I was taught to see racism only in individual
acts of meanness, not in invisible systems
confering dominance on my group.

Through work to bring materials from women's
studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have
often noticed men's unwillingness to grant they
are overprivileged, even though they may grant
that women are disadvantaged. They may say
that they will work to improve women's status,
in the society, the university, or the curriculum,
but they can’t or won’t support the idea of
lessening men's. Denials that amount to taboos
surround the subject of advantages that men
gain from women's disadvantages. These
denials protect male privilege from being fully
acknowledged, lessened, or ended.

Thinking through unacknowledged male
privilege as a phenomenon, I realized
that, since hierarchies in our
society are interlocking,
there was most likely a
phenomenon of white
privilege that was
similarly denied and
protected. As a white
person, I realized
I had been
taught about
racism as
something
that puts
others at a
disadvantage,
but had been
taught not to see
one of its corollary
aspects, white privilege,
which puts me at an advantage.
I think whites are carefully taught
not to recognize white privilege, as males are
taught not to recognize male privilege. So I
have begun in an untutored way to ask what it
is like to have white privilege. I have come to
see white privilege as an invisible package of
unearned assets that I can count on cashing
in each day, but about which I was meant
to remain oblivious. White privilege is like
an invisible weightless knapsack of special
provisions, maps, passports, code books,
visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.

Describing white privilege makes one newly
accountable. As we in women's studies work
to reveal male privilege and ask men to give
up some of their power, so one who writes
about having white privilege must ask, “Having
described it, what will I do to lessen or to end
it?”

After I realized the extent to which men work
from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I
understood that much of their oppressiveness
was unconscious. Then I remembered the
frequent charges from women
of colour that white women
whom they encounter are
oppressive. I began to
understand why we
are mostly seen as
oppressive, even
when we don’t see
ourselves that way.
I began to
count the
ways in
which I
enjoy
unearned
skin
privilege
and have been
conditioned
into oblivion
about its
existence.

My schooling gave me
no training in seeing myself as an
oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged
person, or as a participant in a damaged
culture. I was taught to see myself as an
individual whose moral state depended on her
individual moral will. My schooling followed
the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow “them” to be more like “us”.

**Daily Effects of White Privilege**

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case, attach somewhat more to skin colour privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place, and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

01. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
02. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live.
03. I can be pretty sure that my neighbours in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
04. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
05. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my racial group without putting my race on trial.
06. When I am told about our national heritage or about civilization, I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is.
07. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
08. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding the music of my race represented.
09. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can deal with my hair.
10. Whether I use cheques, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin colour not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
12. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute those choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
16. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of colour, who cohabit the world’s majority, without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behaviour without being seen as a cultural outsider.
18. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to “the person in charge” I will be facing a person of my race.
19. If a traffic cop pulls me over, or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.
20. I can easily buy posters, post cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children’s magazines featuring people of my race.
21. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
23. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
24. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help my race will not work against me.
25. If I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred systemically. Power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate. But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably dominating. Some, like the expectation that neighbours will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society. Others, like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups. We might at least start by distinguishing between positive advantages, which we can work to spread, and negative types of advantage, which unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies. For example, the feeling that one belongs within the human circle of people of a certain race, of a certain sex, of a certain class, of a certain ethnic identity. In my case, this is a reasonably unconnected set of feelings about which I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case, attach somewhat more to skin colour privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place, and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

26. I choose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh” colour that more or less match my skin.