CHAPTER 15

Legacies of White Privilege

Lisa Berndt

I want to share with you a letter I wrote to the great-grandfather of my great-grandfather, a man introduced to me in family lore and genealogy books as General Griffith Rutherford. I wrote it in response to an invitation to stand with Native American and African American colleagues and offer a piece on European American accountability at a conference on "healing the wounds of history" (White & Denborough, 2005, pp. 53–57). It was certainly a healing experience for me to have a chance to address in very personal yet public way the dis-ease of White privilege. It also provided me with an unexpected joy—the opportunity to embark on a frank and loving relationship with ancestors I had been reluctant to trust.

My first sense of this dis-ease that goes with privilege came when, as a child, I noticed that the city swimming pool in Waco, Texas, where I visited my grandparents, was a lot older and more run-down than the sparkling new pool where I played in my mostly White subdivision in suburban northern Virginia. My grandmother assured me that I would not want to swim in the "Nigra pool." It was not said directly, but I got the message that our pool was nicer because "we" were better. The myth of racial superiority was right there ready to fit into my childhood meaning system about who's in, who' out, who's safe who's not, who's us, who's them, who deserves what and why. At the same time, I learned, you are not supposed to talk about it, and you are certainly not supposed to say "Nigra." I felt deeply embarrassed to have the skin color I had but glad to have a nice pool to swim in.

I came of age in the 1960s and '70s. At dinner we would watch as startling images flickered forth from the small Sony black-and-white TV: images of fire hoses and dogs turned on dark-skinned people, guns turned on students, body counts, leaders gunned down. I could tell the world was shifting, that history was happening around me. It seemed that the good guys were no longer the good guys, and there was a sense of excitement and threat, but I had no vocabulary to make sense of what I was seeing.

Meanwhile, the movements I had glimpsed on the TV screen were changing the culture and making the "wounds of history" much more visible to the mainstream folks like me. They were movements that offered liberation not just to people of color but to White people as well. In the 1980s and '90s, I was trying to be a good therapist and listen to people's experience in the context of their experience, and when I did that I kept finding that racism was right there. Because of those movements, there was now a vocabulary available for understanding that experience. Taking leadership from people who had been marginalized gave me access to analyses of power that helped me put words to the vague uneasiness I had been feeling all along.

It was a jolt to be confronted about my privilege and its effects, but it was a helpful jolt. I found it refreshing when people cut through the haze and told the truth. And the truth was that racism was permeating even the well-intentioned profession I had chosen and that I had better stop to learn more about it before I continued to perpetuate it. This led to joining with other activists to address the racist practices and assumptions in our field and our community, and this led to relationships in which I heard more from people of color about their everyday experience. This, in turn, informed me about how my privilege works. Learning the history of racism in this country led me to understand my own family history and to see how the protections my family has enjoyed were put in place and at whose expense.

I still did not know what to do with the shame and despondency that accompanied these discoveries. In my urge to change things quickly (perhaps to relieve my own discomfort), I wanted to distance myself from my ancestors and to condemn them, just as I wanted to shun White people who did not feel the same urgency I did. But anti-racist allies encouraged me to lean into the discomfort rather than recoil from it. They encouraged me to approach my ancestors with interest and openheartedness, along with a sober awareness of the toll their actions took on others. This letter is an attempt to do that.

I want to acknowledge the delicacy of bringing these relationships into public view. I am talking about real people's lives. When I speak of White privilege and class privilege, I am also calling forth the stories of those whose lives and hopes and loves were wrested away through the workings of that privilege. Those stories are not mine to tell, but my story and that of my ancestors intersect with theirs. I speak of great pain, great loss inflicted by my people on native people and African American people—pains and losses that reverberate to the present. I ask that you hold all of our generations tenderly as you read this letter.[1]

Dear Sir,

I began writing this letter as an opportunity to stand together with others I love and respect to weave our histories together: Native American, African American, European American. I wonder what you think of all this, being invited to this magnificent place (Spelman College in Atlanta) so full of ancestors and ancestors-to-be, all with stories to tell. To me this is important, vital, healing, this acknowledgement of what and who has come before.

To me, being together here today is about breathing into our place in history—yours, and mine, and our people's, and all people's—and honestly coming to terms with what this means. It was my grandfather who first introduced me to you, General, shortly before he died. He, Grandmother, and I would sit around the kitchen table and reminisce. We would talk about connections and disconnections and missed connections among our loved ones. We talked about the memories we loved best and some of the disappointments we shared. Grandmother would always prepare a ham, because she thought I loved ham, and make that blueberry and Jell-O salad I couldn't get enough of. Granddad would talk about his brothers who had passed on, his mother, and his father, Lester, who supposedly had gambled away what was left of the Rutherford land.

In my family and in my culture, there have always been patches of silence, like fog, or like ice. We all knew: You don't go in there. It felt like shame, but I'm not sure what to call it. Because of those patches of silence, it was never really clear where we came from or what awful thing somebody had done that nobody was talking about. The ice started to crack when I learned that my grandparents had been married at a Ku Klux Klan meeting. I came to realize that what was left of Great-Granddad Lester's prestige derived from his leadership of the Klan around Paris, Texas, in the 1920s. I was horrified to discover this and to find out more about what life was like for African Americans in North Texas at that time, but it helped make sense of things.

There are many patches of silence that I would like to traverse. So much fog to see through, so much ice I want to thaw. It is in this spirit that I am trying to know you better, General. Because your story and mine and Lester's and my granddad's aren't separate. I don't know much more about you than fragments of recorded history allow. I know that you and your parents left Ireland for the North American colonies when you were an infant in 1721 and that your parents died on that voyage. I wonder what that was like for you. I know that cousins took you in and saw to your education in New Jersey. For you, it meant safe arms to receive you at the end of your voyage. Looking back from here, it is clear that a certain life, certain opportunities, rose to greet you from the moment you arrived. In fact, those connections with nation-builders were probably already made when your parents decided to come to this land.

I know that you worked as a surveyor though Virginia and into North Carolina, where you made your home. I know you married Mary Elizabeth, had eight children, and took part in community-building and government-forming. I know you were elected to the colonial legislature in North Carolina, that you voted for the Declaration of Independence, and that you loved to show your grandchildren the snuffbox George Washington had given you on a visit to your home. These are stories that connect me to the history I learned in school, and I felt pride and belonging and ownership when my grandfather shared them with me. I also know that you joined the colonial army and that by 1776 you were a brigadier general, fighting the British and Indians. I was grieved, and horrified, to read that you led forces that burned 30 Cherokee villages—a campaign that "opened the way" for the Treaty of Long Island and the ceding of all Indian land east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. I believe you were rewarded for this action with large amounts of land.

I know that you moved in circles of power that set you up in the world of plantation finance—the economy founded on slavery—and that your lifestyle and much of your legacy was supported by the forced labor of African people. Because of who was in charge, these events were documented in written history. So my acquaintance with you has derived from the parts you played in events that promoted the development of one nation, the United States of America, and that had disastrous effects on other nations—Indian nations and African nations. This is what I know of you. I wish I knew more.

Although I was raised in a military family, there is so much about your life and actions that I don't understand. What did you think you were doing when you set fire to those villages? What made it possible for you to do these things? Did you use words like "collateral damage"? Did you have moments of doubt? Did the voices of the women and children stay with you? They have stayed with me.

And how did these actions shape our family's future? What are the legacies that we carry? I believe they are mixed legacies. There is no doubting the layers upon layers of privilege that we accumulated as we reaped the benefits of White supremacy and White dominance. Generations of our family have also taken pride when they have looked at maps of North Carolina or Tennessee and seen our family name. There is a triumphal version of our family history that glories in your achievements.

But there are also the legacies of shame. Of silence. Of the half-truths and untruths that have propped up our privilege through the years. It is very uncomfortable, queasy, disorienting, standing on stolen land, profiting from violence and stolen labor, living a fraudulent birthright. I believe it has kept us from talking to each other in life-giving ways.

General, I would like very much to know what you think about how history remembers you. How else might you have wanted to be remembered? How did those close to you experience you? What kind of friend, neighbor, husband, and father were you? I know a little about your grandson, Newt: that he struggled with alcohol and died young. I know that you lost your eldest son in battle. How did Mary Elizabeth feel about that loss? Your long absences? Your imprisonment by the British? Your campaigns against the Cherokee? What did you tell her about what you did while you were away?

My father left for Vietnam in 1968, when I was 11. He wrote cheerful letters about the weather and told us the tourist version when he came back. But he came back different—quieter, more angry, withdrawn. He told me much later that one of his jobs as a legal officer was to prosecute AWOL (absent without leave) soldiers. Often he would counsel them to stay with their assignment. The son of an old friend heeded such counsel and was killed. This incident haunts my father to this day. Even more haunting, he says, was the way the Vietnamese were treated in their own land. He said he could never feel at ease as an American again.

Does anything haunt you? I wonder. There is much about our past that haunts me, that fills me with sorrow. I think of those Cherokee villages. I think of the enslaved Africans on those plantations, the men and women and children terrorized by Klan violence, the villagers and boy soldiers in Vietnam. I think about the links between all these and our lives, General, and a profound sadness and remorse arise. It is a remorse that shapes many of my actions.

How can we begin to atone for those lives so exploited, ravaged, and stolen? For the ongoing effects of systems and practices and actions and policies that paved the way for some and blocked that way for others—that treated some as God's gift and others as invisible or worse? We know that denying the truth doesn't work. So what if we tried it differently? It seems we could operate from a different sort of strength.

What if we took up the opportunity to learn more about, to listen deeply to, the experiences of those whose lives and livelihoods were devastated in the creation and maintenance of this nation? What if we set out to reclaim the humanity we lost in trying to rob others of theirs? What if we dedicated ourselves to learning how racism was and is constructed and to working in schools, courts, hospitals, financial institutions, governments, arts, neighborhoods, and relationships to take it apart? Perhaps these are legacies we can leave for my generation's great-grandchildren, steps toward a world in which the shared ownership of history—past, present, and future—is acknowledged and valued.

General, contacting you in this way, and learning the histories of others whose lives our people have affected, gives me perspective and, somehow, hope as well. I wonder whether this might be an important process for you, too. Someone asked me once, "Don't you think our ancestors keep learning, too?" I like this idea a lot. Maybe honesty lets us keep learning from each other. One thing I do know is that I don't have to figure this all out myself. This isn't just about you or me or my family. This is about all of us, and perhaps together we will figure out how to talk about it and where to go from here.

I have a longing to know you and to be known by you. It's a longing that speaks to my sadness at my grandparents' passing with so much left unsaid between us. It is a longing that speaks to my hope that we don't have to separate from each other, that we don't have to forget where we have come from. My longing to know you is linked to my hope that people from different nations, across generations, might be able to come together to face what has happened in this land and to this land, and what this has meant for all of us.

General, I'm not aware of traditions in my culture for contacting you, for even having this conversation, for talking with you about your assumptions and mine. I wonder what questions you would have for me, and I look forward to ongoing conversations. But I have been told that, in other people's traditions, for me to speak here today involves speaking on behalf of my ancestors.

And so I'd like to close by saying, to you, with you: It's time for you and me and all in between to come forward with the pieces of history from which we've tried so hard to protect each other and ourselves. We deserve to know, so we can begin to take responsibility, to participate in repairing what we can and taking a respectful place in what is to come.

Yours sincerely,
The great-granddaughter of your great-grandson,
Lisa Kathleen Rutherford Berndt

I continue to correspond with the general and his progeny in letters; I talk to him and others on long walks and bring them along on trips to museums, as I continue to learn about history as experienced by those who have been marginalized. I write and speak to many generations of grandmothers, whose answers never fail to soothe and fortify me. It helps me greatly to take racism personally. I believe that this sense of being in touch with my ancestors and their struggles and their limitations and the consequences of their actions—on their descendents and the descendents of those they harmed—can bring more life to my life and more compassion to my relationships with myself and with others. It challenges the old "who's in, who's out" thinking that can contaminate even my anti-racist work.

When I see a news item or talk to a child experiencing rage at how he is alienated at school, I feel the reverberations of the lives and laws that came before. When I am in professional meetings or "case" conferences, I feel the ancestors of all of us present, and it affects how I think and speak. Meanwhile, as this reciprocal relationship with my family of long ago continues to deepen and expand, so does my relationship with my living elders, and this is a gift beyond measure.

Privilege is like a spell. Its thrall is seductive and powerful. It depends for its power on silence and comfort, and it exploits our desire for belonging by leading us to exclude. Because one of the privileges of privilege is the option to ignore it, I try to live in a way that keeps racism and its effects in my awareness every day. Learning about racism—its effects, its construction, and its history—breaks the spell. And when the spell is broken, connection becomes possible. We can take up responsible membership in the human race. For me, learning about racism is about learning to use privilege in partnership with those denied it (Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka, & Campbell, 2003). It's about healing the uneasiness, the deep loneliness of being cut off from the past and from each other, so that we can have a strong foundation for joining community and taking collective action.

NOTE

1. This letter was originally published in White and Denborough (2005, pp. 87–92). Copyright 2005 by Dulwich Centre Publications. Reprinted by permission. Available at *www.dulwichcentre.com.au*.

REFERENCES

Waldegrave, K. T., Tamasese, K., Tuhaka, F., & Campbell, W. (2003). *Just therapy—A journey*. Adelaide, South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.

White, C., & Denborough, D. (2005). *A community of ideas: Behind the scenes*. Adelaide, South Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.