



What Does an Ally Do?

ACTING AS AN ALLY TO PEOPLE OF COLOR is one of the most important things that white people can do. *Ally* is not an identity, it is a practice. An ally is someone who not only shows up, but one who stays around for the long term. Acting as an ally means living each day in alliance with people of color in the struggle for racial justice because we recognize that we are interdependent.

The lives of all people are intimately intertwined, no matter how invisible those connections may be. The daily benefits I enjoy are directly related to the exploitation and violence directed at people of color both in my neighbourhood and in other countries. We are all in the same boat, and racism is a huge hole in our aspiration to create a democratic, multicultural ship. I may have the benefit of being on a higher deck. People of color may literally drown before me. But ultimately, we will all go down together.¹

However, there is no simple formula, no one correct way to act as an ally because each of us is different and we have different relationships to social organizations, political processes and economic structures. Acting as 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, working together with people of color and other white allies, decide what needs to be done.

This book is filled with things to do and ways to get involved. These suggestions are not prioritized because they cannot be. 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 and money toward strategic priorities within a long-term vision.

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 analyzing the struggle of white people to maintain dominance

and the struggle of people of color to gain equal opportunity and justice.

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 many voices so we understand and give credence to their experience. We can then evaluate the content of what others 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 white people 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.

Listening to people of color and giving critical credence to their experience is not easy because of the training we have received. Most of us were taught that people of color are not as intelligent or as competent as white people and that it is natural that white people be in charge. Nevertheless, it is an important first step. When we hear statements about racism that make us want to react defensively, we can instead keep the following points in mind:

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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* rather than treating 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 tendency to defend ourselves or to assume we should be in control. Then we may want to talk with other white people both to express our feelings and to get support so our tendency towards defensiveness or controlling behavior doesn't get in the way of our acting as effective allies.

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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?

Notes

1. My appreciation to Victor Lewis and Hugh Vasquez for the boat metaphor which is developed more fully in Part V.

Being a Strong White Ally

PEOPLE OF COLOR 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. The focus here is on personal qualities and interpersonal relationships. More active interventions are discussed in the next part of the book.

What People of Color Want from White Allies

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| Respect us | Don't take it personally |
| Listen to us | Honesty |
| Find out about us | Talk to other white people |
| Don't take over | Teach your children |
| Stand by my side | Interrupt jokes and comments about racism |
| Provide information | Don't ask me to speak for my people |
| Don't assume you know what's best for me | Don't be scared by my anger |
| Money | Your body on the line |
| Take risks | |
| Make mistakes | |

Basic Tactics

ALTHOUGH EVERY SITUATION IS DIFFERENT, taking the previous statements 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 is not 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 and may bring up feelings of inadequacy, lack of self-confidence, indecision or fear of making mistakes — 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.
9. *Don't call names or be personally abusive.* 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.*
11. *Learn something about the history of white people who have worked for racial justice.* This is a long history. 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 and work with already established groups.
13. *Talk with your children and other young people about racism.*



Getting Involved

IT CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR THOSE OF US WHO ARE WHITE TO know how to respond 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. Roberto is angry, not sure what to do next. He walks down the hall and meets a white teacher who wants to help.¹

Teacher: Hey, Roberto, how's it going?

Roberto: That son of a bitch! He wasn't going to give me a job. That was really messed up.

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

Roberto: 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.

Teacher: 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.

Roberto: 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.

Teacher: 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.

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

The teacher is concerned and is trying to help, but his intervention is not very effective. 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. He threatens to get Roberto in trouble himself if Roberto doesn't calm down. As he walks away, he may be thinking "It's no wonder Roberto didn't get hired for the job" or "I tried to help but he was too angry." The teacher leaves having reaffirmed his own innocence and good intentions, withdrawn his compassion and blaming Roberto for his ineffectiveness as an ally.

You probably recognize some of the tactics described in Part I. 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:

1. The feeling that we are being personally attacked. It is difficult to hear the phrases "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."

Remember these things when you feel attacked. First, this is a question of injustice. You need to focus on what happened and what you can do about it, not on your feelings of being attacked.
2. Someone who has been the victim of *injustice* is legitimately angry and 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. Often, because white people are 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 proactive about identifying and intervening in situations of injustice, people would not have to be so "loud" to get our attention in the first place.
3. Part of the harm of racism 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 passerby may discriminate, act hostile or say something offensive. They may make statements about all white people based on hurtful previous experiences. We should remind ourselves that, although we want to be trusted, 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 act as allies by fighting racism.

When people are discriminated against, they may feel unseen, stereotyped, attacked — as if a door has been slammed in their face. They may feel 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 US government conservatively estimates that there are nearly 1.2 million acts of race-based housing discrimination every year — 12 million every decade.² Each year African Americans alone lose more than \$120 billion in wages due to discrimination in job markets.³

We know that during their lifetime, every person of color will probably have to face many 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 described earlier.

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 for him to consider

that such occurrences are usually not isolated instances, but a pattern within an organization or institution.

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

Teacher: Hey, Roberto, what's happening?

Roberto: That son of a bitch! He wasn't going to give me a job. He was messin' with me.

Teacher: You're really upset. Tell me what happened.

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

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

Roberto: 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.

Teacher: 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.

Roberto: I want to get that job.


Teacher: 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. He did not deny or minimize what happened or defend white people. He did not try to take over, protect or save Roberto. Instead he believed him and offered his support in trying to figure out what to do about the situation.

Notes

1. Adapted from Paul Kivel. *Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence that Tears Our Lives Apart*, rev. ed. Hazelden/Ballantine, 1998.
2. National Fair Housing Alliance. *A Step in the Right Direction: 2010 Fair Housing Trends Report*. May 26, 2010. [online]. [cited February 16, 2011]. nationalfairhousing.org/FairHousingResources/ReportsandResearch/tabid/3917/Default.aspx.
3. Urban Institute Study cited by Tim Wise, *Speaking Treason Fluently*, p. 267.

An Ally Makes a Commitment



NOBODY NEEDS FLY-BY-NIGHT ALLIES. Being an ally takes commitment and perseverance. It is a lifelong struggle to end racism and other forms of injustice. People of color know this well because they have been struggling for generations for recognition of their rights and the opportunity to participate fully in society. The formal struggle to abolish slavery took over 80 years. Women organized for over 60 years to win the right to vote. I was reminded about the long haul recently when my sister sent me a news clipping about my old school in Los Angeles, Birmingham High.

The clipping was about the 17-year struggle to change the "Birmingham Braves" name and caricatured image of an "Indian" used by the school sports teams. I was encouraged to hear that the name and mascot were now being changed, but was upset to read that even still there was an alumni group resisting the change and filing a lawsuit to preserve the old name.

Soon after receiving the article, I had the good fortune to talk with a white woman who had been involved with the struggle over the mascot. The challenge had originated with a group of Native Americans in the San Fernando Valley. The work is part of a national effort by Native Americans and their allies to get sports teams and clubs to relinquish offensive names and mascots. This woman decided to join the group; she was the only white person to do so. She started attending meetings. For the first two or three years, all she did was listen, and the group hardly spoke to her. After a time, members of the group began to acknowledge her presence, talk with her and include her in their activities. This woman learned a tremendous amount about herself, the local Native cultures and the nature of white resistance during the 15 years she was involved with this group. They tried many different strategies, and eventually, because they met with so much intransigence at the high school, they went to the Los Angeles school board.

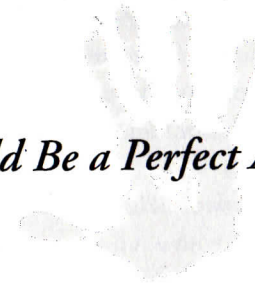
When the school board finally made its decision to eliminate Native American names and logos in school programs, it affected every school in the Los Angeles area. Subsequently the decision became a model for the Dallas school district's policy and has been adopted by other school districts across the US. This was a long struggle, but much public education was accomplished in the process.¹

If the woman I talked with had been discouraged or offended because nobody welcomed her or paid her special attention during those first meetings, or if she felt that after a year or two nothing was going to be accomplished, or if she had not listened and learned enough to be able to work with and take leadership from the Native American community, she would have gone home and possibly talked about how she had tried but it hadn't worked. She would not have been transformed by the struggle; she would not have contributed to and been able to celebrate the success of this struggle for Native American dignity and respect. Her work as an ally reminded me of what commitment as an ally really means.

Notes

1. For an overview of the struggle to eliminate Indian mascots, including reference to the Birmingham high school alumni reaction, see *Indian Mascots, Symbols, and Names in Sports: A Brief History of the Controversy*. [online]. [cited February 20, 2011]. users.humboldt.edu/ogayle/kellogg/mascots.html.

I Would Be a Perfect Ally If...



WE LEARN MANY EXCUSES AND JUSTIFICATIONS FOR RACISM in this society. Our training makes it easy to find reasons not to act as allies to people of color. In order to maintain our commitment to standing up as allies, we must reject the constant temptation to find excuses for inaction.

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- What reasons have you used for not taking a stronger stand against racism or for backing away from supporting a person of color?
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Following are some of the reasons I've heard white people use. I call them "if only" statements because that's the phrase they usually begin with. We are saying that "if only" people of color do this or that then we will do our part. "If only" lets 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, impatient or demanding.
- If only people of color realized that I am different from other white people. I treat everyone the same.
- If only people of color would 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.

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"

This justification sets standards for 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.

People of color are not perfect. Within each community of color, people are as diverse as white people, with a full range of 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.

People of color are not 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 that happened to be in the room. When was the last time you spoke as a representative for all white people?

- Imagine yourself in a room of 50 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?

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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 that you couldn't represent white people? Would you want someone 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 up when we see any kind of racism being played out.



It's Not Just a Joke

“**D**ID YOU HEAR THE ONE ABOUT THE CHINAMAN WHO ...” What do you do when someone starts to tell a joke that you think is likely to be a racial put-down? What do you do if the racial nature of the joke is only apparent at the punchline? How do you respond to a comment that contains a racial stereotype?

Interrupting racist comments can feel scary because we risk an attack or anger toward us. We are sometimes accused of dampening the mood, being too serious or too sensitive. We may be ridiculed for being friends of the group being attacked. People may think we're arrogant or trying to be politically correct. They may try to get back at us for embarrassing them. If you're in an environment where any of this could happen, remember that, no matter how unsafe it is for you, it's even more unsafe for people of color.

People tell jokes and make comments sometimes out of ignorance, but usually knowing at some level that the comment puts down some group of people and creates collusion between the speaker and the listener. Whether there are people of color present or not, racist joke telling is a form of racial performance. The joke teller is claiming that “we” are normal, intelligent and sane, and others are not. The effect is to exclude someone or some group of people from the group, to make it a little (or a lot) more unsafe for others to be there. Furthermore, by objectifying a group, it makes it that much easier for the next person to tell a joke, make a comment or take stronger action against any member of the objectified group.

The reverse is also true. Interrupting such behavior makes it less safe to harass or discriminate and more safe for the intended targets of the abuse. Doing nothing is tacit approval and collusion with abuse. There is no neutral stance. If someone is being attacked, even by a joke or teasing, there are no innocent bystanders.

As a white person, you can play a powerful role in such a situation. You, as a white person interrupting verbal abuse, may be listened to and heeded because it breaks the collusion from other white people that the abuser expected. If a person of color speaks up first, then you can support that person by stating why you think it is right to challenge the comments. In either case, your intervention as a white person challenging racist comments is important and often effective.

Most white people know that making explicitly racist comments in mixed-racial settings since the civil rights period is considered impolite and frowned upon. However, studies show that such inhibitions are much lower in all-white settings.¹ If you pay attention, you will probably notice many negative racial jokes, comments, put-downs and stereotypes are made in your presence when it appears that only white people are present. People of color, Jews and Muslims who can pass as white often report witnessing such occurrences. In small and intimate family and social networks, a shared white culture is established, maintained and passed on, and the racial order is affirmed. In these situations, white bonding, boundary setting and justification for discrimination and abuse is occurring, and it is important for white allies to interrupt these events.

What can you actually say in the presence of derogatory comments? There are no right or wrong answers. The more you do it the better you get. Even if it doesn't come off as you intended, you will influence others to be more sensitive, and you will model the courage and integrity to interrupt verbal abuse. Following are suggestions for where to start.

If you can tell at the beginning that a joke is likely to be offensive or involves stereotypes and put-downs, you can say something like: “I don't want to hear a joke or story that reinforces stereotypes or puts down a group of people,” or “Please stop right there. It sounds like your story is going to make fun of a group of people, and I don't want to hear about it,” or “I don't like humor that makes it unsafe for people here” or “I don't want to hear a joke that asks us to laugh at someone else's expense.” There are many ways to say something appropriate without attacking or being offensive yourself.

Using “I” statements should be an important part of your strategy. Rather than attacking someone, it is stronger to state how you feel, what you want. Other people may still become defensive, but there is more opportunity for them to hear what you have to say if you word it as an “I” statement.

Often you don't know the story is offensive until the punchline. Or you just are not sure what you're hearing, but it makes you uncomfortable. It

is appropriate to say afterwards that “the joke was inappropriate because...,” or “the story was offensive because...,” or “it made you feel uncomfortable because” Trust your feelings about it!

In any of these interactions, you may need to explain further why stories based on stereotypes reinforce abuse, and why jokes and comments that put people down are offensive. Rather than calling someone racist or writing someone off, interrupting abuse is a form of public education. It is a way to put what you know about racial stereotypes and abuse into action to stop them.

Often people telling racial jokes are defensive about being called out; they may argue or defend themselves. You don't have to prove anything, although a good discussion of the issues is a great way to do more education. It's now up to the other person to think about your comments and to decide what to do. Everyone nearby will have heard you make a clear, direct statement challenging verbal abuse. Calling people's attention to something they assumed was innocent makes them more sensitive in the future and encourages them to stop and think about what they say about others.

Some of the other kinds of reactions you can expect, and your potential responses, include the following:

- *It's only a joke.* “It may ‘only’ be a joke, but it is at someone's expense. It creates an environment that is less safe for the person or group being joked about. Abuse is not a joke.”
- *I didn't mean any harm.* “I'm sure you didn't. But you should understand the harm that results even if you didn't mean it, and change what you say.”
- *Is this some kind of thought patrol?* “No, people can think whatever they want to. But we are responsible for what we say in public. A verbal attack is like any other kind of attack; it hurts the person attacked. Unless you intentionally want to hurt someone, you should not tell jokes or stories like this.”

Sometimes the speaker will try to isolate you by saying that everyone else likes the story, everyone else laughed at the joke. At that point, you might want to turn to the others and ask them if they like hearing jokes that are derogatory, do they like stories that attack people?

Sometimes the joke or derogatory comment will be made by a member of the racial group the comment is about. They may believe negative stereotypes about their racial group, they may want to separate themselves from others like themselves or they may have accepted the racial norms of white peers in order

to be accepted. In this situation it is more appropriate and probably more effective to talk to that person separately and express your concerns about how such comments reinforce stereotypes and make the environment unsafe.

Speaking out makes a difference. Even a defensive speaker (and who of us isn't defensive when challenged on our behavior?) will think about what you said and probably speak more carefully in the future. I have found that when I respond to jokes or comments, other people come up to me afterwards and say they are glad I said something because the comments bothered them too but they didn't know what to say. Many of us stand around, uneasy but hesitant to intervene. By speaking out, we model effective intervention and encourage other people to do the same. We set a tone for being active rather than passive, challenging racism rather than colluding with it.

The response to your intervention also lets you know whether the abusive comments are intentional or unintentional, malicious or not. It will give you information about whether the speaker is willing to take responsibility for the effects words have on others. We all have a lot to learn about how racism hurts people. We need to move on from our mistakes, wiser from the process. No one should be trashed.

If the speaker persists in making racially abusive jokes or comments, then further challenge will only result in arguments and fights. People around them need to take the steps necessary to protect themselves from abuse. You may need to think of other tactics to create a safe and respectful environment, including talking with peers to develop a plan for dealing with this person, or talking with a supervisor.

If you are in a climate where people are being put down, teased or made the butt of jokes based on their race, gender, sexual orientation, age or any other factor, you should investigate whether other forms of abuse such as sexual harassment or racial discrimination are occurring as well. Jokes and verbal abuse are obviously not the most important forms that racism takes. However, we all have the right to live, work and socialize in environments free of verbal and emotional harassment. In order to create contexts where white people and people of color can work together to challenge more fundamental forms of racism, we need to be able to talk to each other about the ways that we talk to each other.

Notes

1. For the research and an analysis of what has been labeled *backstage* racism, see Picca and Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism*.



Talking and Working with White People

ONE OF THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF A WHITE ALLY is to work with other white people. But what does this really mean? If we look at Western history, we can see that members of exploited groups have rarely gained political or economic change by converting more and more members of the group in power to their side. Groups in power don't generally make concessions to disenfranchised groups just because they understand that it is the right, moral or just thing to do. Social change comes when people organize to challenge the everyday practices and policies of the organizations and institutions in society. Popular opinion is important at certain times in efforts to create change, but I believe it is unrealistic to think that most white people will become active participants in the struggle for racial justice in the near future. We could spend all of our time talking with other white people, trying to convince them that racism is indeed a problem and that they should do something about it, but I don't think this is an effective or strategic use of our time or energy.

Training, workshops, talks and other forms of popular education are important. I do a lot of each of these things. But to what end? In many of the workshops, I find there are a few white people — often young or adult males — who resist even acknowledging that racism exists. Sometimes loud and vociferous, sometimes soft-spoken, they demand lots of time and attention from the group. They assume that they and their concerns deserve center stage. I know that when white people express such common responses to discussions of white behavior as “White people are under attack,” “What I said was misunderstood or misinterpreted” or “I didn't intend to hurt anyone,” I want to take care of them by giving them time and attention. It can be difficult for me to set limits with them, to ask them to stop responding and just listen for a bit, to acknowledge their feelings but to juxtapose their perceptions to the greater reality in the room. There are a lot of things I could say:

- I recognize that you don't feel safe, but this is not about safety. Many of us don't feel safe, but we have to keep addressing the structures that put us at risk and that may mean operating out of our comfort level.
- Although it is, of course, personal, it is not personal. The problem under discussion is institutional racism, not their personal behavior, although they have a responsibility for their personal behavior and for addressing racism.
- Rather than defending yourself, I encourage you to just take in what was said, understand the spirit in which it was offered and take some time to reflect upon it before responding.

However, I have never found that it is useful to get into a long discussion with someone who is defensive. It just increases their defensiveness and my frustration. I get caught up in attempting to win them over to the anti-racist side, converting them by the power of my arguments and reasoning.

I've decided that I don't want to be an anti-racist missionary trying to convert white people to a belief in racial justice. This decision has increased my effectiveness as a facilitator because it means I don't get locked into a passionate debate with participants as often, and I no longer try to meet their every defence with a response. I can listen to them and move on to working with other participants and, more importantly, with the group itself.

Make no mistake; my goal is partly to motivate white people to take a stand against racism. But there are plenty of well-intentioned white people who want to move forward in this work. I find it more useful to help them find the understanding and tools to make their work more effective than to spend large quantities of time trying to convert the unconvertible.

I also try to be clear with myself that I am not invested in how many white people I win over. My role as a facilitator is to provide the safety, information and exercises that allow people to understand their role as community members and to figure out how to address injustice. I have no control over what they do with the opportunity, and much as I would like to have the magic dust that would turn everyone I spoke with into anti-racism activists, I know that every individual makes his or her own moral choices. When I work with people, I am trying to send them out the door more connected to each other as part of a community, more aware of injustice in their midst and committed and better equipped to take some specific actions to challenge racism.

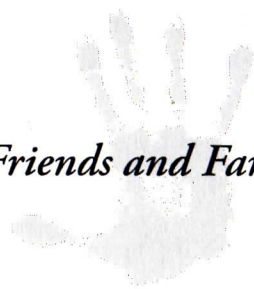
When the goal of a group is organizing against racism, then we are not talking about winning people over. We are trying to achieve some concrete

changes in the institutional practices we confront, and that requires a combination of social, economic and political pressure. We are not trying to change the minds of government officials, judges and corporate executives; we are trying to change public policy, judicial practice and corporate behavior. Being persuasive by itself is rarely a tactic that works in achieving organizational change.

There were large numbers of African Americans involved at all levels of the civil rights movement, but perhaps not even a majority of African Americans were active participants. There were a substantial number of white allies in the struggle, but certainly they were far from a majority of whites. But those that were active were effective enough in confronting white power that the country could not continue to operate without attending to some of the most glaring aspects of racism at the time.

There are ongoing struggles today to end racism. The question I hope to leave white people with is "Which side are you on?" The side of resistance and backlash, the side that protects white interests and perpetuates injustice? Or the side that is fighting to end racial discrimination, racial violence and racial exploitation? I can challenge others with the question, but I can only answer it for myself.

What about Friends and Family Members?



WE MAY HAVE A LOT MORE AT STAKE PERSONALLY when confronted with friends or family members who are outspokenly racist. Our ability to continue the relationship or to spend time with that person may be at issue. Here again, unfortunately, there is no magic dust that will help them change their minds. In such situations, I have had to decide whether to challenge their opinions, set limits to what they can say around me, end the relationship or agree to disagree. Obviously your decision depends partly on how close and/or important the relationship is to you. Even in those rare times when I have decided to end a relationship, I have tried to make it clear that it is because of my values and because of my commitment to my friends and colleagues of color that I could not continue to spend time with that person's attitude, comments and behavior. I want them to know that it is specifically because of their racism that I can't be around them, not because of personality differences or different interests.

However, in most relationships there are grounds for engagement. All of us who are white have work to do on racism, all of us who are men on sexism, all of us who are straight on heterosexism. Rather than feeling superior or righteous because "I'm not racist," we can gently but seriously challenge each other. I try to engage people in open discussion with questions like:

- Why did you say that?
- Why do you say such stereotyped and negative things about people of color?
- I've known you a long time, and I know you're not as mean-spirited as that comment makes you sound.
- I love you a lot, but I can't let these things that you do around people of color go unchallenged.

- You may know a great deal about ... but when it comes to talking about this issue you're wrong, misinformed, inaccurate, not looking at the whole picture.
- I've been told by Asian Americans that the word you used is very offensive. Did you know that? Are you trying to hurt people?

I find that I can quickly tell if someone is well-intentioned but unaware of the effects of their words, or if they are resistant and not likely to change their behavior.

When relating to friends and family, I speak up because I can no longer remain silent. I refuse to bond or collude with other white people in maintaining racism. I hope my actions make it easier for people of color to be around these particular white people.

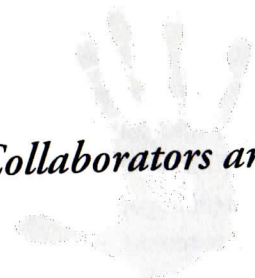
But I am also clear that my efforts at this level, as necessary as they are for me, are not going to end racism. This realization keeps me from spending all my time in discussions with Uncle Max and Aunt Jane about how they talk about people of color.

I think it is crucial that as white people we work with other white people. But not every white person, not all of the time, perhaps not even most of the time.

Working with White People

1. Which white people in your personal network of family and friends do you think it makes sense to talk with? And which white people would it not be useful or productive?
2. What long-term anti-racist goals are you trying to achieve in your organization, institution or community?
3. Which white people do you need to work with, influence and organize to achieve those goals?
4. What kind of education will raise white people's awareness and understanding to provide an environment that will support those goals?
5. Which people of color will you talk with to help you answer the previous questions?
6. Which individuals or groups of white people do people of color around you want you to talk or work with?

Allies, Collaborators and Agents



AS WE HAVE SEEN, an *ally* takes an active but strategic role in confronting racism. A *collaborator*, on the other hand, is someone who follows the rules (which are set up to benefit white people), doesn't make waves and makes sure that most people of color don't have the information and resources they need to move ahead. Collaborators don't have to be overtly racist (although some are) because the organizations or institutions around them maintain racism without their active contribution. They simply collude with the status quo rather than challenging it. A collaborator says, "I'm just doing my job, just getting by, just raising my family. Racism doesn't affect me." But they continue enjoying the benefits of being white and ignore the costs of racism.

In reality, most of us are *agents* — more actively complicit in perpetuating racism than collaborators. Many of us find ourselves in situations in which, because of racism, we have more status, seniority, experience or inside connections than people of color. This may be in the PTA, in a civic group, in a congregation, in a recreational program, on the job, at school or in a neighborhood. As an ally, we can be welcoming and share information, resources and support. Or as an agent, we can be unwelcoming. We may not share all of the information or resources we have with them. We might set limits on their participation by failing to provide culturally appropriate outreach and opportunities. We may favor other white people with our warmth, information or support. We may give people of color the message that they are not as welcome, not as legitimate, not as acceptable as friends, neighbors, shoppers, members or classmates. In this way most of us, perhaps not consciously or intentionally, act as agents to maintain a white culture of power.

There is an even stronger sense in which I use the word *agent* — to refer to the way that many of us have become agents of the ruling class in maintaining racism through the roles we play in the community.

People in the ruling class — those who are at the top of the economic pyramid — have never wanted to deal directly with people at the bottom of the pyramid, but have wanted to prevent them from organizing for power. Therefore, they have created a space that buffers them from the rest of the population. I call this the *buffer zone*. The buffer zone consists of all the jobs that carry out the agenda of the ruling class without ruling-class presence. The buffer zone has three primary purposes.

The first function is to take care of people at the bottom of the pyramid. If there were a literal free-for-all for the 7% of the wealth that 80% of us have to fight over, there would be chaos and many more people would be dying in the streets (instead of dying invisibly in homes, hospitals, prisons, rest homes and homeless shelters). So there are many occupations to sort out which people get how much of the *seven percent*, and take care of those who aren't really making it. Social welfare workers, nurses, teachers, counselors, case workers of various sorts, advocates for various groups — all these workers (who are mostly women) take care of people at the bottom of the pyramid.

The second function of jobs in the buffer zone is to keep hope alive, to keep alive the myth that anyone can make it in this society, that there is a level playing field and that racism and other forms of discrimination are just minor inconveniences. These jobs, sometimes the same as the caring jobs, determine which people will be the lucky ones to receive jobs and job training, a college education, decent housing or healthcare. The people in these jobs convince people that if they just work hard, follow the rules and don't make waves, they too can get ahead and gain a few benefits from the system. Sometimes getting ahead in this context means getting a job in the buffer zone and becoming one of the people who hands out the benefits.

Before the civil rights movement, there was no need to keep hope alive because most white people did not see racial apartheid as contrary to US ideals. They simply believed that people of color received what they deserved and were naturally inferior. Since racial discrimination is no longer legal, a different system of explanation for racial apartheid is necessary. When a few people of color are allowed to succeed, they can be held of as examples of the end of racism, and all other people of color can be condemned for not being able to take advantage of the wonderful opportunities they have to be successful. Institutionalized racism can then be ignored.

For example, Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan and most recently President Barack Obama become proof to white people that there

are no barriers left. We might say, "What more could they possibly want?" or "Why are they still complaining?" We can pretend to be colorblind and simply ignore persistent discrimination, criminalization, marginalization and everyday racism that people of color experience by keeping our attention on the exceptions.


To some extent, keeping hope alive works to keep some people of color believing that they too can make it. But more importantly, it misleads white people into thinking that the system works, and that those for whom it doesn't have only themselves to blame.¹

The final function of jobs in the buffer zone is to maintain the system by controlling those who want to make changes. Because people at the bottom keep fighting for change, people at the top need occupations that keep people in their place in our families, schools and neighborhoods, and even overseas in other countries. Police, security guards, prison wardens, soldiers, deans and administrators, immigration officials and fathers in their role as "the discipline in the family" — these are all primarily male buffer zone roles designed to keep people in their place in the hierarchy. (These distinctions are not always so distinct. For instance, many caring roles, such as social worker, also have a strong client control element to them, and the police are now trying to soften their image by including a caring component, using community policing strategies to build trust.)

Some of us are in more powerful positions, where we supervise people of color or allocate benefits to them such as jobs, housing, welfare, educational opportunities. Others of us are in jobs where we monitor or control people of color as police, immigration officials, deans or soldiers. We are paid agents of the ruling class, instructed to use racism to insure that, although a few people of color may advance individually to keep hope alive, people of color as a group don't advance and the racial hierarchy does not change.

Notes

1. For a demonstration of how this reasoning applies to the massive incarceration of African American men, see Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press, 2010, p. 235.



A Web of Control

EACH SPHERE OF THE BUFFER ZONE CONTRIBUTES to an overall web of control that is devastating to communities of color and serves to keep them out of mainstream institutions. School teachers, counselors and administrators often monitor youth of color closely, isolating them in “special needs” classes, writing them up as behavior and discipline problems, suspending them readily and then blaming their families for not caring and their communities for being dysfunctional.

Social workers monitor and intervene in families of color much more readily than they do in white families. Because of system-wide assumptions that people of color are more likely to scam programs for unneeded benefits and because of limited program funding that requires staff to deny benefits to as many as possible to save money, people of color often face more scrutiny, more paperwork, harsher personal treatment and greater levels of rejection than comparable white people. Limited language proficiency, inadequate educational background, lack of access to public transportation, childcare and other resources prevent many people of low income from access to needed services. Low-income people of color are more likely to face a host of these barriers, and, in addition, to be treated as undeserving and suspect.

Social service providers are also more likely to intervene quickly in the affairs of families of color by calling the police, child welfare and protective services. Children of color are far more likely to be removed from their families by child welfare and protective service workers, and are quicker to be placed into residential programs and foster care.¹

Police, sheriffs and immigration officials monitor communities of color with great intensity leading to racial profiling, illegal deportations, police brutality, disproportionate citations and arrest rates for petty crimes such as

traffic violations, alcohol and marijuana use, prostitution, loitering and being a public nuisance.

Apartment owners, real estate agents, bank loan officers, security guards, Bureau of Indian Affairs staff, youth recreation program staff, public and state parks staff, small business owners, store clerks² — there are literally tens of thousands of white people whose jobs have the function of monitoring people of color and limiting where they can be and what they can do.

Although studies show that many exhibit unintentional and unconscious discriminatory behavior, there are many apartment owners, real estate agents and bank loan officers who try to be fair and unbiased in their practices. Overall, however, these professions and the system of housing allocation they are part of do a very efficient job of keeping housing in the United States highly segregated.³

The surveillance and punishment of people of color by people in these jobs is enhanced by the many ordinary white people who informally monitor the people of color around them for “suspicious” activity and report their observations to police, immigration officials, housing authorities, school principals, shopping mall security guards and social welfare workers.

These routine white interventions into the lives of people of color are assaults not just on individuals, but on families and communities. The combination of racism in the school, child welfare and criminal/legal and immigration systems devastates children and adults, literally separates and destroys families and makes strong neighborhood, extended family and community networks fragile and unsustainable. Massive societal intervention in the lives of people of color perpetuates intergenerational patterns of disadvantage, vulnerability to violence and economic exploitation.

In African American, Native American, Arab American and in immigrant Asian American and Latino/a communities, the fate of individuals, families and communities are linked. When individuals are harassed, profiled or beaten by the police, when individuals are denied benefits by immigration officials, when children are disproportionately disciplined by school authorities, when children are unnecessarily taken from families and placed in foster care, when people of color are treated unfairly and disproportionately incarcerated by criminal justice authorities, normal human relationships are disrupted, the social capital⁴ of the community is seriously diminished and the ability to obtain social services is decreased. No one is unaffected.

When the media use the negative impact of such community attacks to further reinforce negative stereotypes and justify policies by blaming those

under attack, such racial mistreatment is seen as normal and acceptable to white people. For example, even though there is much evidence that African American and Latino/a youth are systematically pushed out of schools, the media portray the problem of lack of family support, violence in the community or lack personal effort, reinforcing stereotypes of people of color as uncaring, violent and lazy. Teachers and administrators can then avoid responsibility for their contribution to a school system that operates in a racially discriminatory manner.

White people are almost never subject to reprimand, much less more serious consequences for regular, routine and pervasive patterns of racial discrimination that they personally commit. Even police officers who murder innocent and unarmed black youth rarely receive serious consequences. Whatever level of racism a white person exhibits, we are generally quick to minimize and individualize the damage done, and to attribute their action to inexperience, an accident, a temporary lapse in judgment or extenuating circumstances so we can exonerate and forgive them. This allows us to avoid holding them accountable and avoid examining their role (and ours) in maintaining the web of control over communities of color.

The Buffer Zone

1. Is the work you do part of the buffer zone — either taking care of people at the bottom of the pyramid, keeping hope alive or controlling them?
 2. Historically how has your job, career, profession or occupation developed in relationship to communities of color? What impact has it had on different communities of color at different times?
 3. How have people in your line of work protected white power and privilege and excluded people of color?
 4. Have you noticed individual acts of racism or patterns of racism in the organization or system in which you work?
 5. How have individuals and communities of color resisted these actions either from within your work/occupation/profession or from the community?
 6. Who are white people who have challenged racism in your work?
 7. Who benefits from the work that you do — people at the top of the pyramid, people in the buffer zone or people at the bottom?
 8. How can you take into account the impact of the web of control (the entire system of racism) on people of color when you interact with them and when you look at organizational and institutional policies?
- What will you do to become less of an agent of the wealthy and more of an ally to people of color?

- Am I an agent of the racism that reinforces the racial hierarchy, do I work as an ally to people of color, or are there elements of both roles in my work?
- How can I become more of an ally and less of an agent?

The cumulative impact of the pervasive, everyday web of surveillance, control and enforcement on the lives of people of color should not be underestimated. They always have to operate within white organizations and institutions, are subject to white authority figures and are vulnerable to disrespect or worse from white people around them. Our compassion and our anti-racist action should be guided by our understanding of how this web of control works.

Buffer zone jobs are the largest category of working- and middle-class jobs and are necessary in our society. People go into the helping professions to serve the community and provide needed services. Police officers, nurses, teachers and social workers are routinely honored for their work and dedication. But just because the intent of social service providers and others in buffer zone jobs is well-meaning does not exclude them from accountability for the impact of what they do. Racism is currently built into the structure of the buffer zone, and therefore those white people without an explicit anti-racist commitment and practice, despite their best intent, will be acting as agents of the ruling class in maintaining the racial and economic status quo.

To quote Taiaï Wake Alfred (substituting the word *racism* for *colonialism*):

The challenge, and the hope, is for each person to recognize and counteract the effects of [racism] in his or her own life, and thus develop the ability to live in a way that contests [racism]. We are all co-opted to one degree or another, so we can only pity those who are blind or who refuse to open their eyes to the [racial] reality, and who continue to validate, legitimate, and accommodate the interests of that reality in opposition to the goals and values of their own negotiations.⁵

Notes

1. See Dorothy Roberts. *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*. Basic Books, 2002 for extensive documentation of the impact of racist practices on communities of color.
2. Even white National Basketball Association referees were found in one extensive review of their calls by the NBA to be systematically biased against black players.

3. National Fair Housing Alliance. *Unequal Opportunity: Perpetuating Housing Segregation in America, 2006 Fair Housing Trends Report*. 2006. [online]. [cited February 20, 2011]. mvfairhousing.com/pdfs/2006%20Fair%20Housing%20Trends%20Report.PDF
4. "Social capital is the intangible good produced by relationships among people, as distinguished from the tangible skills, resources, and knowledge that constitute human capital." James N. Coleman. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Harvard, 1990, p. 98.
5. Taiaiake Alfred. *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*. Oxford, 1999, p. 73.