

Privileged illusions

It's easy to overestimate the credit we deserve for our own success.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [February 13, 2019](#) issue



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I was supposed to serve as moderator for a panel of self-professed conservatives at a college symposium last month. The topic was social justice. Panelists were to discuss what political strategies seem most helpful for bending the long arc of the moral universe toward justice, and which aren't. To my surprise, confusion between several organizers landed me on the panel itself rather than in the role of moderator. The host introduced us as "our panel of conservative thinkers."

I don't normally consider myself a conservative, especially if that label requires me to view government as a sinister force eager to take away personal rights, freedoms, and income. When a fellow panelist made it clear that government controlled most of his day, from the display on his alarm clock ("government sets daylight savings time") to his last bathroom stop before bedtime ("government mandates the volume of water permissible in a toilet flush"), I knew I was in unfamiliar waters. When this same individual credited his corporate success and personal wealth to his own talent and hard work, I knew I was in deep water. When he described America's poor as being mostly unwilling to do what it takes to work hard, be motivated, and assume responsibility, I knew I might end up drowning.

I didn't take the opportunity to challenge this corporate lobbyist on the source of his good fortune, but this line of E. B. White came to mind: "Luck is not something you can mention in the presence of self-made men." It is peculiar how—to use an old adage—those of us lucky enough to be born on third base tend to assume that we landed there because our talent and hard work allowed us to hit a triple. The fact that I was raised in an upper-middle-class American suburb of quiet, tree-lined streets and not born into fifth-generation poverty in a New Delhi slum is not inconsequential to who I am. Being born into a favorable environment full of opportunity and privilege is hardly a result of my own effort, hard work, or determination.

It's easy to overestimate how responsible we are for our own successes. All we have to do is excise humility and generosity from our worldview. The leap between enjoying the benefits of a prosperous life and believing that personal grit and determination bought us that advantage can be very small in the minds of some men and women.

A 2017 Pew Research Center study found that people with higher incomes are much more likely than those with lower incomes to say that people are rich because they work harder rather than that they had more advantages. Conservatives lean toward this thinking by about a three-to-one margin over liberals or progressives.

When it comes to building a more just society, the fears of my fellow panelist were obvious. He's convinced the federal government wants to so thoroughly redistribute wealth by taxing "successful people" that the prosperity of every citizen, including the most undeserving, will be identical.

I chose not to debate ideas of hard work or luck, preferring to simply paraphrase Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Blessing does not constitute privileged status; it confers responsibility, I said. God blesses our lives for the benefit of others, not to their exclusion.

I don't expect my friend's mind changed. But if he's able to acknowledge some connection between his good fortune and a responsibility to help those less privileged than he is, then I'm proud to have been a conservative for a day.

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