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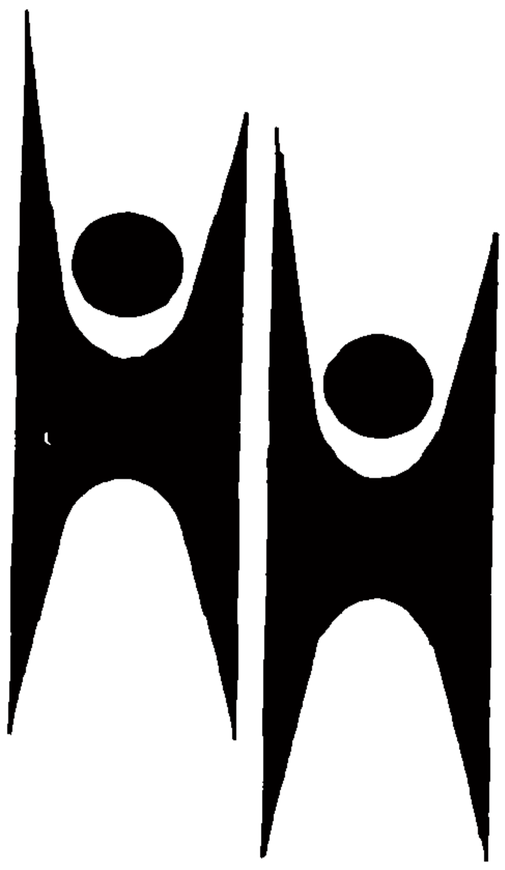

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The Weapons of Privilege

by Jeffrey Kovac

> *With privilege comes power: the power of money, the power of education, the power of social status. Power is neutral and can be used for good or evil. Used to injure and abuse other people, the power that comes from privilege becomes a weapon, as deadly to the human spirit as a firearm is to the body.*

Pacifism and folk music have always been closely linked for me. In part, that's because they entered my life at the same time. When I was sixteen I discovered the guitar and the novels of Aldous Huxley and they both made a lasting impact. A passage in Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* began by conversion to nonviolence:

"Note that we're all ninety-nine per cent. pacifists...Peace, perfect peace, so long as we can have the war that suits us. Result: everyone is the predestined victim of somebody else's exceptionally permissible war. Ninety -nine per cent. pacifism is merely another name for militarism. If there is to be peace there must be hundred per cent. pacifism."[1]

The logic of this passage transformed my thinking. Having been filled with the patriotic rhetoric of our militaristic society, still in the depths of the Cold War, I had never really understood the perspective of the victim. Once Huxley showed me that I could be the victim, I could never look at the organized violence of war in the same way again.

Folk songs complemented the change in my worldview. Those were the days of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, and powerful songs of protest were in the air, some new, some old. Their emotional truth reinforced Huxley's cold logic. When I had to make the choice, it was natural for me to join the long history of conscientious objection to war that has existed in this country since its beginning.

After Vietnam, the issues were less personal and immediate, until the Persian Gulf War in January 1991 forced me to reexamine my position on nonviolence. The world and I had both changed. Unlike Vietnam, this was a popular war, particularly in the place I found myself living. This time I was being asked to counsel young people concerning their options in the event of a military draft. Once again, folk music joined with pacifism to deepen my thinking.

My family and I went to listen to a concert given by Bruce "U. Utah" Phillips, one of my favorite singers for years. His songs and stories capture much of the forgotten and suppressed history of working people and their struggles for dignity in this country. That night he told the story of his conversion to pacifism.[2] His story left me shaken. I am still struggling to come to terms with it.

Phillips served in the army in Korea. He returned so depressed that for several years he rode freight trains around the West, drunk most of the time. Then he met Ammon Hennacy, a Christian anarchist and Catholic worker, running the Joe Hill House in Salt Lake City. Hennacy first convinced Phillips that he actually loved the country; his songs and stories proved that. It was the government that Phillips questioned. There is a difference. Hennacy then told Utah that he needed to become a pacifist. For Hennacy that meant admitting his own personal capacity for violence and dealing with the behavior every day of his life. Just as an alcoholic must acknowledge the addiction, recognize the nature of the alcoholic behavior and then deal with that behavior every day, always fighting the urge to take a drink, the pacifist must acknowledge his or her capacity for violent behavior and then deal with that behavior in each individual situation. Phillips heard Hennacy say, "It will take the rest of your life, but it will save your life."

That made sense to me, too. I had always had trouble reconciling my own violent anger with my equally strong feelings that nonviolence was the proper behavior. As a conscientious objector I had been asked if I would take up arms if the country were invaded, or if I would use a weapon to defend myself or a

member of my family. Such hypotheticals exposed my individual capacity for violence. But on a deeper level my values demanded that my actual behavior be nonviolent and constructive. If we use the tension between our values and our immediate emotional response creatively, we can have peace. If not, we have war and eventually become its victims. Utah Phillips was reinforcing the lesson that Huxley taught me years ago. The important new insight was that the process of dealing with our capacity for violence can never stop.

The next part of the story hit me even harder. Ammon Hennacy told Phillips that pacifism was not enough. He had to go further and lay down the weapons of privilege, weapons that he possessed by virtue of his position as a white male living in twentieth-century America, and go out into the world completely disarmed. Just as Huxley had twenty-five years earlier, Utah Phillips awakened me to a discovery of the weapons of privilege and the daily effort to lay them aside.

With privilege comes power: the power of money, the power of education, the power of social status. Power is neutral and can be used for good or evil. Used to injure and abuse other people, the power that comes from privilege becomes a weapon, as deadly to the human spirit as a firearm is to the body. Privilege leads us into patterns of behavior that dehumanize those with whom we share life's challenging vagaries. These are the weapons of privilege.

The weapons of privilege are at the heart of the essential conflicts of American society, the conflicts that divide men and women, blacks and whites, rich and poor. They are the basis of unequal power relationships, both explicit and implicit. Renouncing them is the key to a truly moral or religious life. I have identified a few, at least provisionally.

A first is the presumption that there are jobs that are beneath you. People with money or power or education often forget that all work is important. Even the most humble job contributes to the common good. Work is crucial to every person's dignity. The fact that my job as a college professor requires a higher education doesn't necessarily mean that it is more important than weekly

garbage collection. In fact, a garbage collectors' strike has much more serious consequences than a college professors' strike, particularly in the heat of summer. I'm a pretty good cook, but I doubt that I would last a day as a short-order chef in a popular lunch etablishment. Even the best home cook can admire the skills of a good short-order cook.

The songs of Utah Phillips have transformed my perspective on work. He sings a lot of the songs of the Industrial Workers of the World, the radical labor union known as the "Wobblies," workers who took pride in their work and were outraged at the inhuman conditions under which they were forced to make their contribution. As I continue to listen and reflect, I find that things haven't changed that much. The oppression is more subtle, perhaps, but the exploitation remains.

Those of us whose jobs have a higher social status often treat those in lower status occupations with disdain. We do not respect what they do, no matter how well it is done. Neither do we regard them as equals. We wield our status as a weapon to keep them subservient. I am not suggesting that professors also work as garbage collectors. The Cultural Revolution in China showed the destructiveness of role reversal in its extreme. However, we should treat everyone's work with respect, giving honest praise for a job well done and lending a hand when appropriate. As we interact with those whose jobs are thought to be more humble than ours, we should not use this status difference to build our own egos. Self-respect should come for doing our own jobs well, not from reminding others that their jobs have a lower social status.

A friend of mine in California has practiced these relationships. For a number of years this woman worked in a professional position at San Francisco State University while living with her family in Palo Alto. To have adequate time for her job and her family, she employed a part-time housekeeper. She paid the housekeeper exactly the same hourly wage that she earned as a professional. The reasoning was that the housekeeper was allowing her employer to do the professional work that she enjoyed, so the housekeeper's time was worth the professional

rate. How many of us extend this much dignity to those who make our comfortable professional lives possible?

A second weapon is the assumption that we cannot learn something from everyone we meet. Using superior rhetorical skills to destroy another person's argument before listening to see if it has value is a weapon often weilded by the educated. But not to listen is to dehumanize.

It is a cliché to say that each person's experience is unique, but it is also true. Those of us with advanced education, money or power often forget that the poor and powerless know things, too. In fact, they know things that we don't. Usually they have the best insight into how to solve their own problems. Myles Horton organized the educational program at the Highlander Center in Tennessee around this principle. In any Highlander workshop the participants set the agenda, and most of the learning takes place as people talk and listen to one another. Over the years, countless people, particularly in the South, have discovered solutions to their problems with the help of the Highlander Center. A song sung at Highlander expresses this philosophy perfectly: "We're going to look to the people for wisdom, in the hard times coming ahead."[3]

On a personal level as well, assuming that a person has nothing to teach us has several consequences. First, there is much that we fail to learn. We can only discover the full diversity of human experience by listening to as many stories as possible. Each can broaden our perspective. Second, when we feel that there is nothing we can learn, we stop listening and therefore shut off any human relationship with the other person. Third, an illegitimate power relationship is established with one person on the top. Unequal power relationships often lead to exploitation. It is not just that the work, pay and credit are unequally shared, but that they are often unfairly shared with the powerless person receiving less of the pay and credit than his or her contribution warrants.

A third weapon is abusing the essential inequality of giving. It is important to give of our talents, but we must remember that giving can set up an unequal power relationship. A gift given wth

arrogance demeans the other person. Too often the privileged bring in their own preconceptions along with their gifts. They never listen to the people they are trying to serve. And so service degenerates into patronage, which is a euphemism for the weapons that maintain the system of inequality. We can give up this weapon of privilege if we always remember the "iron rule" of the organizer: never do for people what they can do for themselves.

The development of talent through application of the iron rule is crucial to the common good. As people gain new skills they can use them not only to help themselves but to help build a better community. We should look at people as potential contributors to be nurtured and not as mere recipients of services.

A fourth weapon is acting without being concerned about the reaction. A powerful person can order subordinates to do pretty much anything, using essentially any language. He assumes that the order will be carried out. It is of no concern that his language might be offensive or insulting. Since he controls their jobs, or some other aspect of their lives such as housing or schools, their public reaction must be subservient, no matter what they feel inside. If there is a negative reaction, the subordinate can be ignored or dismissed.

This assumption was the hallmark of relations between the races in the segregated South. A white person could abuse a black person in any way without fear of negative consequences. On the other hand, the black had to carefully consider each word or action in an attempt to avoid reprisal. A more subtle example is the assumption in many offices that the secretaries will attend to the creature comforts of the bosses, such as making coffee, ordering lunch or even shopping for presents for the spouse's birthday. This is the way the rich and powerful have always treated the rest of the world. In general, it is the way that men have treated women.

It is not just overt behavior that we must be concerned about. Often the things that we say stimulate enormous emotions that we don't expect. There are certain "code words" that Blacks or women or other minority groups find extremely demeaning,

largely because they call up memories of oppression. These words can be powerful weapons. For example, calling an adult Black man a "boy" evokes the humiliation of segregation or slavery.

Because it denies the essential humanity of the other person, language is perhaps the most powerful of the weapons of privilege. It is the hardest to lay down because it requires the inner strength and security to treat everyone as an equal and constant vigilance to make sure that our actions and words do not provoke undesirable reactions such as defensiveness, shame, humiliation or rage.

The weapons of privilege are subtle, but powerful. They serve to perpetuate unequal power relationships between people, devaluing one individual or group at the expense of another. Devaluing another person's work, refusing to learn from others, abusing the spirit of charity and acting without concern for others' reactions all come quite naturally. Sometimes the intention is to hurt or put down another person; sometimes the motivation is benign. The effect, however, is usually the same. Since the behavior is so natural, it is difficult to change. We must change, however, if we are ever to eliminate the destructive differences that divide our society.

The weapons of privilege cannot be renounced by signing a pledge or joining an organization. All of them are far too deeply ingrained in our everyday behavior. We need to recognize them and then deal with the behavior every day of our lives. Not only must we be alert to those situations in which we are tempted to use the weapons, we must also develop the inner strength to avoid using them. Force, after all, is the weapon of the weak.

None of what is being advocated here is an easy task, but, ultimately, accomplishing it will save us all.

Notes

[1]Aldous Huxley, *Eyeless in Gaza*, New York: 1961, Bantam, 325-6.
[2]U. Utah Phillips tells his story on his tape, "I've Got to Know," Brownell Library Press, P.O. Box 1235, Nevada City, CA 95959.
[3]Myles Horton, with Judith Kohl and Herbert Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography,* New York: 1990, Doubleday.