

The Life of a Privileged Minority

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I rolled over in bed. I pressed my face into the pillows. It was a Saturday morning, and I had zero inclination to go anywhere or do anything. I was perfectly content laying in a motionless state for the next several hours. Momentarily, a wave of peace and serenity came over me. I was unburdened, warm, and comfortable. Not even the chilly air from the open window was enough to disturb me. I felt as if I should remain in this state of apathy for the rest of my life. Then my phone chimed with a text message, as if whole of digital society were passive-aggressively chastising my inaction. I looked at the words on the little screen. It said, "Hey, Henry, it's Marc. My family and I just got into Union Station. Do you want to meet up at the Women's March?" Although I didn't know in that moment, the Women's March would lead me to the epiphany that I could no longer pretend that social justice had no relevance to me. I could no longer ignore my status as a racial minority, and pretend that I was white. I could no longer pretend that the greater white American culture would ever be as inclusive to me as it has been to the white majority.

The problem was that I had been ignoring and pretending all my life. When confronted with social justice, apathy was my go-to response. Robert Marin, a Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pittsburg, defined apathy as "a syndrome of primary motivational loss that is not attributable to emotional distress, intellectual impairment, or diminished level of consciousness." In

laymen's terms, it means to not care, to not observe, or to ignore, even if the truth is as plain as the paper they use to make the protest signs. If Professor Marin attempted to apply his definition to my attitude towards social justice in the moment when I received Marc's text, no words would suit me better. I did not care for social justice movements, and much less for protests. I held the same opinions that most of white America still holds today: protests are loud, disruptive, and rowdy. They keep the ordinary course of business from happening. But I wasn't going into the city to protest. I was going there to meet my friend from high school. I looked back at the text and began typing.

I told Marc I would be in the city within the next two hours. For a moment, I wasn't sure if I could follow through with it. After about ten minutes, I stood up. My body wanted more than anything to flop back down on the bed. I wanted to send a message to Marc changing my mind to "no." Instead, I challenged myself. I challenged the Saturday status quo by moving forward. I challenged myself to shower, to dress, and get out the door to catch the shuttle-bus to Tenleytown. I challenged myself to wait in the Metro station, amidst the waves of protesters. I challenged myself not give into apathy.

Certainly, the temptation was there. I might have easily turned around. But something kept me there. As I boarded the train to Union Station, I looked up and down the tightly-packed crowd. Waves of individuals with picket signs and pink hats moved as one body. It wasn't so much a monolith as it was a testament to solidarity. These people were moving to one place, with more-or-less one goal in mind, united by the events of the day before. They were united against apathy. It was apathy that prevented other from moving forward, from keeping their promises to support the downtrodden and marginalized. It was apathy of the

Trump Administration, and its stances on the rights of women, immigrants, Muslims, the LGBTQ+ community, Latinos, African-Americans, the disabled, and many others. It was the apathy that keeps people in their beds, that keeps them from recognizing the outside reality. I did not want to expose my silent loyalty to the status quo, where apathy reigned supreme. This philosophy was incompatible with them. To act on it would leave them inconsolable. I remained with the crowd for the time being.

The train pulled into Union Station. I still could not find Marc. I called him, although his voice was barely audible with all the surrounding noise. He told me that his family was near the yellow gate. I trekked forward, dodging pockets of people, trying to pick out Marc's green Whalers sweatshirt. In the grand scheme of the Women's March, my search for Marc mattered little. The waves of women, men, and children continued to crash against the great force of apathy. Yet, I still hunted Marc's green sweatshirt in the sea of pink. Here I was, speeding towards my selfish goal, with apathy shielding me from the wrath of protesters. Marc and his family, a symbol of the quiet isolation of home, would bring me personal solidarity. They were a sanctuary from the explosiveness of political outrage, an island in this sea of pink. I had no solidarity with the crowd, at least not yet.

For the moment, I had no solidarity with the crowd because I indulged in the apathy that tried to keep me in bed. I indulged in the apathy that tempted me to turn back from the train. I held the same apathy that ushered in a conservative backlash in the Rust Belt and put Donald Trump in the White House. But the white majority says apathy isn't immoral; apathy doesn't characterize any wrongdoing. I can't be racist because I'm a person of color. I can't be sexist because I'm a

Democrat who supports equal pay. I can't be anti-immigrant because I was born in another country. These sets of traits are, in the eyes of the white majority, mutually exclusive. But the Women's March told me otherwise. I was never immune to discriminatory thoughts. I am just as capable of hate. I am just as capable of turning a blind eye to the needs of my fellow citizens. Apathy has rested in my consciousness since my beginnings. My education had a job of eliminating it, to open me up to different cultures and peoples so that my apathy might be replaced with sympathy. But this did not happen because I grew up white.

I grew up in such a way that some might consider me a "privileged minority." East Asians and Indians are stereotyped as gentrifying, upper-middle class citizens. I do nothing to break that stereotype. I was born in Saigon, adopted by Caucasian parents at 4 months old, and English was my first language. I know no other culture besides American culture. I grew up in two-income household with four bedrooms. I go to college in Washington D.C. I competed for the top of my class in high school, and graduated salutatorian with my name engraved on five plaques on our school atrium. Life has been easy for me.

My life as the child of Caucasian parents led me to think of myself not as Asian, or even Asian-American, but simply "American." I identified as an American the way that the white majority does. I have described myself as speaking and acting like a "white person." American culture (or even "white culture") has tuned me to the notes of the Caucasian majority. I have since been guilty of viewing social justice issues, even race, through the same lens of Caucasians. I subscribed to the philosophy of apathy that the Women's March stood against. I did this because my parents are Caucasian. But I could not escape the truth, the inextricably painful reality that the country would never be as kind to me as it was to my parents

when they grew up. I subconsciously tried to ignore racial issues the way that many white Americans do. But the differences made themselves known. My apathy back then came back to haunt me later.

The first of many incidents involved my friend Sarja, who was in my class in second-grade. At a brief stop at the water fountain after school, Sarja remarked that I was lucky. He said it was because I was “white.” I wasn’t sure what he meant at first, but he pointed out that I was lucky because his skin color was much darker than mine. Sarja continued, and said “You could drink from the clean water fountain back in the olden days.” Since then, I view the incident with a great deal of cynicism. I do so because the incident represents apathy in effect, the same apathy that dominated my thoughts and actions for nearly two decades. I realized being raised by Caucasian people and assuming white American culture does not make you white. Ta-Nehisi Coates used the term “Dreamer,” to describe those who would allow for domination of white culture. I was indoctrinated into the ways of the Dreamers by my Caucasian parents.

I was so indoctrinated that I didn’t know how to handle incidents that made a point of my differences. My friend Austin, also from elementary school, kept laughing at me while I was over his house. He repeated over and over that I was from China. I thought it was a joke at first, but it got on my nerves after a few exchanges. I insisted that I was from Vietnam. Eventually his father stepped in to scold him. After the incident passed, I could hear him crying in his room. As a child, I pitied him because I never liked having time outs either. At most, the racial aspect was a blip on my radar that I effectively ignored.

As an adult, I now pity him for his indoctrination. He was raised into the same American culture that I was. He, too, would become a practitioner---and therefore a perpetrator---of apathy. The difference

between us was that a privileged minority like myself lies to his heritage to accommodate this philosophy. I called myself an American. I left the Asian part out, because I was a “Dreamer” in the eyes of Ta-Nehisi Coates.

My sister is also a “Dreamer.” She is from China, and English is her first language. Looking at her, I see the same apathy of myself, the same apathy for social justice of white Americans. Yet, she cannot come to terms with changing schools between 8th and 9th grade. Her reason for this is because her new school lacks the same racial and cultural diversity. She wants the diversity because she knows that Asians and other “privileged minorities” cannot hide among Coates’ “Dreamers.” Doing so will devour who she is.

I support my sister’s need for immersion in a diverse setting. For both of us, and all privileged-minority Dreamers, there is a limit and a price to our adoption of white American culture. My indoctrination into this culture has reached its limit. I no longer adopt the standard of apathy, the standard that so many white Americans, my parents included, have adopted towards social justice. As I was searching for Marc, this standard was very much in control of me. I continued to navigate the sea of pink, confused and apathetic as ever.

I eventually waded so deep into the water that by the time I approached Library of Congress, it was pure luck that I spotted his green sweatshirt. He was standing near a tree. I approached, and we fell into the usual “How are you doing?” “How’s school going?” I was, for the moment, actively avoiding the elephant in the room or rather, the many elephants that now controlled all three branches of our government. Then Marc started walking. I was hesitant to follow him. I had no protest sign. It felt as if I had nothing to vocalize. I had no stake in social justice. Apathy

gripped me for those first few seconds. I wrestled myself from it, caught up to Marc, and rejoined the waves in the sea of pink.

I quickly became aware of the chants: “No Trump, No KKK, No Fascist USA!” Other chants were part of the same umbrella of outrage against Donald Trump. “Black Lives Matter” and “Science is real” were two of the most common. Marc and I panned our eyes across the sea of pink, a vast conglomeration of different people with different motivations.

But time was the Catch-22. The longer I waded into the sea of pink, with Marc’s green sweatshirt next to me, the less it seemed like a sea at all. Fish do not realize the vastness of their habitat. They live in it, and experience it. They don’t fly overhead in a Boeing 737, looking down on the sea as if it were somehow beyond caring about. Fish need the sea, and realize how important it is to them. I saw one man in a cap, the same type that “Newsies” of the 1890’s would wear, carrying a sign saying, “I’m still with her.” One woman was holding up a sign that said, “Love Trumps Hate.” I took the images that represented peoples’ frustrations and internalized them. Their anger became mine. I could no longer pretend to be above them, to prefer apathy to activism. I could no longer pretend that I was white. I could not pretend that I was still one of Coates’ Dreamers. I had no choice now. I either joined the fight against apathy, or became complicit in it.

I had broken from the American culture of Caucasian families, and joined the people who also knew they had a stake in our governance. I, too, crashed against the force of injustice. I might have been raised white, but I was born Vietnamese. Navigating the sea of pink at the Women’s March showed me this truth. I can no longer pretend to be white and ignore my racial heritage. My heritage is why I must resist the Trump

administration. My apathy is dead. But the Women's March continued because the country realized it cannot afford apathy any longer. There are people like me, both privileged and not, who have adopted apathy as their doctrine in relation to social justice. They have learned to not care. They have learned to not care while being robbed by white America. They are robbed in jobs prospects, educational opportunities, and political clout needed to affect change. Even white America is robbing itself of decent morality, by allowing itself to become prejudiced and indifferent to the needs of others. Everyone is being robbed because the status quo says they should be.

Only the Women's March and similar protests can show both the privileged and the Dreamers in white America that social justice matters to everyone. The atmosphere and the emotional dedication would be enough to kill the apathy that grips American citizens. Exposing them to what they don't understand will force them to learn why it is important to them. But convincing America warrants special prescription. I needed a selfish reason to go into the city that day, and so will the country. Friends, family, or even just an excuse to get out of work should be enough. But they will learn, one way or another, that everyone is being robbed. One cannot pretend to be white, or to blend in, or to bask in privilege, because there is no privilege in being robbed. Everyone has their own reasons for social justice causes, whether it be race, gender, sexuality, religion, disabilities, and so on. Everyone is robbed on one way or another. America sorely needs to wake up, get out of bed, and wade into the sea as I did. America will not stand to be robbed, and neither should the rest of the world.

Works Cited

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