

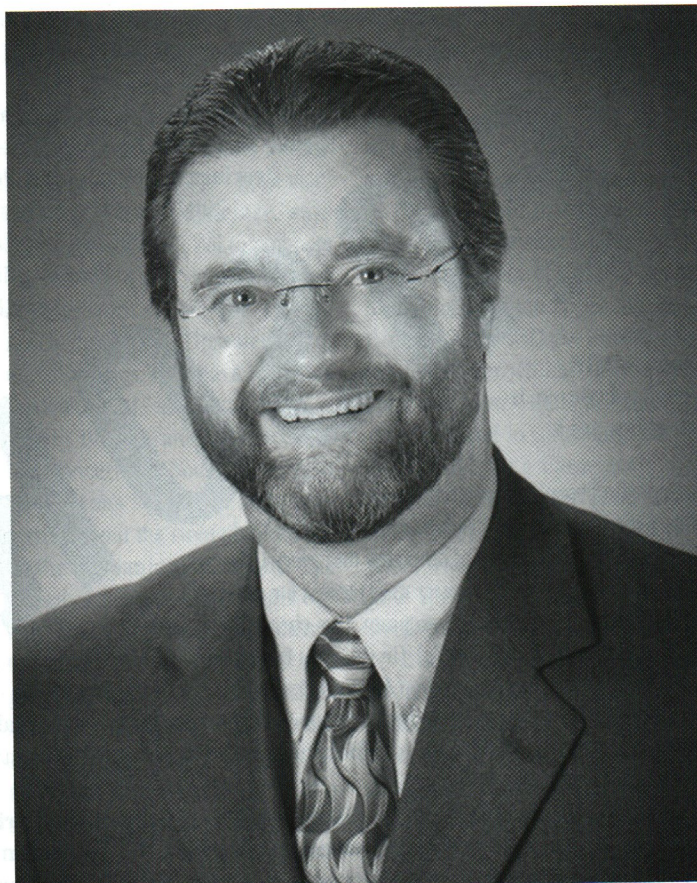
Social Privilege: A "Lefty's" Perspective

by Anthony E. Beebe

I want to talk about being a "lefty." No, I'm not talking in the political sense. I'm talking about being a left-hander. As a right-hander, you might be asking, what does this have to do with me? Well, here in the U.S., probably not much, given southpaws are readily accepted. However, there are concepts about privilege that I learned as a lefty living in a foreign country that have relevance to us all.

One in 10 of us are left-handers. I never thought much about being left-handed, experiencing only mildly frustrating things like right-handed scissors, right-handed desk-chairs, and right-handed can openers. However, because my mother wanted me to be "normal," as a boy, she made me go around the house with a T-shirt on with only my right arm out. My left arm was tucked away inside. Her hope was to coax me into being right-handed. The "T-shirt treatment" managed to make me more ambidextrous, but not right-handed.

Thankfully, lefties are accepted in the United States. This isn't so in other countries, where southpaws have been looked down upon for centuries. In the rural Arab world, for example, the left hand is used for personal hygiene in the desert. As a result, Arab Bedouins are terribly offended when lefties eat with their "dirty" hand. In fact, the related degradation of this is what is behind the chopping off of the right hand as punishment for theft. Thieves are then forced to eat with their left hand for life. Needless to say, lefties in Saudi are viewed as social pariahs.



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During 1979-80, I lived on a U.S. Army base in the Saudi Arabian desert. The experience there gave me a razor-thin view of what it is like to be a minority. I'll never forget my first experience with this. I was invited to a "welcoming" with local Bedouins. They had killed two lambs and put together a grand feast. In a tented area on a big, beautiful cloth (a *sufrah*), the spread of selected dishes was framed by thin pillows for the guests to sit

upon. I was intimidated by the setting, not knowing the protocol of the culture. I was warned about not stretching my legs out or pointing the soles of my feet at someone as this is considered offensive. I was also told not to use my left hand, so I sat on it. As the evening progressed, I forgot about the left-hand issue, and, during the excitement of telling a story, I reached for a bite to eat with my left hand. The Arabs gasped and retracted quickly from the setting. I was incredibly embarrassed, but I managed to get through the rest of the evening. I carried the dirty little left-handed secret with me for the next 24 months living in Saudi.

What I learned from the experience had to do with "social privilege." Privilege exists when one group has something denied to others simply because of an association with the group. An important aspect of privilege is that it has nothing to do with us as individuals, whether we are good people or not, or what we have done or failed to do. It is a social benefit of our merely belonging to a particular group. A privilege is an unearned entitlement.

The privilege in my Saudi experience had to do with a privilege that right-handers have in Saudi over left-handers, being able to use their right hand and even talk about being right-handed in an open and accepted fashion.

Back here in the States, I see "privilege" all over the place. Awareness and identification of privilege takes a bit of practice, but each of us has various privileges just for being a part of groups in American society. It's cultur-

al and situational, though, depending to which groups you might belong. For example, if you belong to the group free of physical disabilities, you have privileges that those with disabilities don't have. For one thing, you can ask for help without worrying that people will think you are helpless about everything. As an able-bodied person, you can succeed or get an education or do something incredibly intelligent without people being surprised. You can also choose to be conscious of your privilege or to ignore it. This is not an option for physically disabled people.

As another example, as a male airplane pilot, I can easily sit with other male pilots and tell flying stories. Women pilots, regardless how skillful they might be, are not yet as generally accepted in this group. This is a male privilege. This privilege does not come about because of the male individuals in the group, it happens because of the social legacy of simply being male. In other words, I don't receive the male privilege because of who I am; I receive it because maleness is a privileged category in this country.

As a final example, heterosexuals in the U.S. have a privilege. They can talk openly and freely about heterosexual relationships. On many occasions, I have stood before my colleagues and spoken about my spouse, Carolyn, without hesitation or repercussion. Gays do not have this same privilege. If you don't think this is true, announce to your friends tomorrow morning that you are gay and see if they treat you or perceive you any differently in ways unrelated to sex.

In addition to privileges associated with being able-bodied, heterosexual, or male, other privileges can relate to being educated, wealthy, or White. There are obviously others too. In all this, it is possible, even likely, to have

multiples of these privileges and to be oppressed in other dimensions at the same time. Think about what privileges and oppressions you might have.

It's interesting that almost everyone in Saudi interested in left-handed concerns is left-handed. Right-handers there take their privilege for granted, leaving left-handed concerns for southpaws to sort out. The problem is that, because the stigma in Saudi associated with being left-handed is a social construct, lefties don't have any power to change the system. It's bigger than lefties alone. More significantly so, the same holds for the concerns of the underprivileged in the U.S. For example, poverty cannot be solved by the poor; illiteracy cannot be solved by the uneducated; and ethnic discrimination cannot be solved by people of color. Because each of us has some form of privilege and shares other oppressions, it only makes sense that we all be part of the solution. It's to each of our benefit.

The solution to me is that we all work to make privilege of all kinds so prevalent that "privilege" as I have described it in this essay is completely eliminated. Awareness of privilege is a beginning, but a difficult one. Einstein said, "Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them." We need a wholly new awareness and definition of privilege, founded in pluralism. We need a new way to think about differences, not as a "melting pot" where differences are defused and tolerated, but where they are appreciated and accepted. In this way, even an awkward lefty can contribute strength and balance to the community.

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