

MennoExpressions

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Hurdles

An advantage I don't share with my kids

Kris Kauffman

A hurdle I've had removed is the ability to ignore the advantage I was born to. I am white and economically advantaged.

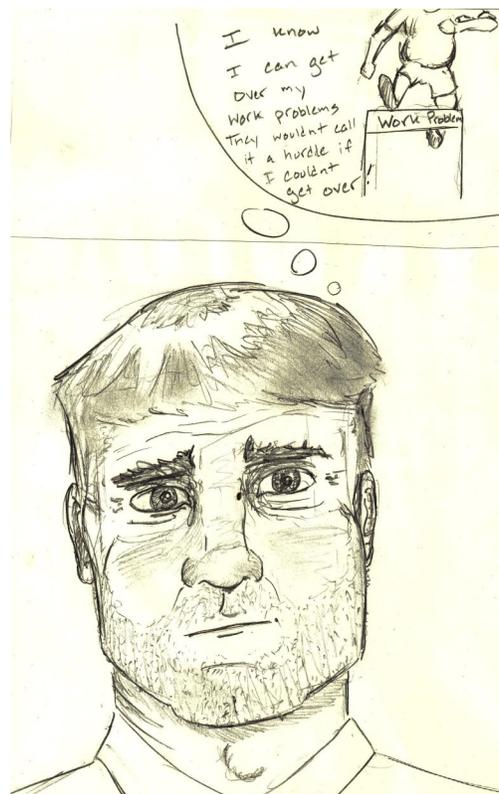
I do not even know where to begin to discuss the racial injustices that have happened and continue to happen in this country today. I can only speak about my experience and it is CLEARLY from a position of racial and economic privilege. The timing and opportunity to attend Alison's class to discuss the book *Waking Up White* was perfect. It was a primer for me to begin to unpack the difficult work of admitting that I have spent my life in total ignorance of the white privilege I was born into.

I truly believed in the premise that if you "worked hard enough, pursued an education, and lived an upright life," that anyone could be successful. This is simply not true. Blinders are falling away and I am becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

It would be more comfortable to remain silent but I feel I can no longer do that. I find myself sharing that I worry about the safety of my black children and getting the response from well-intentioned friends that, "You have raised them right....they don't hang out in dangerous places or engage in risky behaviors, so they will be OK." Is driving home late at night with a burned out tail light in the car risky? Is wearing a hoodie and walking down a busy street where a robbery just occurred risky? Is standing outside a house at night in Broad Ripple risky? Is running through our neighborhood's yards with a paintball gun risky? For me? No. For my children... a resounding *yes!*

When Isabel was about 14 years old, she started house cleaning for my nephew who lived on Kessler Blvd. One cold winter night she was dropped off at his house to do her work, and due to a dead cell phone, a mistaken code to open the lock, and a sibling who drove away too soon she found herself locked out in the cold in a hoodie with

no means to communicate with me. She walked to a neighbor's house and after telling them what had happened they reluctantly gave her a phone to use while standing outside. The code she received still did not work, and she remained locked out in the cold. While standing by the house figuring out what to do, the neighbor on the other side drove into the adjoining driveway, stared at her, and then backed slowly out. Moments later she heard the roar of sirens and speeding police cars. They initially sped by, but quickly turned around and approached the house blinding her with flashlights and began yelling at her. She admitted initially thinking that they were there to help her but it quickly became clear they were screaming *at* her. Someone yelled, "He has a gun," at which time she was ordered, "hands up" and grabbed from behind, backpack ripped from her back and held at gunpoint.



Drawing by Liam Friesen

She was questioned endlessly about why she was there and how she knew the people who owned the house. She said, "They [the police] tried to trip me up by asking questions in many different ways, just like on the TV shows." They eventually placed a call to my very confused nephew who vouched for her, and then finally allowed her to call me. I arrived to find a terrified and traumatized child with cops who were still confused as

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Editor's Note

While discussing this theme, one of our editorial board members mentioned she'd run hurdles in track in high school. Someone exclaimed, "Wasn't that hard?" Abri shrugged. "When you've done it so many times, it's just something you do. But you fall down a lot in the beginning."

I've been considering this theme from a track perspective ever since. To get over your hurdles, you first have to see them and know they are there. Then you need to figure out your plan to get over them, which might involve mental as well as physical preparation. Then you go for it through practice, practice, practice. What once took a lot of energy to get over might not be that big of a deal weeks or months later.

How does that relate to other hurdles we face, such as recovering after a health issue, tackling a big project, or recognizing what hurdles we place in our own paths. What is a hurdle for you?

Another hurdle I've recently been aware of is our own church's finances and our congregation's giving this year. What are the barriers in place to our giving? Is it that we collectively don't attend church as often; we don't use checks and therefore don't put them in the offering; we prefer to give online but aren't sure how to do it for FMC? How does the church ask for money, and do we hear that request? Do we assume that others will step up, and that it's not "our" problem?

Ten years ago, I participated in a year-long giving circle which had an emphasis on creating our own personal philanthropy plans. In one session, we created a list of places we gave donations to. Then we each developed a list of three to five values from a master list of 100 or so words or phrases. Finally, we did the same with issue areas and concerns. What had the greatest meaning to each of us?

We compared our values and issue areas and checked for alignment. Then we compared those values and issue areas with our giving lists.

I was struck by how disconnected my giving was from my discerned values and issue areas. I had a justification for each of the places we'd given funds to - places I had worked and believed in their missions, places I'd gone to school and wanted to give a gift as a thank you - but in terms of creating a long term impact or investment in areas of importance to me, I was way off my own base.

Instead of giving lots of smaller gifts to many different

organizations, we were encouraged to think more strategically. What sort of change or improvement could our funds create if we were focused our philanthropic investments on a handful of issues or organizations? It radically changed how Sam and I approached our giving from then on. In some cases, I determined that I really did care enough about one of my alma maters and therefore I'd keep supporting them annually. But in far more cases, we determined we'd rather focus our giving on a smaller number of organizations and be able to make bigger gifts to each.

We've made adjustments to our overall plan as the years have gone by and our priorities have shifted. For example, now we have two kids, and we are far more involved in FMC than when we were newer and church-commitment-shy.

When I think about the communities that we are part of, and what being part of those communities means, I think about FMC and how much we give and receive as part of that relationship. It is so much a part of our lives now. I look forward to the relationships our kids will continue to develop as they grow up in JYF and MYF. This needs to be reflected in our financial giving to the church, too.

How can FMC remove this hurdle? Could we reframe our perspective on giving to not one of obligation but to one of excitement, of funding something that may have real meaning in each of our lives?



How do you make these decisions? - AS

November: **Brain Storm**; submissions due **October 21**
February: **Dirt**; submissions due **January 20**
Send content to MennoExpressions@indymenno.org

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High Stakes in Education

Brooke Kandel-Cisco

A significant hurdle facing education in Indiana and elsewhere is legislators' and policymakers' reliance on standardized tests to make decisions about schools, teachers, and students. While standardized tests have long been used in schools, the connection of "high stakes" to the results of standardized tests has been a rather recent phenomenon. High stakes were originally connected to test results as an accountability measure to ensure students of all backgrounds were making academic progress in our schools. Schools that do not make adequate progress in serving all students, according to standardized test scores, face "high stakes" consequences such as required transfer of students to a higher performing school, replacement of staff, or even school closure. The increased focus on a quality education for *all* students is positive, yet high-stakes testing and the mandates that accompany high-stakes testing are fraught with problems and negative consequences.

High-stakes tests cannot possibly assess student understanding of the entire school curriculum, thus certain parts of the curriculum are selected to appear on the tests. In turn, schools and teachers often tend to focus instruction on those standards and subject areas that appear on the test, so as to avoid the negative high stakes associated with poor test results. Over time, the curriculum narrows and students no longer have the opportunity to experience the arts, pursue their own academic areas of interest, or read widely and deeply. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, students living in poverty are those who suffer most from a reductionist curriculum covering only the "basics" that aligns with the tests. Additionally, the test questions themselves are often biased against these same children, yet the results of the tests are still used to make high stakes decisions, such as grade retention, and more importantly, influence students' self-perceptions.

There are high stakes for teachers, too. Indiana's teacher evaluation systems are heavily tied to student test scores. A teacher's effectiveness rating and salary considerations are connected to students' success on standardized tests. In theory, this evaluation system provides evidence for determining high-quality and low-quality teachers, yet relying primarily on test scores to do so oversimplifies the work of teachers and overestimates the ability of a teacher to overcome out-of-school factors. Test scores are highly correlated with family income and only about 7-10% of variability in student performance on standardized tests is attributable to teacher- and school-level factors. Non-school variables such as birth weight,

access to medical care, environmental pollutants, stress in the home, and neighborhood characteristics exert a much greater influence on student achievement than do school-related factors. This is not to say teachers don't have a significant influence on students—they most certainly do—but rather to assert that test scores might not be the best way to determine teachers' influence.

While reliance on high-stakes standardized tests presents hurdles for students and educators, the testing obsession has created significant money-making opportunities for the private sector. Pearson, the multi-national corporation contracted in Indiana, receives tens of millions of dollars to develop, administer, and score Indiana's K-12 high-stakes tests as well as teacher licensure tests. Of course, Pearson also wants to help teachers and students be successful on the tests, so they are happy to sell supplementary test prep materials. Pearson and other testing corporations then use some of their profits to lobby for pro-testing policies. *This is a HURDLE.*

Standardized tests are not bad in and of themselves, but the results should be considered a snapshot of student, teacher, and school performance, not the full story. The public opinion pendulum does seem to be swinging away from overreliance on high-stakes standardized tests, yet it often takes educational policy decades to catch up to public opinion. In fact, the same high-stakes standardized testing movement that K-12 educators have been dealing with for over a decade is now creeping into higher education policy.

What to do? Some parents have begun to opt out of high stakes standardized tests, but until parents do so en masse, it is unlikely to change the current pro-testing trajectory. In some states, parents can opt their children out of tests and the student's score is listed as "opt out." In Indiana, however, an opt out student's score is listed as a zero. This means, of course, that the teacher and the school are punished for the opt out. While I've contemplated opting my children out of ISTEP, I haven't yet taken the plunge as I worry about the consequences for my children's teachers and school. I have started contacting my legislators on a fairly regular basis, and educational policies, including those related to standardized testing, are often addressed in my phone calls and letters. ✍️

"I spend my time enjoying my family (most of the time), walking my dog, and teaching. A hurdle I've had removed is getting blackberries to grow in my yard!"



Pilgrimage

Sara Penner

Last summer I got to fulfill a dream of walking on a famous trail in northern Spain known simply as “The Camino.” *Camino* in Spanish means “the way” or “the path.” The Camino de Santiago is the most famous Christian pilgrimage in the world. Supposedly the apostle James is buried at the end-point of the camino at the Santiago de Compostela cathedral, although this is widely considered a myth. I was fascinated by this tradition of pilgrimage that dated back to the ninth century. What could I find on this path, even though I didn’t believe that St. James was waiting for me at the end? Just like the medieval pilgrims, I wanted to find God, only I didn’t put my faith in God in quite the same way they had. First of all, I didn’t start walking from my literal house. Second, I didn’t have to walk home after atoning for my sin or asking a favor. Third, I had a nice infrastructure of creature comforts along the way.

I started in Leon, Spain, along with my friend Rachel Wigginton. The day before we began walking, we were feeling confident, even a bit smug, and we giggled at the limping pilgrims hobbling through the square. Surely they had not trained and prepared like we had! I was ready! I was in great shape! I had read my guidebooks! I had the right GEAR!

The first days were grueling. Why would anyone choose to spend their vacation doing this? Even the delicious wine and breathtaking scenery did not distract from the sore muscles. Getting through each day of eight or more hours of walking was just that – getting through the day. Did it get easier? No.

About a week in, I was experiencing excruciating pain in my left knee and could barely get around the village, let alone 25 kilometers of up and down trail. I despaired as I was forced to take taxis and buses to the next villages to keep on track with our schedule. I sat alone in our room, crying that I was stuck inside and was missing out on this great adventure I had anticipated for months.

One day, I got on a bus and to my surprise it was full of injured pilgrims just like me! And some of them looked younger and fitter than me! Hallelujah! I made it to the next town and spent the morning sitting at a bar with a new friend I made on the “ambulance bus,” as I called it. We complained together, shared our food with pilgrims passing by, and joy somehow seeped into my heart at this new friendship.

One day I realized I didn’t have enough cash for a taxi because ATMs weren’t in every village. I asked the driver if she could take me to an ATM at our destination and I would pay her. To my horror, my bank account had been frozen because of an unsuccessful transaction in Madrid that I wasn’t aware of. I panicked. I tried to get cash from the teller by changing US bills. She refused as she insisted the exchange fees were way too high. She simply reached into her unlocked drawer and handed me the 30 euros to pay the driver. What banker in the US would do that? Then she called my bank in the US and let me straighten out the problem, no charge for the international phone call. Another angel from God. Here I was, a rich American saved by a small town teller who smoked inside her bank. It was surreal.

I finally got to see a doctor who, in about 30 seconds, diagnosed my ailment as tendonitis and told me to be on my way as I wouldn’t be doing myself any permanent damage by walking on it. I got the feeling that I was right around the 20th person she had diagnosed with tendonitis that morning. Another glimpse of joy. The doctor said I could walk!

Easier said than done. Just because the doctor said I could walk, the pain was still the same. I was scared and kept taking taxis and buses. In a town called Palas de Rei, our *tios*, as Rachel and I called them, came up to our picnic table and excitedly insisted that I come with them to a local massage therapist. Jaime and Katerin were Spaniards that had taken both Rachel and me under their wings. I didn’t believe that this massage could help, but they were so insistent that I went anyway.

I laid down on a bed behind a restaurant. Jaime squeezed my hand and while his cross dangled over my face, I allowed the massage therapist to knead the exact point of the most intense pain. The pain shot up my thigh, and I think this 15-minute session was the most intense physical pain I’ve ever felt in my life. Jaime paid for the session. We took the phone number of the massage therapist to check back with her along the rest of our journey. Only at the end of the camino did I find out that Jaime and Katerin were both medical doctors. I could only assume they hadn’t told me out of humility. The massage did help, but I was still scared to walk. Could I endure the pain? Again, I despaired as I took more buses.

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When an obstacle affects many of us a conversation between Dan Hess and Del Culp

Dan: We often think of a hurdle as a personal challenge. Occasionally, we face a family or small group obstacle. Del, I'd like to consider a hurdle faced by a larger community. Help me out. What do you consider a hurdle that Indianapolis must deal with?

Del: I will refer not only to Indianapolis but to every unit of local government in the state.

Dan: So you are referring to Indianapolis and Fort Wayne and South Bend.

Del: All cities in Indiana.

Dan: What is the hurdle common to all of these local government units?

Del: They don't have enough money.

Dan: Money for what?

Del: For all that people expect of local government – streets and sidewalks and lighting and bridges and parks and libraries and fire and police protection and courts etc.

Dan: Oh, that's what Channel 13 was featuring the other night. A dangerous bridge that has been in disrepair for years, but the city hasn't the money to build a new bridge.

Del: ... and schools and teachers. Dan, do you know that some teachers, not all of them but some, didn't get a raise in five years of work? Do you know that fire stations are closing and/or merging? Do you know how many thousand vacant houses in Indianapolis aren't torn down because of lack of funds? Do you know our city ranks very low compared with the cities in investment per person in public parks?

Dan: OK, not enough money. Why?

Del: Several years ago the governor convinced the legislators to write into the state constitution that property taxes must be capped: 1% for private residences, 2% for rentals etc. This low rate means that a community with small and/or substandard houses generates minimal property taxes.

Dan: But don't we all like low taxes?

Del: Here is the problem. Local government is largely funded by property taxes. Local government doesn't receive a cut of state income taxes. Local government typically doesn't get a cut of special taxes for, let's say, sports complexes.

Dan: Does every local government suffer?

Del: No. A local government in a fast growing and wealthy area may not feel the impact as much – just look at local government units in cities that surround Indianapolis. They aren't hurting because of large homes and new developments.

Dan: But can't a local government get funds through a local referendum?

Del: The property tax cap law includes an amendment that allows a local government to raise extra money, but only through a referendum approved by the community. Thus you see schools such as Hamilton Southeast hoping for dear life that a referendum passes so that they can maintain quality in their schools. They are taking the issue to parents and grandparents. But know that Hoosiers in general don't like to pay taxes. That referendum might not pass.

Dan: Is there then no solution?

Del: The mayor and other government leaders are encouraging communities to work together in trying to address local issues. Neighborhood crime watch and local beautification projects are examples of what some communities are doing. I participate in fact in one such group. People in our vicinity are getting together, learning to know each other and then possibly responding to local needs. This way of solving local problems is limited, of course, by neighborliness, family resources and ultimate trust. ↵

Dan Hess attends Shalom Mennonite Church. "My career focused on teaching and consulting. In retirement my hobbies include photography, writing, reading and being with family."



***November theme: Brain Storm
submissions due October 21***

***February theme: Dirt
submissions due January 20***

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MennoExpressions reserves the right to edit submissions, including for length and/or clarity; submissions are published as space and relevancy to themes allow.

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to how I could be her parent. They were unapologetic and warned her to not stand outside a house like that again. I was stunned. I did not know how to respond. I did not get badge numbers. I did not file a complaint. I did not understand what had happened. I was ignorant. I was inexperienced with racial profiling. I was overwhelmed and did not process that experience in a realistic way. I was in denial. I weep at the thought of how many things might have gone wrong that night. I weep for the many parents of children where things did go wrong. I weep.

The faces in the news are the faces of my children. I cannot stay silent. I find it difficult to speak. I do not know what to say, yet I must speak.

The faces in the news are the faces of my children. I must stay silent. I must still my urge to over-speak. I need to find ways to listen to the voices of those hurt by the sin of my ignorance.

I live in this tension. I must live in this tension because others have no choice. 🙏



Sonoran Desert Obstacle Course

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Part of my pain was that things were not going as planned. This WAS NOT THE PLAN. The camino is for WALKING. NOT SITTING IN A CAFÉ HALF THE DAY TALKING TO COOL PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD. Wait, that doesn't actually sound so bad, does it?

Two days later, Jaime called the massage therapist and told her that I was still taking it pretty easy and experiencing pain. She said, "She's just scared." That was a turning point for me. I decided to walk the next day as far as I could. I walked 4 kilometers, then took a taxi the rest of the way. The next day I walked 10 kilometers. Then next day, 10 more. Did the pain go away? Never; in fact, it got worse as I was asking my tendon to do more work. (Actually, under normal circumstances, you are supposed to rest inflamed tendons, not work them.) The last two days of my camino I walked the whole distance: both were about 22 kilometer days. Did I break any speed records? No. People twice my age were flying by me on the trail. And each step hurt, but the pride I felt when I walked up those cathedral steps made it worth it.

Pain is inevitable in many journeys. Even when you prepare and take all the steps necessary to avoid it. Even when you have the right gear! The cool thing is that God puts people in our lives who help us at just the right moments. We must endure, press on, work through the fear to get through the pain. And sometimes the healing part involves even more pain. You gotta get up there on that massage table and take the medicine. God will be there.

One part of healing is simply accepting whatever camino is in front of you. Instead of fighting it because it doesn't fit your expectation, ease into it. Accept it. Find the benefits of this alternative reality. Open yourself to accept the gifts and recognize your need for help. Fight your enlarged ego. Allow others in. Weakness can create space for God and God's angels. I tell you from experience: God will not leave your side. God will not get fed up with the whining and the short-sightedness. God will give you what you need. Not only that, God will bless you with unexpected gifts and teach you lessons make that next hill a tad easier.

I am forever grateful for my camino and look forward to another summer in the future when I can go back down that hard trail with the wisdom I have now. Maybe next time, I will get to be the angel. 🙏