

Reference:

Robertson, L.H. (2020). The poster boy for white privilege. *Humanist Perspectives*, 53(3), 4-6.

The Poster Boy for White Privilege

Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson

My friend is the poster boy for white privilege. I know this because his likeness was placed on a large billboard in the city of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, with the phrase: “I have to acknowledge my own privilege and racist attitudes.” He became a media star and was interviewed by the CBC, Maclean’s and Huffington Post. People from First Nations University and the race relations unit with the Saskatoon City Police lauded him for acknowledging the unearned advantages he is presumed to have accrued due to his race and gender. But they do not know him; they know only a caricature, a stereotype. I want to introduce you to the real Jim.

He and his wife moved to Saskatoon about four years before the billboard was erected. They bought a small 900 square foot house in an older part of the city because they could not afford more. They needed to rent out a basement suite to pay the mortgage. Then the suite developed black mold,

and they went deeper into debt to fix it. Jim’s wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, and

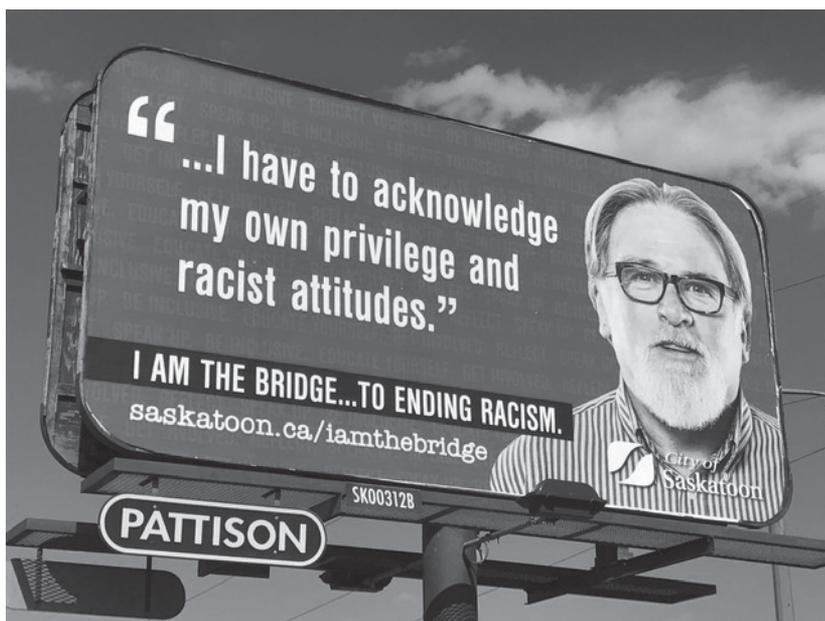
Jim, nearing seventy, could not afford to retire, so he stayed working at a stressful job he did not like. I know many of the people who lauded Jim. They have fine homes, six-figure incomes and will likely have no problems retiring with dignity. I presume they like their jobs. So I drove to Saskatoon to find out more about this “privilege” which my friend was apparently acknowledging.

On the way, I thought about Jim’s history.

His birth parents were alcoholic and he was adopted. He was a sixties hippy who hitchhiked internationally with minimal income. For a time, he was into dope and bad relationships. Eventually he settled down and achieved a degree in social work. During his probationary period for his first job after graduation, he was asked to do a home study on a single parent. After a first meeting, the client asked Jim’s supervisor for another worker because he, apparently, reminded her of an abusive uncle. The supervisor took this to be

a complaint of sexual harassment and without investigating further (because she didn’t want to

They needed to rent out a basement suite to pay the mortgage. Then the suite developed black mold, and they went deeper into debt to fix it.



Billboard in Saskatoon
 Photo by Jim Williams

risk traumatizing the client further), Jim, who was still on probation, was dismissed. I didn't see much "privilege" operating here. He eventually landed a job organizing and advertising adult education classes for others to teach.

So I asked Jim to tell me how he had benefited from privilege in his life. He seemed surprised by my question. He waved his hands about and said, "I have my life and this house."

"I am healthier than you and have a house twice this size, newer, and paid for. Do I have indigenous privilege?" I asked.

"Well, no, but I was adopted to good parents and got an education, and that is where my privilege came from."

I replied, "I know many aboriginal people who were adopted at the same time during the 'sixties scoop' who got a good education, but they do not view themselves as privileged as a result."

"Well I... I wanted to do something about racism."

"I understand that, but you said you had to acknowledge your own racism."

"Well, yeah," he said, "but I am not totally free of racism, sometimes I make assumptions based on appearance, by the colour of skin."

"Tell me," I asked, "how many white people were at your wedding?" I should disclose here that I was the marriage officiant at Jim's wedding and I helped him and his bride write their vows.

"I guess you are right," he said. "My best man was coloured (from South Africa), his wife was Filipino, and everyone else was aboriginal."

"Maybe your racism is that you didn't invite any whites to your wedding," I suggested.

Let me tell you another story about Jim. We were kayaking on Lac La Ronge in northern Saskatchewan. It's a big lake that never gets warm. The waves came up and we were swamped. Now this "kayak" is a clumsy commercial plastic thing and we cannot empty the water. But Jim, who has never been wealthy, refuses to abandon it, so we attempt to tow it while swimming. Jim is carrying on a steady patter of encouragement DJ-like: "That island is only a few strokes away," and "This is an adventure, think of the stories we will be able to tell our grandchildren." Me, I am concentrating on the channel some distance to the north of us waving at any boat that I see. Finally, a boy sees my wave, and the boat with his family arrives. I climb in, but two of us have to lift Jim because he is as stiff as a board and his lips have turned blue. We immediately put blankets around him and rub his feet and hands. They offer him tea in a thermos. Even close to hyperthermia, he refused to complain and asked if I would like some tea first.

Jim is a person who will treasure whatever bone life throws his way while maintaining a positive attitude. And if someone tells him that what little he has is a result of "privilege," he will gladly share what he has. What angers me

is not that he shares, but that he should debase himself by buying into this ideology. Certainly, Jim was better off with his adoptive parents, but good parenting is a child's right, not a privilege.

The notion that white people are wealthy and are born into their wealth is demonstrably not true in most cases, but there is such a thing as class privilege. Children of wealthy families have more opportunities with respect to education, travel, and role models than those in poverty. Further, unlike Jim, they have a built-in financial safety net when they fail. Ironically, the inventor of the term "white privilege," Peggy McIntosh, was born into such a rich family.

By focusing attention on a racial construct of privilege, she turned attention away from the class structure that formed her heritage. We can

seek to mitigate the negative effects of class privilege by ensuring all children have universal health care and education financed through progressive taxation. We want to ensure upward mobility on the basis of ability and effort. This

whole discussion becomes discarded with the racialization of privilege. This is not to say there cannot be racial privilege. Were people granted jobs, tax rights or benefits on the basis of race,

then that would constitute racial privilege. But these were not privileges Jim enjoyed.

Jim's wife died and after a period of mourning he quit the job he didn't like and volunteered to work for an international aid agency. Working for his living expenses, he helped youth in a remote town in northern Ethiopia until just before the world outbreak of the novel coronavirus effectively ended international air travel for most people. He reported that he had been the only "white person" in the town, and that he had many adventures that "build character." He had lost a tremendous amount of weight for which he voiced thanks.

Canadians generally are privileged in comparison to those parts of the world where poverty is endemic, but that is not racism. To work hard in accordance with our abilities and opportunities is not racism. We can share our wealth and expertise without guilt. •

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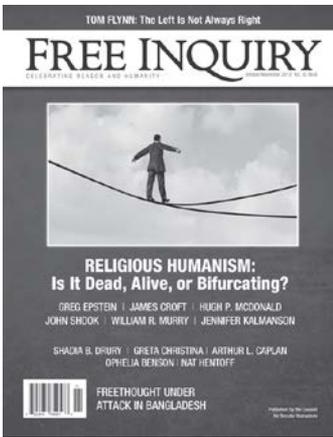
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