

privilege

A Reader

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being a strong white ally¹

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What Does an Ally Do?

Being allies to people of color in the struggle to end racism is one of the most important things that white people can do. There is no one correct way to be an ally. Each of us is different. We have different relationships to social organizations, political processes and economic structures. We are more or less powerful because of such factors as our gender, class, work situation, family and community participation. Being an ally to people of color is an ongoing strategic process in which we look at our personal and social resources, evaluate the environment we have helped to create and decide what needs to be done.

Times change and circumstances vary. What is a priority today may not be tomorrow. What is effective or strategic right now may not be next year. We need to be thinking with others and noticing what is going on around us so we will know how to put our attention, energy, time and money toward strategic priorities in the struggle to end racism and other injustices.

This includes listening to people of color so that we can support the actions they take, the risks they bear in defending their lives and challenging white hegemony. It includes watching the struggle of white people to maintain dominance and the struggle of people of color to gain equal opportunity, justice, safety and respect.

We don't need to believe or accept as true everything people of color say. There is no one voice in any community, much less in the complex and diverse communities of color spanning our country. We do need to listen carefully to the voices of people of color so that we understand and give credence to their experience. We can then evaluate the content of what they are saying by what we know about how racism works and by our own critical thinking and progressive political analysis.

It is important to emphasize this point because often we become paralyzed when people of color talk about racism. We are afraid to challenge what they say. We will be ineffective as allies if we give up our ability to analyze and think critically, if we simply accept everything that a person of color states as truth.

Listening to people of color and giving critical credence to their experience is not easy for us because of the training we have received. Nevertheless, it is an important first step. When we hear statements that make us want to react defensively, we can instead keep some specific things in mind as we try to understand what is happening and determine how best to be allies.

We have seen how racism is a pervasive part of our culture. Therefore we should always assume that racism is at least part of the picture. In light of this assumption, we should look for the patterns involved rather than treating most events as isolated occurrences.

Since we know that racism is involved, we know our whiteness is also a factor. We should look for ways we are acting from assumptions of white power or privilege. This will help us acknowledge any fear or confusion we may feel. It will allow us to see our tendencies to defend ourselves or our tendencies to assume we should be in control. Then we can talk with other white people so these tendencies don't get in the way of our being effective allies.

We have many opportunities to practice these critical listening and thinking skills because we are all involved in a complex web of interpersonal and institutional relationships. Every day we are presented with opportunities to analyze what is going on around us and to practice taking direct action as allies to people of color.

People of color will always be on the front lines fighting racism because their lives are at stake. How do we act and support them effectively, both when they are in the room with us, and when they are not?

Getting Involved

It can be difficult for those of us who are white to know how to be strong allies for people of color when discrimination occurs. In the following interaction, imagine that Roberto is a young Latino student just coming out of a job interview with a white recruiter from a computer company. Let's see how one white person might respond.² Roberto is angry, not sure what to do next. He walks down the hall and meets a white teacher who wants to help (R=Roberto, T=teacher).

T: Hey, Roberto, how's it going?

R: That [expletive deleted]! He wasn't going to give me no job. That was really messed up.

T: Hold on there, don't be so angry. It was probably a mistake or something.

R: There was no mistake. The racist bastard. He wants to keep me from getting a good job, rather have us all on welfare or doing maintenance work.

T: Calm down now or you'll get yourself in more trouble. Don't go digging a hole for yourself. Maybe I could help you if you weren't so angry.

R: That's easy for you to say. This man was discriminating against me. White folks are all the same. They talk about equal opportunity, but it's the same old shit.

T: Wait a minute, I didn't have anything to do with this. Don't blame me, I'm not responsible. If you wouldn't be so angry maybe I could help you. You probably took what he said the wrong way. Maybe you were too sensitive.

R: I could tell. He was racist. That's all. (He storms off.)



What did you notice about this scene? On the one hand the teacher is concerned and is trying to help. On the other hand his intervention is not very effective. He immediately downplays the incident, discounting Roberto's feelings and underestimating the possibility of racism. He seems to be saying that racism is unlikely—it was probably just a misunderstanding, or Roberto was being too sensitive. The teacher is clearly uncomfortable with Roberto's anger. He begins to defend himself, the job

recruiter and white people. He ends up feeling attacked for being white. Rather than talking about what happened, he focuses on Roberto's anger and his generalizations about white people. By the end of the interaction he is threatening to get Roberto in trouble himself if he doesn't calm down. As he walks away he may be thinking it's no wonder Roberto didn't get hired for the job.

You probably recognize some of the tactics [...] The teacher denies or minimizes the likelihood of racism, blames Roberto, and eventually counterattacks, claiming to be a victim of Roberto's anger and racial generalizations. This interaction illustrates some of the common feelings that can get in the way of intervening effectively where discrimination is occurring. First is the feeling that we are being personally attacked. It is difficult to hear the phrase "all white people," or "you white people." We want to defend ourselves and other whites. We don't want to believe that white people could intentionally hurt others. Or we may want to say, "Not me, I'm different."

There are some things we should remember when we feel attacked. First, this is a question of injustice. We need to focus on what happened and what we can do about it, not on our feelings of being attacked.

Second, someone who has been the victim of injustice is legitimately angry and they may or may not express that anger in ways we like. Criticizing the way people express their anger deflects attention and action away from the injustice that was committed. After the injustice has been dealt with, if you still think it's worthwhile and not an attempt to control the situation yourself, you can go back and discuss ways of expressing anger.

Often, because we are frequently complacent about injustice that doesn't affect us directly, it takes a lot of anger and aggressive action to bring attention to a problem. If we were more pro-active in identifying and intervening in situations of injustice, people would not have to be so "loud" to get our attention in the first place.

Finally, part of the harm that racism does is that it forces people of color to be wary and mistrustful of all white people, just as sexism forces women to mistrust all men. People of color face racism every day, often from unexpected quarters. They never know when a white friend, co-worker, teacher, police officer, doctor or passer-by may discriminate, act hostile or say something offensive. They have to be wary of *all* white people, even though they know that not all white people will mistreat them. They have likely been hurt in the past by white people they thought they

could trust, and therefore they may make statements about all white people. We must remember that although we want to be trustworthy, trust is not the issue. We are not fighting racism so that people of color will trust us. Trust builds over time through our visible efforts to be allies and fight racism. Rather than trying to be safe and trustworthy, we need to be more active, less defensive, and put issues of trust aside.

When people are discriminated against they may feel unseen, stereotyped, attacked or as if a door has been slammed in their face. They may feel confused, frustrated, helpless or angry. They are probably reminded of other similar experiences. They may want to hurt someone in return, or hide their pain, or simply forget about the whole experience. Whatever the response, the experience is deeply wounding and painful. It is an act of emotional violence. It's also an act of economic violence to be denied access to a job, housing, educational program, pay raise or promotion that one deserves. It is a practice that keeps economic resources in the hands of one group and denies them to another.

When a person is discriminated against it is a serious event and we need to treat it seriously. It is also a common event. For instance, the government estimates that there are over two million acts of race-based housing discrimination every year—twenty million every decade.³ We know that during their lifetime every person of color will probably have to face such discriminatory experiences in school, work, housing and community settings.

People of color do not protest discrimination lightly. They know that when they do white people routinely deny or minimize it, blame them for causing trouble and then counterattack. This is the "happy family" syndrome [...]

People of color are experts in discrimination resulting from racism. Most experience it regularly and see its effects on their communities. Not every complaint of discrimination is valid, but most have some truth in them. It would be a tremendous step forward if we assumed that there was some truth in every complaint of racial discrimination even when other factors may also be involved. At least then we would take it seriously enough to fully investigate.

How could the teacher in the above scenario be a better ally to Roberto? We can go back to the guidelines suggested earlier for help. First, he needs to listen much more carefully to what Roberto is saying. He should assume that Roberto is intelligent, and if he says there was racism involved then there probably was. The teacher should be aware of his own

power and position, his tendency to be defensive and his desire to defend other white people or presume their innocence. It would also be worthwhile to look for similar occurrences because racism is usually not an isolated instance, but a pattern within an organization or institution.

Let's see how these suggestions might operate in a replay of this scene.

T: Hey, Roberto, what's happening?

R: That son of a bitch! He wasn't going to give me no job. He was messin' with me.

T: You're really upset, tell me what happened.

R: He was discriminating against me. Wasn't going to hire me cause I'm Latino. White folks are all alike. Always playing games.

T: This is serious. Why don't you come into my office and tell me exactly what happened.

R: Okay. This company is advertising for computer programmers and I'm qualified for the job. But this man tells me there aren't any computer jobs, and then he tries to steer me toward a janitor job. He was a racist bastard.

T: That's tough. I know you would be good in that job. This sounds like a case of job discrimination. Let's write down exactly what happened, and then you can decide what you want to do about it.

R: I want to get that job.

T: If you want to challenge it, I'll help you. Maybe there's something we can do.

This time the teacher was being a strong, supportive ally to Roberto.



I Would Be a Perfect Ally If . . .

We learn many excuses and justifications for racism in this society. We also learn many tactics for avoiding responsibility for it. We have developed a coded language to help us avoid even talking about it directly. Our training makes it easy to find reasons for not being allies to people of color. In order to maintain our commitment to being allies, we must reject the constant temptation to find excuses for being inactive.

What reasons have you used for not taking a stronger stand against racism, or for backing away from supporting a person of color?

Following are some of the reasons I've recently heard white people use. I call them "if only" statements because that's the phrase they usually

begin with. Our real meaning is just the reverse. We are often setting conditions on our commitment to racial justice. We are saying that "only if" people of color do this or that will we do our part. These conditions let us blame people of color for our not being reliable allies.

I would be a committed and effective ally:

If only people of color weren't so angry, sensitive, impatient or demanding;

If only people of color realized that I am different from other white people, I didn't own slaves, I treat everyone the same, I don't see color, I'm not a member of the KKK and I've even been to an unlearning racism workshop;

If only people of color would give white people a chance, hear our side of things and realize that we have it hard too;

If only people of color didn't use phrases like "all white people";

If only people of color didn't expect the government to do everything for them and wouldn't ask for special treatment.



Being a white ally to people of color means to be there all the time, for the long term, committed and active. Because this is hard, challenging work, we often look for ways to justify not doing it. Rather than finding ways to avoid being allies, we need to look at what gets in our way. Where does it get hard? Where do we get stuck? Many of the reasons listed above are ways to justify withdrawal from the struggle against racism.

Another way we justify our withdrawal is to find a person of color who represents, in our minds, the reason why people of color don't really deserve our support. Often these examples have to do with people of color not spending money or time the way we think they should. "I know a person who spends all her money on . . ."

We often set standards for their conduct that we haven't previously applied to white people in the same position. "Look what happened when so-and-so got into office." In most instances we are criticizing a person of color for not being perfect (by our standards), and then using that person as an example of an entire group of people.

People of color are not perfect. Within each community of color people are as diverse as white people, with all the human strengths and failings. The question is one of justice. No one should have to earn justice.

We don't talk about taking away rights or opportunities from all white people because we don't like some of them, or because we know some white people who don't make the decisions we think they should. Even when white people break the law, are obviously incompetent for the position they hold, are mean, cruel or inept, it is often difficult to hold them accountable for their actions. Our laws call for equal treatment of everyone. We should apply the same standards and treatments to people of color as we do to white people. Not only are people of color not perfect, neither are they representatives of their race. Yet how many times have we said,

"But I know a person of color who . . ."

"A person of color told me that . . ."

"So and so is a credit to her race . . ."

(Turning to an individual) "What do people of color think about that . . .?"

"Let's ask so and so, he's a person of color."

We would never say that a white person was representative of that race, even if that person were Babe Ruth, Mother Teresa, Hitler, John Lennon or Margaret Thatcher, much less the only white person in the room. When was the last time you spoke as a representative for white people?

Imagine yourself in a room of fifty people where you are the only white person. At one point in the middle of a discussion about a major issue, the facilitator turns to you and says, "Could you please tell us what white people think about this issue?" How would you feel? What would you say? Would it make any difference if the facilitator said, "I know you can't speak for other white people, but could you tell us what the white perspective is on this issue?" What support would you want from other people around you in the room?

In that situation would you want a person of color to be your ally by interrupting the racial dynamic and pointing out that there isn't just one white perspective, and you couldn't represent white people? Would you want them to challenge the other people present and stand up for you? Being a white ally to people of color calls for the same kind of intervention—stepping in to support people of color when we see any kind of racism being played out.



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What kind of active support does a strong white ally provide? People of color that I have talked with over the years have been remarkably consistent in describing the kinds of support they need from white allies. The following list is compiled from their statements at workshops I have facilitated. The focus here is on personal qualities and interpersonal relationships. . . .

What people of color want from white allies:

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|------------------------------------|--|
| "respect" | "listen" |
| "find out about us" | "don't make assumptions" |
| "don't take over" | "stand by my side" |
| "provide information" | "don't assume you know what's best for me" |
| "resources" | |
| "money" | "your body on the line" |
| "take risks" | "make mistakes" |
| "don't take it personally" | "honesty" |
| "understanding" | "talk to other white people" |
| "teach your children about racism" | "interrupt jokes and comments" |
| "speak up" | "don't ask me to speak for my people" |
| "don't be scared by my anger" | |
| "support" | |

Basic Tactics

Every situation is different and calls for critical thinking about how to make a difference. Taking the statements above into account, I have compiled some general guidelines.

1. Assume racism is everywhere, every day.

Just as economics influences everything we do, just as our gender and gender politics influence everything we do, assume that racism is affecting whatever is going on. We assume this because it's true, and because one of the privileges of being

white is not having to see or deal with racism all the time. We have to learn to see the effect that racism has. Notice who speaks, what is said, how things are done and described. Notice who isn't present. Notice code words for race, and the implications of the policies, patterns and comments that are being expressed. You already notice the skin color of everyone you meet and interact with—now notice what difference it makes.

2. Notice who is the center of attention and who is the center of power.

Racism works by directing violence and blame toward people of color and consolidating power and privilege for white people.

3. Notice how racism is denied, minimized and justified.

4. Understand and learn from the history of whiteness and racism.

Notice how racism has changed over time and how it has subverted or resisted challenges. Study the tactics that have worked effectively against it.

5. Understand the connections between racism, economic issues, sexism and other forms of injustice.

6. Take a stand against injustice.

Take risks. It is scary, difficult, risky and may bring up many feelings, but ultimately it is the only healthy and moral human thing to do. Intervene in situations where racism is being passed on.

7. Be strategic.

Decide what is important to challenge and what's not. Think about strategy in particular situations. Attack the source of power.

8. Don't confuse a battle with the war.

Behind particular incidents and interactions are larger patterns. Racism is flexible and adaptable. There will be gains and losses in the struggle for justice and equality.

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9. Don't call names or be personally abusive.

Since power is often defined as power over others—the ability to abuse or control people—it is easy to become abusive ourselves. However, we usually end up abusing people who have less power than we do because it is less dangerous. Attacking people doesn't address the systemic nature of racism and inequality.

10. Support the leadership of people of color.

Do this consistently, but not uncritically.

11. Learn something about the history of white people who have worked for racial justice.

We have a long history of white people who have fought for racial justice. Their stories can inspire and sustain you.

12. Don't do it alone.

You will not end racism by yourself. We can do it if we work together. Build support, establish networks, work with already established groups.

13. Talk with your children and other young people about racism.**notes**

1. Adapted from Kivel, Paul. *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishing, 1996.
2. Adapted from Kivel, Paul. *Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence that Tears Our Lives Apart*. Center City, MN: Hazelden/Ballentine, 1992, 1998.
3. Ezorsky, Gertrude. *Racism and Justice: The Case for Affirmative Action*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991. p. 13.