

# WAKING UP TO WHITE PRIVILEGE

By Kirsten Overdahl

My name is Kirsten. I am a white, 27-year-old doctoral candidate at Duke University. For three years I have worked with Tyrone as a client and training partner. I consider myself educated, knowledgeable, and active about social and environmental justice: I read voraciously, I follow the news, I attend seminars and webinars, and I discuss with others. The weeks following George Floyd's murder were therefore a brutal wake-up to the reality that my engagement with justice has always been one of privilege, and that I know extraordinarily little.

Daily, I started reading accounts of racism from activists, colleagues, friends, and strangers that shocked me and left me speechless. I found myself asking again and again, "How on earth can racism still be so prevalent in 2020?" I know I am not alone in asking that well-intentioned question, but I think that question is just as much evidence of racism as is any individual racist act. Institutionalized racism surrounds us all: it is still alive and well, and racism in the form of white privilege is persistent and prevalent. There is no greater evidence of white privilege than being unaware of the full scope of reality. There is no greater evidence of white privilege than "choosing to engage" with systemic and institutionalized racism, while meanwhile Black Americans must live in and navigate racist systems daily.

As a result, I have been humbled by the challenge of assessing the scope and power of the racist system I still live in. I have spent most of my life thinking that if I can combat racist thoughts, behaviors, and actions, I am therefore not a racist. Thanks to the work of scholars like Ibram Kendi, I now understand that although individual behavior matters, what matters just as much is living in and benefitting from systems that were never designed to be inclusive. As someone who has spent over 20 years of my life climbing the academic ladder, whose life has often been defined by doing so, it's uncomfortable to internalize the reality that despite any challenge I have ever faced, the institution of academia is built for people who look like me. While I have faced many obstacles during my academic journey, the color of my skin has never been one of them. I've never faced barriers to my admittance because of my skin color; I've never been made to feel out of place or unwelcome in a room of scholars; I've never been treated with skepticism or shock when I tell people what I do. Coming to understand this truth in the past months has been exceptionally humbling, even shameful.

However, shame does not create change – Black lives do not benefit from hanging my head. What does create change is taking the time personally to understand and evaluate why I feel shame, and then channeling the understanding, the guilt, and the anger into action. How can I take action? In academia, I must call out oppressive policies that disproportionately burden Black scholars; I must call out individually racist behaviors and be willing to take a side. In my day-to-day life, I must be willing to start conversations about dismantling oppressive systems, and to have conversations about harmful behaviors, whether intentional or unintentional. Racism thrives on complacency, and I cannot be complacent.

Rejecting complacency, of course, means that I need to be brave. Being brave is hard, but if training with Tyrone has taught me anything – and it's taught me a lot – it's that I am stronger than I think and braver than I believe. Let's be brave together.