because of how vulnerable to judgment and self-judgment we are, and how easy it can then be to hear blame and judgment regardless of whether it’s there, defensiveness is almost a “natural” response as a way to counteract the possibility of shame and guilt: if I can “prove”, at least to myself, that I am a good person, then I don’t have to look more closely at the privilege, or listen to what others are telling me.

This is why in so many conversations related to privilege, those with privilege focus attention on their intention and on being misunderstood, while those without the privilege try, often unsuccessfully, to focus attention on the effect of the privilege or of unconscious behaviors that emerge from having the privilege.

Defensiveness contributes to the existing system by keeping the focus on the individual level, and, specifically, on the person with privilege. Meanwhile, the attempts of those without the privilege to call attention to it, to open up a conversation, to mobilize to take action, or in any other way to create change, go unattended.

**Entitlement.**In a world structured around scarcity, everyone is scared to lose. In a stunning piece of research, many multi-millionaires were asked if they have enough. Most said no. On average and across the range of wealth in the sample, they said that having 25% more than they had would be enough. After the initial shock of finding out this information, I am no longer surprised. When we don’t trust that our needs can be met in and of themselves, we are pushed to come up with justifications for why we deserve what we have, and hold on to it as tightly as possible.

When a friend of mine and her two sisters confronted their three brothers after discovering a trust in the family that distributed money to all living males whenever someone died, their brothers uniformly stated, simply, that they weren’t the ones who set it up. With that, they were satisfied to keep the money instead of seeing that they each could divide it with one sister and then all would have access to it regardless of what the trust says.

The sense of entitlement contributes to the persistence of privilege in direct ways by keeping those who have the privilege from being able to be creative in their use of it.

Engaging with Privilege: The Positive Path

For each of the negative ways of engaging with privilege, I have a found a positive way that moves the person engaging it into more freedom and choice. In addition, if enough people engaged in the ways I describe below, perhaps a larger shift would become possible.

**Owning the privilege.**Time and time again I notice just how simple and strong it is to own and acknowledge my privilege where I have it, and to do so without guilt and shame. When I do it, there is almost invariably deep and sometimes overwhelming sorrow. Sorrow, as big as it can be, is soft. It joins with life rather than fights against it through denial. Once denial is traversed, recognizing what is true releases energy that was blocked in the hiding, and makes it available for connection and for choice.

**Learning about privilege.**When I came to the US in 1983, I knew absolutely nothing about privilege. I was aware of racism, which made absolutely no sense to me as a foreigner and immigrant to the US. It took some years before I was exposed to people and groups that were looking deeply at social differences and their effect. Then, in 1991, I took a course on race and ethnicity in the US as part of graduate studies in sociology, and wrote a paper about racism in the women’s movement which was an accelerated immersion in the topic. Since then, it’s been a steady experience of learning more and more about the historical roots of race privilege in the US, and I intend to keep learning for as long as I read at all.

In some ways, it’s easier for me, an outsider, than for white people born in the US to approach the topic. I don’t carry the weight of guilt that growing up in the US leads so many whites into. It is not my ancestors nor the structures created by them that have established what is happening. Similarly, I learned about the extent of the dispossession of Palestinians that was part of establishing the state of Israel when living far away, once again making my task easier than it is for those living right there, facing the reality in the most visceral way. So I may be limited in my ability to imagine what it would be like for people with privilege being born into it and living in its direct context.

I can only say that I have seen many times how learning about the history of privilege and of its structural nature relieves people from the suffering of guilt and shame. I suspect this is because the personal element becomes less pronounced as the magnitude of the larger issues is exposed.

In addition, learning about any particular privilege any of us has, within the particular society or culture we live in, gives us an entryway into understanding the particular ways we may unwittingly reinforce structures of privilege in our most mundane actions. That, too, increases choice and reduces the chances of inadvertently acting in harmful ways. I can’t imagine that not being liberating.

**Opening to receive feedback.**Perhaps the most difficult discipline of engaging with privilege is that of choosing to do whatever it takes internally to be relaxed and open to hear feedback from a person who doesn’t have the particular privilege that I do. Much of my learning about the topic of privilege, especially as it relates to race relations in the US, came through friends and students who were willing to speak truth to me across lines of power difference, sometimes two (both race and my position as a leader). This is very hard work. And I know its value and necessity. When I am the person with privilege, I am way less likely than the person without the privilege to notice the dynamics of power. Because of that, and especially in times of conflict, I would almost always want me as the person with privilege to commit to hearing and opening to all feedback even when I am utterly convinced that whatever upset the person is experiencing is based on misunderstanding my intentions. Why? Because focusing on my intentions before focusing on the effect of my actions reinforces the structures of privilege. I have compassion for the many times I do not succeed, because I know how strong is my need, anyone’s need, to be seen and understood. And this compassion is not about getting me off the hook, only about motivating me more fully. I am always committed to this even when I am not successful. I want to get better and better at holding gently my need to be seen, breathing with it, and letting go of having it met, at least for a while, while I make myself available to those who don’t have the privilege that I have.

The freedom that comes with this willingness is the freedom of choice about my own needs. One of the core practices of inner freedom that I am aware of is precisely the capacity to live in peace with unmet needs, because it is when our needs are not met that we are most likely to lose choice. Being able to sit with unmet needs means having more choice, more capacity for freedom and nonviolence.

**Stewarding privilege for the benefit of all.**The last of the four positive ways of engaging with privilege that I have found is a deep and conscious shift from possessing to stewarding my privilege. Instead of automatically and reflexively assuming that the privilege is “mine” and the benefit of having it goes to me, this change in attitude puts me in a position of seeing the privilege as belonging to the whole and seeing me as its steward for the benefit of all.

A whole new vista of possibilities opens up when this shift begins.

I’ve engaged quite a number of people now with thinking proactively about what resources they have, how they are using them now, and how they might want to use them for the benefit of all. So far, people have loved this activity, and have felt inspired and lighter after doing it. Going through this simple activity myself is what led me to begin the [Facing Privilege](http://baynvc.org/events/?tribe_paged=1&tribe_event_display=list&tribe-bar-search=facing+privilege+calls) calls, and then to doubling their number to twice a month. It was immediately after Darren Wilson was acquitted after killing Mike Brown in Ferguson. I already had the frame of using my privilege for the benefit of all, and I didn’t know what I could do in that instance, when I so wanted to do *something*. Upon reflection, I realized that one of my privileges, an acquired one, is access to a small platform and a small following, and that I could use *that* privilege to do the work of moving, however minutely, in the direction of dismantling the system of privilege. I could open up conversations about privilege that would be loving and fierce.

I have never looked back. These conversations are some of my most cherished moments of every month. My internal willingness keeps growing to engage, to challenge myself and others, to reach across divides, to make messes by trying to offer support, to name things that others may not feel up to looking at, and to put myself overall in more and more uncomfortable positions.

Necessary and Unnecessary Discomfort

The willingness to experience discomfort is essential for shifting from the negative to the positive ways of engaging with privilege. The positive path doesn’t eliminate discomfort. Indeed, I don’t know any way in which any of us in a position of privilege can wake up to it without experiencing discomfort. The question for me is not whether or not there will be discomfort; only what kind of discomfort.

My way of understanding the deepest source of the discomfort emerges from my faith in the human spirit. I believe we are all born with an innate capacity for care and from it with the desire to contribute to life around us. Because of that, the way we usually explain to ourselves implicitly why we have privilege is by denying that we have the privilege and at the same time thinking that we deserve it. Both ends of this illogical position combine to provide some ease in relation to our fundamental care. To suddenly recognize that there really is no reason for us to have it other than that’s how society is structured puts us face-to-face with the reality that our privilege is at the expense of other people. **This spells a moral contradiction that I see as the root of the challenge of facing privilege**.

We cannot protect ourselves and others from this discomfort because the existence of systems of privilege is, indeed, at odds with our basic inclination to care for everyone’s needs. This discomfort, the anguish of truly seeing how much of what provides comfort, ease, material resources, access, and more to some is at cost to others, doesn’t go away. It can’t go away for as long as the systems we have in place are what they are. Nothing else would bring an end to the excruciating and growing disparities that exist in the world in terms of access to resources of all kinds. That anguish, when faced fully, becomes a source of energy fueling work for transformation. I find it generative and useful.

The unnecessary discomfort stems from making a systemic issue appear to be an individual failing. When the word privilege is either used or heard as a statement about the moral character of the person with the privilege, it tends to bring about shame and defensiveness, both of which interfere with learning.

Given that many of us want to make the reality of systems of privilege known, I find it important to remind myself that we become more effective the less shaming and the more fierce tenderness we can bring to the topic. Then we can find ways of supporting all of us in staying present as we look at the untold suffering that exists in the world because of massive differences in power, so that we can truly come together and create change.

There are no guarantees, because anything that anyone says, no matter how skillful, can still be filtered through the experiences of the listener into something that is far from the original intention. My hope is that we can find a way to do this collective awakening with only the necessary and unavoidable discomfort, and not more. This, to me, is one of the core tasks facing us if we are to still find a way to turn around the march towards destruction that’s only been accelerating in my lifetime.

Because of how easy it is to fall into self-blame and shame, I am actively excited about focusing on how much liberation *for self*there can be in engaging with privilege. I have no hope of transforming the world if people engage with privilege out of obligation. Instead, I want to both remember and to effectively show others that having unexamined privilege and unconscious or reactive ways of using it is at cost to all, not only those without privilege. The cost is drastically different, and still it affects us all.

In this context, I experience dedicating my resources for the benefit of all as the most liberatory of all the positive ways of engaging with privilege. It challenges the heart of the system: a privileged person’s ability to protect themselves from discomfort. By willingly taking on discomfort, I begin to free myself from attachment to the privilege. As I do that, more and more, I live in more integrity and less fear at the very same time as contributing to others and to transforming the systems of privilege, even if minutely. Less separation all around.

**Why Focus on Patriarchy?**

The focus on patriarchy emerges from the understanding that patriarchy plays a foundational role in everything. Yes, I mean it: everything.

Patriarchy is not the same as sexism; patriarchy is to sexism very much what structural racism is to (interpersonal) racism: it’s a system that runs independently of any one person’s attitudes or behaviors. As I understand it, patriarchy is the original separation, and it restructured both institutions and thinking. At its core, it’s a separation from life, from self, from others, and from nature. Capitalism, racism, and all the other forms of exploitation, oppression, war, and now environmental degradation, could only come into being because patriarchy already primed us for them.

These calls at the same time are premised on maintaining a distinction between what is an *acute* issue and what is a *root* issue. In the US, and in many other industrialized Global North countries, the acute issues are global warming and racism/xenophobia. In some other parts of the world, acute issues may be starvation. And there are places where the most acute issues directly relate to women. Whatever the acute issue is anywhere, it makes sense for it to receive the direct activist attention. The hope fueling these calls is that whatever the acute issue is, those taking action for change will do this with an analysis that recognizes the root cause, which is just about always patriarchy. If activists don’t, then even if they succeed they will end up reinforcing patriarchy, sometimes even using patriarchal methods without knowing it or even on purpose, as in “by any means necessary”.

In the absence of a direct focus on patriarchy, even work that directly aims to support women will be diminished. Thus it is that feminism has been reduced to a struggle for individual women’s rights, and even those are often narrowly defined in ways that focus on the acute issues of white middle class women who are not, at the same time, affected by the additional devastation of race and impoverishment. A focus on patriarchy allows us to see it as a system that sustains all division, separation, oppression, scarcity, powerlessness, and so much more.

If we use patriarchy as an analytic lens and overcoming it as the active lens, then we can maintain a commitment to right away do things differently, regardless of what the issues are that we want to engage with.