Privilege. It’s an off-putting word. No matter where we fall on its spectrum, we probably wish we were somewhere else. In the America I know, privilege is being able to walk into a department store without being followed by a security guard. It’s being confident that if I ace an exam, no one will be surprised or contemplate whether I have cheated. According to Peggy McIntosh of Wellesley College, white privilege is “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.” Unfortunately, this invisible knapsack of privilege has become the basis of success in American society. First of all, wealth acquired on the backs of slaves has led to a colossal income gap between black and white Americans. Consequently, this wealth gap supports an education system that remains separate and unequal. Finally, sustained racial prejudice has contributed to a partisan justice system that is anything but just. Privilege is apparent in almost every setting, but it can be combated through dialogue and a new appreciation of our differences.

I discovered white privilege on my first day of middle school. As one of the two white girls attending an urban public school in Mississippi, I became painfully aware of my own privilege. I was always given the nicest history textbooks so I could read about all the dead white men who share my gene pool. I could also count on getting leads in the school plays, not because I was a good actor, but because the director said I was a “natural leader who exerted power and authority.” I worked hard, but no harder than my black peers. Good things just seemed to fall in my lap. My skin color, I came to realize, had an awful lot to do with that.

But white privilege not only affects me—it affects every bank account in America. In many cases the concentration of poverty has been paired with a concentration of melanin. According to census data recorded in 2010, black people’s share of the nation’s wealth is 80 percent less than their share of the population, while white people’s share of the nation’s wealth is 30 percent greater than their share of the nation’s population. In other words, for every dollar white people own, black people own less than a nickel. Things have gotten so bad in the last decade that the United States now has a greater wealth gap by race than South Africa did during Apartheid. The massive gap in the distribution of wealth in America runs neatly along color lines, illustrating that racial discrimination and its twin of white privilege continue to characterize our society, no matter how much we might like to avoid or deny them.

In theory, education provides an equal opportunity for every child to become successful regardless of race or class. Education should slowly bridge the racial wealth gap. However, where there is a wealth gap, there also tends to be a gap in educational opportunity. In 1954, Brown vs. Board of Education ruled that this gap is unlawful, stating, “In the field of public education, the doctrine of separate but equal has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” Today, sixty years after Brown vs Board of Education, American schools are still largely segregated, and privilege still determines educational opportunity. In fact, according to a report released by The Civil Rights Project in 2011, close to 80 percent of the nation’s
African-American students are enrolled in mostly minority schools. These schools tend to have fewer resources, teachers with less experience, and violent reputations.

My own experience, growing up in Mississippi, is instructive here. I attended an underfunded public school in Jackson, the state capital. Many classes were held in moldy trailers, with traffic cones covering the holes in the floor. The majority of our textbooks were so old and defaced they were nearly illegible. None of my white childhood friends remained in public schools after elementary school. Instead, they moved to suburbs or paid tens of thousands of dollars to attend majority white private schools. According to reporting conducted for National Public Radio, underfunded public schools like my middle school tend to have high suspension and expulsion rates. African American and Latino children who attend these schools are four times more likely to get suspended than white kids. The study suggests that these suspensions lead to dropouts, which in turn lead to criminal records. This school to prison pipeline sends many minority youth into a criminal justice system that reflects and reinforces race and class privilege. In fact, according to The American Sentencing project, minorities are disproportionately represented in prison and receive sentences that are 10% longer than white Americans for the same crimes.

Unfortunately, racial profiling is a well-known practice of law enforcement that simply deepens racist assumptions that brown and black skinned people are “natural” criminals. As our nation struggles to make sense of tragedies like the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, one sad truth we can all agree on is that in today’s America, parents of black and brown children would be negligent not to teach their kids to fear law enforcement officers and the criminal justice system. In my own life, when I see a police officer driving by, my first instinct is to feel safe and thankful for the protection. I have been raised to see law enforcement as my ally. My dark-skinned friends simply don’t have that luxury. In truth, my white privilege is a bulletproof vest that ensures police protection rather than unwarranted harassment or violence.

Despite sustained racial injustice, I believe that privilege is surmountable if we work together to raise awareness about the issue, rather than allowing ignorance to keep us in the dark. Unlike racism privilege is not sustained through hate, it is sustained through unawareness. Having privilege does not make one a bad person, but privilege does place responsibility on our shoulders. We ignore privilege because we know it shouldn’t exist. But ignoring the power of privilege has not made its impact any less severe. I believe that the only way to truly end privilege and provide equal opportunity for all people is to cultivate interracial conversations that might make us uncomfortable. By encouraging conversations about race and white privilege, we can better understand the injustice that threatens to separate us, and we will be more willing to unite in combatting it.

In conclusion, while fairness may be an American ideal, it is by no means the American way. As a nation, we should take pride in how far we have come in ending racism, but we should not overlook how far we still have to go before white privilege and racial discrimination are truly eradicated. From separate and unequal public schools to a justice system that is anything but just, our nation’s greatness is called into question every day by the pervasiveness of white privilege and racial discrimination. Despite these sad facts, I believe that if we collectively embrace the world with an open heart and a willingness to learn about our differences, America will truly become “the land of the free.”