



Who remembers Napoleon Dynamite? He's not one of the cool kids, in fact he only really has the one friend, Pedro. And for all his smooth talking, he's not doing as well as he would like with the ladies. But he's a loyal friend, so when Pedro decides to run for class president, Napoleon goes all in with the "vote for Pedro" campaign. At the student rally, Pedro and Napoleon find out that they're supposed to perform a skit after Pedro's speech. They've got nothing. So Napoleon listens to his heart and goes for it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcWPiHjIExA>

"But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing." James 1:22-25

This summer, in this series on privilege, we've been hearing a lot. And some of us have done quite a bit of talking as well, and I'd say that talking and hearing both fall short of the "doing" that James is calling us to.

So in this final sermon, I want to explore what it looks like to make that shift, from hearing to doing.

The word for the day is "agency." Dictionary.com gives a whole bunch of different definitions for the word, and I want to focus on the last two:

9. the state of being in action or of exerting power; operation:
the agency of Providence.
10. a means of exerting power or influence; instrumentality:
nominated by the agency of friends.

In other words, agency is about "doing," the ability to create change, to move, to be in charge of your own destiny. In small things as well as big.

In some ways, agency is part of the privilege package. Those of us who have privilege have more options, more flexibility, more security, more power, and all of those are tools of agency. In my life, I've had a ton of agency--I've moved from one side of the continent to the other, and then back to the middle, all by choice. Only once have I had to take a job that I didn't really like because I had no other option. My life has largely been determined by my decisions, not the decisions of others. That's the agency of privilege.

A lot of people don't have those kind of options. Their choices are restricted by external forces: by limited finances, by family obligations, by glass ceilings, by physical limitations, by government regulations, by religious restrictions, by the prejudice of others. And I see that, and I'm sad about it. Now, what do I do with it?

How do those with more privilege share agency with those with less?

As a person of privilege, how do I share my agency with those who have less? That's a tricky thing, for two reasons.

For one, agency is a difficult thing to share. Stock market billionaire Warren Buffett is famously stingy about passing on his wealth to his children. He could have given them billions, but he intended to give his children "[enough money](#) so that they would feel they could do anything, but not so much that they could do nothing."

That's how agency works - if a thing is simply given, it's hard to learn its value. That's a legitimate concern with the practice of charity: How do we share without creating dependence? How do we practice generosity and equality without being patronizing? How do we help in ways that build up agency for those receiving help?

And second, even the agency of privilege is limited by the status quo. I have options, yes. But only within certain parameters. There are strong defenses protecting the status quo. Imagine if I were to try something drastic, say I decided to take a vow of poverty and join the new monastics like Shane Claiborne, maybe quit my job and sell my house to go start a church community in Vancouver's Downtown East Side. How many people would try to talk me out of it? How many times would I be reminded of my obligation to my family, warned about the finality of that decision? How many financial and legal hoops would I have to jump through? How many friends would I lose along the way?

It's hard to create change, in ourselves and especially in our world. Even the agency of privilege only extends as far as it supports the status quo.

Agency? From Hearing to Doing

How do those with more privilege share agency with those with less?

- How to help in ways that encourage agency instead of dependence?
- How to create change in a world heavily weighted towards preserving the status quo?

And so we get stuck in the cycle of speaking and analysing, hearing but not doing.

So... let's start there, by naming that this is going to be difficult. We're probably not prepared for this. We'll definitely make mistakes as we go, and sometimes we might even do more harm than good. We are going to look foolish at times. And it might end up not making a difference in a world that resists true difference makers.

And yet, the call is there, to create change, to work for justice, to take the stage and dance, because that's what needs to happen.

So, I have a couple of suggested dance steps:

1. Move beyond guilt, shame, and blame

First, a call to let go of our guilt and shame. They're not helping us. Mostly, they make us feel bad and keep us from getting involved at all. They squelch agency.

When I was a teenager, my church youth group went on missions trips every summer. We typically went to some underprivileged area far from home, and we'd do physical labour--building wheelchair ramps, fixing roofs, painting houses and churches, stuff like that. And after we came back, we always had an evening program where we would share stories and pictures about the good work we'd done in those places.

And the youth would all line up across the front of the church, and answer the question, what did God teach you on this trip? And every year, two-thirds of us would answer the same way: "Seeing all those needy people reminded me to be thankful for what I have. I'm not going to take for granted any more how good I have it." For me, that was a cop-out: I felt guilty. I didn't want to live like those people I was helping, and I felt good about helping but bad that I was better off... so I covered my guilt with a reassurance of my superiority thinly disguised as gratitude.

I felt bad, and I didn't know what to do with that, so I pushed it away. That's what guilt does, it puts layers between me and those who are hurting. And shame is the inverse of that, it pulls that hurt inside, pretends that it doesn't really exist. And again, puts distance between me and them.

Both of those limit our agency, by defense and denial.

How do we let go of guilt and shame? We dance. I know, room full of Mennonites, dancing is only going to increase our guilt and shame! :)

In the year after high school, I joined the Mennonite Service Adventure program. Along with four other young adults, I lived in an inner city neighbourhood. We didn't save the world, mostly ran some children's programming and helped out at a local church. I can't say I made any long-term relationships in the neighbourhood or really came to understand it, let alone changed anything.

But we *lived* there, in a crappy, flood-damaged rental house, down the street from the sketchy bar with the alleged gang affiliations, in the middle of strained racial dynamics and the occasional street fights and the cloud

of domestic violence over the whole area. And we lived there long enough to get beyond our guilt, to see the good along with the bad, to actually be proud of the neighbourhood and how people found ways to survive and thrive in spaces I wouldn't walk alone at night.

That was dancing. I had no idea what I was doing there, I was scared half the time, and my motives were far from pure. But I was out there. I made connections, however fleeting. Instead of stereotypes, I met people, complicated, amazing people living incomprehensible lives. For a while we rubbed shoulders, danced around each other. And that made a difference in me, if noone else.

If we're going to change our systems of privilege, we have to get out there on the dance floor. We have to let go of the rules and the "shoulds" and the right ways of doing things, and start stepping. Agency requires involvement, connections, humanizing. It's less concerned with who's to blame, and more with finding the next step and getting in sync with the beat.

That's been missing in much of the current situation around white supremacy in North America, particularly regarding how we view our history of colonialism. I'm sure you're aware of the debate around historic statues and naming things after historic figures like John A Macdonald. In Ontario a teachers union is calling for his name to be removed from schools because of his role in the genocide of First Nations, and similar calls are coming in Regina for Dewdney Avenue.

This is a loaded topic, obviously. I really like what Senator Murray Sinclair has been saying about it this week. Here's Senator Sinclair in a CBC radio interview this week. [interview with Susan Bonner on CBC Radio](#)

Agency? From Hearing to Doing

How do those with more privilege share agency with those with less?

1. Move beyond guilt, shame, and blame
2. Build up instead of tear down

Senator Murray Sinclair on CBC Radio, Aug 29



The objective of reconciliation isn't to edit our history, or to suppress anything, but to bring the present relationship into balance by telling the whole story. Where we can, we should do that by adding rather than subtracting.

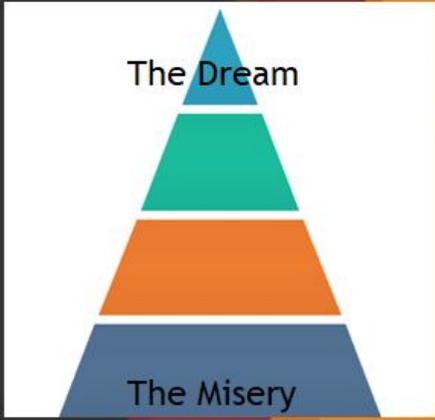
Again with the dancing metaphor, a proper understanding of past events is important, because that helps us see the whole dance floor, where our partners are, and what's likely to come next in the dance. But past mistakes aren't to be hidden, they become part of the dance. And the focus is always on what comes next, moving ahead together.

On that note of understanding the other and moving together, a third step:

Agency? From Hearing to Doing

How do those with more privilege share agency with those with less?

1. Move beyond guilt, shame, and blame
2. Build up instead of tear down
3. Challenge the assumptions of hierarchy



We typically picture the hierarchy this way, with the elites on the top and those living in poverty on the bottom, and the comfortable middle class swimming around in the middle. And we equate life at the top with pleasure and fulfillment; that's where the goodness is. We look up with longing and we look down with pity.

Yet of course it's not that simple.

Nikki Giovanni is an African-American poet that I recently heard on the [podcast *On Being with Krista Tippett*](#).

[Nikki-Rosa BY NIKKI GIOVANNI](#)

*childhood remembrances are always a drag
if you're Black
you always remember things like living in Woodlawn
with no inside toilet
and if you become famous or something
they never talk about how happy you were to have
your mother
all to yourself and
how good the water felt when you got your bath
from one of those
big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in*

*and somehow when you talk about home
it never gets across how much you
understood their feelings
as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale
and even though you remember
your biographers never understand
your father's pain as he sells his stock
and another dream goes
And though you're poor it isn't poverty that
concerns you
and though they fought a lot
it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference
but only that everybody is together and you
and your sister have happy birthdays and very good
Christmases
and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they'll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgaWp14aIM4>

Our hierarchy doesn't tell all of the story. The hierarchy of privilege is not a hierarchy of happiness, or strength, or character. There is much goodness and joy and vitality and spirit in a life lived "on the bottom." We don't need to romanticize the blessed poor, but to look down in pity is also missing the point.

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"Nikki-Rosa"
by Nikki Giovanni

Yes, the hierarchy of privilege is reality in terms of life expectancy and quality of healthcare and job opportunities and incarceration rates. But it's not the whole story, not in quality of life or strength of relationships or personal character.

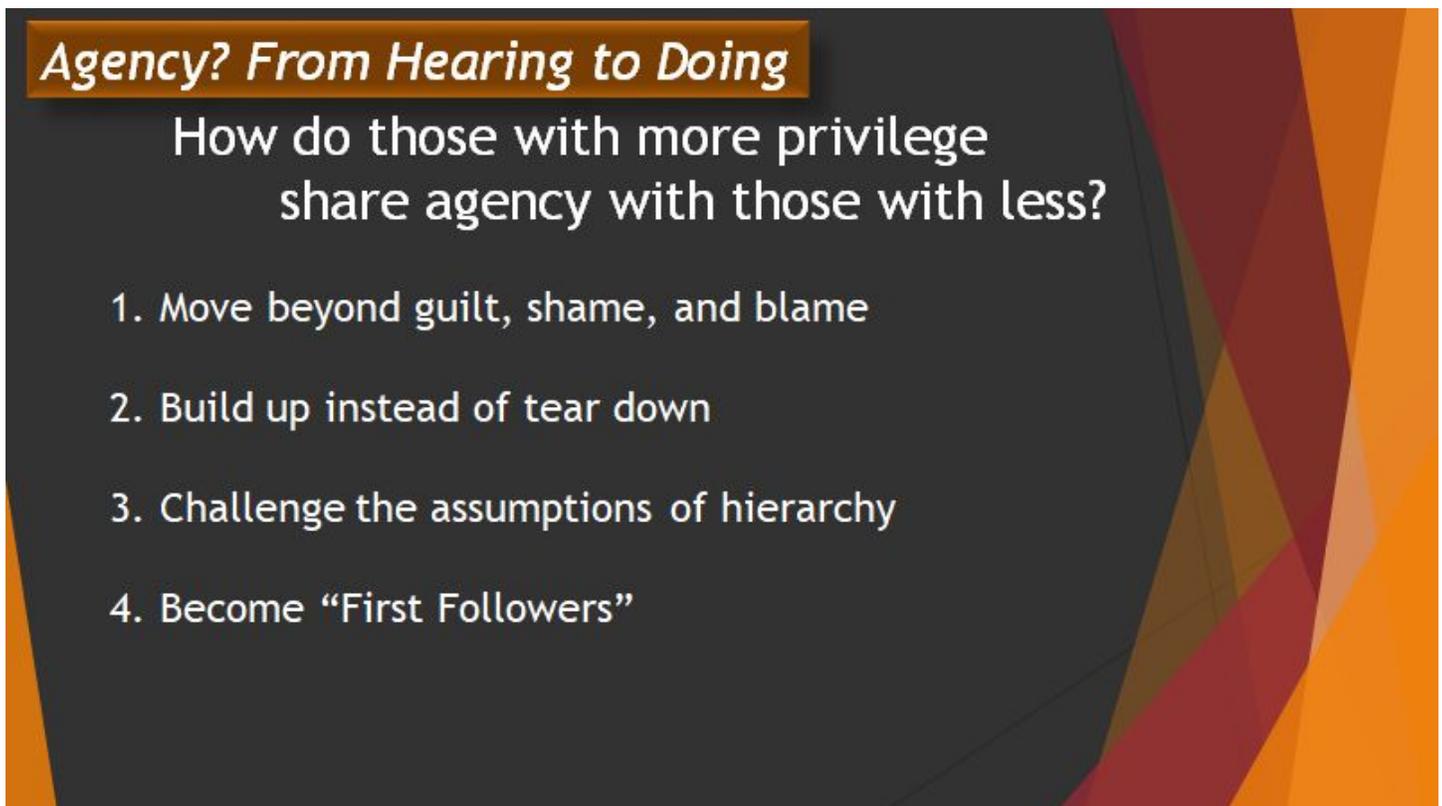
Again, it's a dance. At times, we have to focus on the hierarchy in order to struggle against it and to reshape it. And at times we have to look past it to value the real people within it, to receive and to learn more than we give and teach. Sometimes we play by the rules of the system in order to bring balance to it, and sometimes we have to throw out the rulebook and go wherever the beat takes us. (preacher awkwardly moves to the beat in his head--I was really more comfortable last week with the tractor metaphor!)

One more dance-related point:

“The Role of the ‘First Follower’” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fW8amMCVAJQ>

I think that might be the best thing we can do with our privilege, to be first and second followers. There are lots of leaders doing great things that go unnoticed in the hierarchy of privilege, because they don't have the status to attract attention or they are undercut due to stereotypes or lack of opportunity. They don't need us to teach them or tell them what to do, but they might benefit from our privilege if we simply get behind them and follow their lead.

So. (1-2-3-4) that's my attempt at choreographing a path beyond privilege.



Agency? From Hearing to Doing

How do those with more privilege share agency with those with less?

1. Move beyond guilt, shame, and blame
2. Build up instead of tear down
3. Challenge the assumptions of hierarchy
4. Become “First Followers”

I don't know about you, but I think I've heard enough. Time to get doing. And dancing. (Some foot-shuffling music for inspiration: [“Footloose” by Kenny Loggins](#))