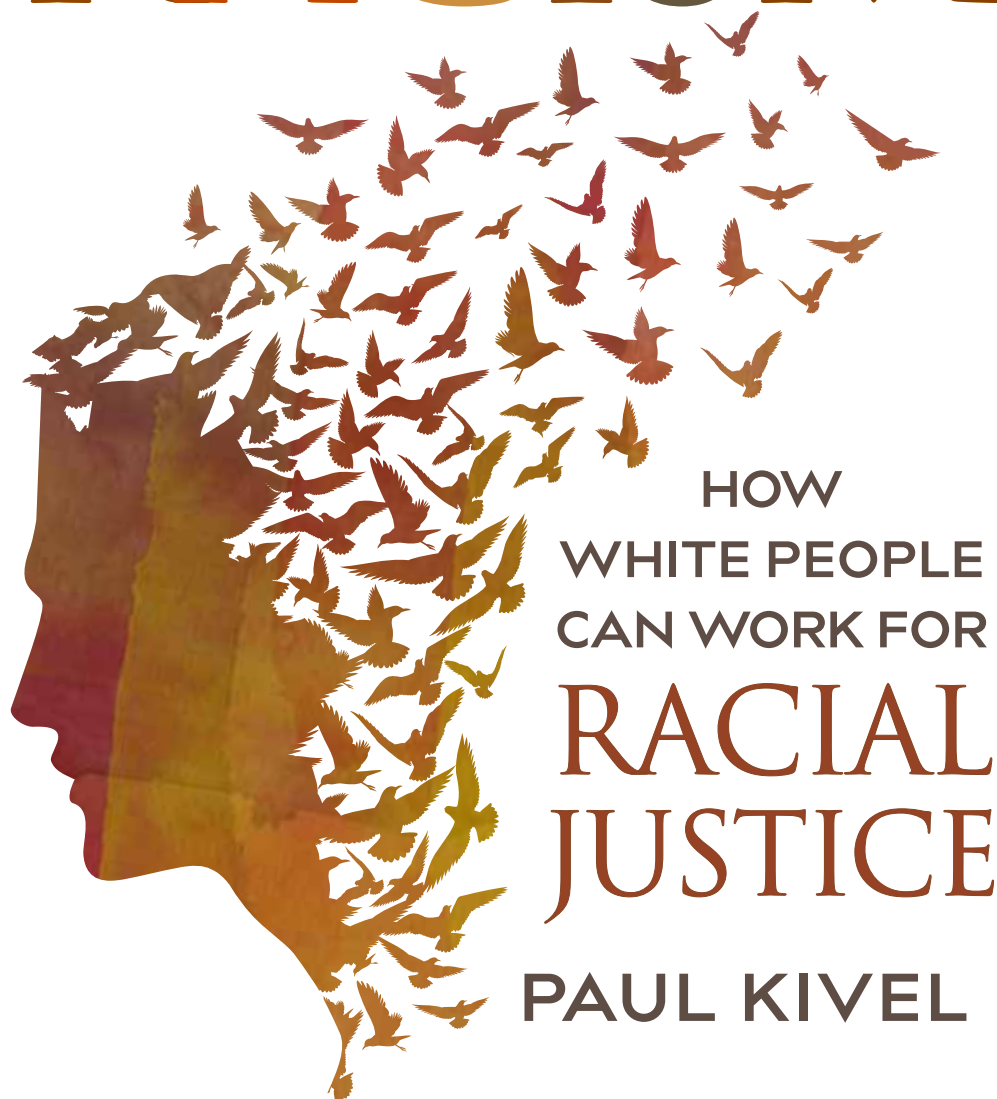


4<sup>TH</sup> REVISED & UPDATED EDITION

# UPROOTING RACISM



HOW  
WHITE PEOPLE  
CAN WORK FOR  
RACIAL  
JUSTICE

PAUL KIVEL

## Praise for *Uprooting Racism*

With current context, deepened history and new chapters, Paul Kivel's revised and updated *Uprooting Racism* offers visionary and practical tools for white people to reflect, share, learn, show up and act. Given all we have at stake in building a racially just society, this is both a timeless and urgent work. Like my copy of a previous edition, this one will be dog-eared from use, and my wallet thinner as I will gift copies of this book over and over.

—Pam McMichael, Highlander Center, Executive Director, 2005–2016

Paul Kivel...presents a powerful yet accessible vision, informed by research and reflection on racism in the US... This book provides the best concrete guidance for the new or perplexed would-be white ally that I have ever seen in print. For the individual explorer, the self-study exercises are amazing. As a resource for the educator or trainer's library, *Uprooting Racism* is indispensable and unique. I have personally used many of the exercises in the book in my own teaching. Paul's support and guidance for educators and trainers in his books and on his website is outstanding.

—Victor Lee Lewis, Progressive Life Coach,  
founder/director of the Radical Resilience Institute,  
Co-Editor with Hugh Vasquez of Lessons from "The Color of Fear."

*Uprooting Racism* gives the student, activist and practitioner something for their social justice tool box. The expanded edition is challenging, informative and practical. You'll finish the book and want to get right to work.

—Dr. Eddie Moore Jr., Founder/Director, The White Privilege Conference

*Uprooting Racism* continues to be a powerful and wonderful book, a major contribution to our understanding of racism as white people... Not only does Kivel address tough issues related to whiteness and racism,... he also identifies specific ways that whites can be allies for change—all done with honesty, forthrightness, respect, and from the heart. For any white person who is sincere about working for social justice, here's the source.

—Judith H. Katz, Ed. D., author,  
*White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-Racism Training* and  
*The Inclusion Breakthrough: Unleashing the Real Power of Diversity*

Paul Kivel writes with clarity and depth in a style that is adequately complex for understandings of racism in our time. He uses his writing power to illuminate all the systems, inner and outer, which lead to inequitable distribution of power, respect, money, safety, security, and opportunity in the world. . . .

—Peggy McIntosh, founder and co-director, National SEED Project on Inclusive Curriculum, author, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*

*Uprooting Racism* is a fact-filled resource for teachers and parents to use in educating ourselves and our young people about the history and the hidden costs of racism in our communities. Kivel presents simple, meaningful actions we can all take to build a more just and healthy society.

—Jackie Shoner, parent and Coordinator for Conflict Resolution Programs, Oakland, (CA) Unified School District

As a woman of color actively engaged in social justice movements for over 25 years, I have often longed for a book like *Uprooting Racism* to help white people understand the institutional, systematic, and persistent character of racism in our world. Paul Kivel has written a handbook to critically examine racism in our lives, and in our work for peace and justice.

—Luz Guerra, activist, consultant/writer

. . . the 'how-to manual' for whites to work with people of color to create an inclusive, just world in the 21st century. *Uprooting Racism* succinctly describes how intricately racism is tied to all institutions and our daily lives. . . . It should be in the toolbox of anyone who is working for an anti-racist society.

—Maggie Potapchuk, Senior Program Associate,  
Network of Alliances, Bridging Race and Ethnicity (NABRE),  
a program of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

Those of us who commit to the life-long journey of being anti-racist whites need lots of help. The revised edition of *Uprooting Racism* offers a clear vision of the journey's destination, an invaluable and accessible map and a set of tools for the steps we must take to get there. . . . I recommend it highly and plan to use it in my own work.

—Louise Derman-Sparks, co-director, of the Early Childhood Equity Alliance.  
Author, *Teaching/Learning Anti-Racism: A Developmental Approach*

*Uprooting Racism* is a uniquely sensitive, wise, practical guide for white people struggling with their feelings about race.

—Howard Zinn, author, *A People's History of the United States*  
(Praise from previous edition)

# UPROOTING RACISM

HOW  
WHITE PEOPLE  
CAN WORK FOR  
RACIAL  
JUSTICE

PAUL KIVEL



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*To my family—Micki, my love  
Ariel, SAM, Ryan, Amanda, Leticia, Kesa,  
Niko, Mateo and Anahi, my inspiration  
And to all those fighting for justice*

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PART III

# Being Allies



## Mutual Interest

IT SHOULD BE CLEAR from the last sections that racism has devastating costs to people of color *and* to white people. Those costs are not the same. People of color face immediate survival level threats to their health and well-being that most white people don't experience.

If we only act from an understanding of the costs of racism to people of color, then our involvement in racial justice work is based on "helping them." The work becomes a form of charity and confirms people of color as needy and white people as having it together, knowing the answers, and being righteous. This approach reinforces white superiority and obscures the fact that white-run institutions produce the conditions harming people of color. If we only act from an understanding of the costs of racism to us, then we are acting from self-interest not out a sense of compassion, moral integrity, and an understanding of everyone's true interconnectedness. I believe racial justice work must be based on our understanding of mutual interest—we all have a tremendous stake in building a society based on inclusion, equity, caring, and justice. This is an understanding leading to long-term, sustainable multiracial alliances for justice.

*Mutual interest* is a core value of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ). On their website, they state, "We use the term mutual interest to help us move from the idea of helping others, or just thinking about what is good for us, to understanding that our own liberation as white people, our own humanity, is inextricably linked to racial justice.... It means our own freedom is bound up in the freedom of people of color."<sup>1</sup>

The daily benefits I enjoy are directly related to the exploitation and violence directed at people of color both in my neighborhood and in other countries. The ruling-class neoliberal agenda tells us that through hard work, personal responsibility, individualism, competition, and choice, we can succeed even if most others can't. However, 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.<sup>2</sup> I will return to this metaphor later in the book.

# What Does an Ally Do?

ACTING AS AN ALLY to people of color is one of the most important things 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 recognizing we are interdependent and have mutual interest in building a healthy and caring society that provides for people's needs and is environmentally sustainable.

I use the word *ally* because it has been very useful in the social justice work I do. But it is not a perfect term. Some people use the concept of *solidarity*, others of *accompanying*, others the concept of being an *accomplice*. Each word has its strengths and limits. The practice of acting as an ally is based on the idea of mutual interest, our interdependence, and the need for common struggle. But it also recognizes we are not all located in the same place in the struggle. In the work to end racism, for example, people of color, Native Americans, and immigrants of color are on the front lines. They take the most risks and pay the most severe costs—everyday their lives are at stake. They are most knowledgeable about racist oppression and how it works, and therefore they should be in leadership. White allies should look to the leadership of people of color-led organizations and be accountable to it.

The Oakland Men's Project originally adopted the concept of acting as an ally in the early 1980s while doing work to educate and mobilize men to end sexism and male violence. Some women were saying men were the problem, and many men concluded that if they were the problem, they couldn't play a role in addressing these



“women’s issues.” Then and now, acting as an ally invites/challenges those who are disengaged to step up and work alongside—but to be accountable to the leadership of those most impacted. Just as many men are against violence against women but don’t see ways to be involved, many white people believe in racial justice as an abstract ideal. It’s powerful to call them in, to give them a role to play.

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 are in, and in collaboration with people of color and other white allies, pursue justice.

*Uprooting Racism* 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. How do we put our attention, energy, and money toward strategic priorities within a long-term vision?

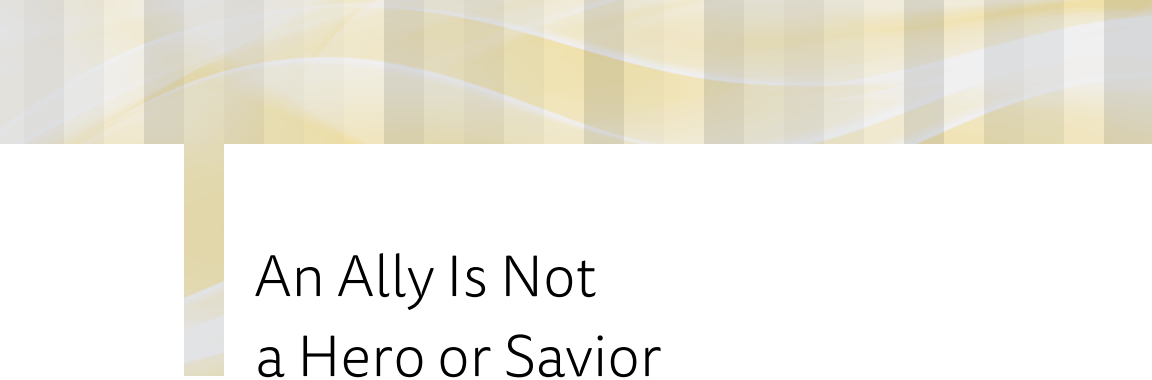
This task includes listening to people of color so we can support the actions they take, the risks they bear in defending their lives and challenging white hegemony. We don’t need to believe or accept as true everything people of color say. There is no one voice in any community, much less in the complex and diverse communities of color spanning the US. We do need to listen carefully to many voices—particularly those on the front lines of the struggle—so we understand and give credence to their knowledge and 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.

- 
- *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?*
-

# Showing Up as 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.

3.1. What People of Color Want from White Allies	
Respect us	Take risks
Listen to us	Make mistakes
Find out about us	Don't take it personally
Don't take over	Honesty
Stand by my side	Talk to other white people
Provide information	Teach your children
Don't assume you know	Interrupt jokes and
what's best for me	comments about racism
Financial support	Don't ask me to speak for
Check your privilege	my people
Don't try to save or rescue us	Don't be scared by my anger
Interrupt white silence	Your body on the line



## An Ally Is Not a Hero or Savior

IF WE ARE WORKING from an understanding of mutual interest and responding to what people of color say they need from white people, it should be clear the struggle for racial justice is not about white people saving, rescuing, or “helping” people of color.

We’ve been taught white men built, produced, discovered, or created everything of importance in the world. We’ve been taught people of color have been lazy and unambitious. We’ve seen or read about all the great white male saviors from Jesus to Medieval knights; from Columbus to the Founding Fathers; from Western gunslingers to contemporary comic book, movie, and video game superheroes. It is always white men and Western civilization who protect the family/town/nation/women/children/Western civilization from dangerous others. This constantly reiterated cosmology of saviors bringing salvation can make it hard for individual white people not to assume we are the current leading edge of the salvation effort bringing democracy, “free” markets, humanitarian aid, equality, justice, safety, etc. to “those in need.” In fact, a lot of the violence initiated by white people and by the US globally is in the name of self-righteous efforts to help people.

Other people don’t need to be rescued. Allies aren’t heroes. They are members of the community who understand injustice when they see it and do what they can to work with others to redress it.

# Basic Tactics

ALTHOUGH EVERY situation is different, taking the previous statements into account, I have compiled some general guidelines.

1. *Assume racism is everywhere, everyday.* Racism affects 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 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 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. *Assume our whiteness is also a factor.* We should look for ways we are acting from assumptions of white power or privilege. This will allow us to see our tendency to defend ourselves or to assume we should be in control.
5. *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.
6. *Understand the connections between racism, economic issues, sexism, and other forms of injustice.*

7. *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 enacted.
8. *Be strategic.* Decide what is important to challenge and what's not. Think about strategy in particular situations. Confront the source of power.
9. *Don't confuse a particular struggle with larger issues.* 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.
10. *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.
11. *Support the leadership of people of color and POC-led organizations.*
12. *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.
13. *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.
14. *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 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.<sup>1</sup>

**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. The teacher 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 the teacher 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 withdrawn his compassion, reaffirmed his own innocence and good intentions, and blaming Roberto for his own ineffectiveness as an ally.

You probably recognize some of the teacher's tactics from descriptions in Part I. The teacher denied or minimized the likelihood of racism, blamed Roberto, and eventually counterattacked, claiming to be a victim of Roberto's anger and racial generalizations.

This interaction illustrates some of the common feelings that can make it difficult for white people to intervene effectively where discrimination is occurring:

1. The feeling 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 white people could intentionally hurt others. Or we may want to say, "Not me, I'm different."

If you feel attacked, remember Roberto has experienced *injustice*. You need to focus on what happened and what you can do about it, not on your feelings.

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 addressing the issue. 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. Just as sexism forces women to mistrust all men, part of the harm of racism is it forces people of color to be wary and mistrustful of all white people. People of color face racism everyday, often from unexpected quarters. They never know when a white friend, coworker, teacher, police officer, doctor, or passerby may discriminate, act hostile, or say something offensive.<sup>2</sup> 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 people of color will trust us. Trust builds over time through our visible efforts to act as allies in 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, to hide their pain or simply forget about the whole experience. Whatever their response, the experience of racism 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 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 all need to treat it seriously. It is also a common event. 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 in Part I.)

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 more carefully to what Roberto is saying. He should assume 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 the 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:** OK. 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.



# Allies Leverage Their Resources

WHITE PEOPLE GENERALLY have a lot more resources to bring to the struggle for racial justice than we take credit for. See the following page for some of the resources you may be able to draw on.

### 3.2. You Have Resources to Leverage for Racial Justice!

**Money:** direct donations, hosting house parties

**Time:** support work, administration, research, filing

**Skills:** fundraising, web-based activity, outreach, childcare, writing, music, art, carpentry

**Connections:** to journalists, politicians, decision-makers, funders

**Space:** in your house, office building, religious or community organization for meetings, living room gatherings, workshops, or art builds

**Organizational leverage:** working for organizational change where you work, where you go to school, where your children go to school, at your religious or community center.

**Information to share:** about racism and other issues of social justice, about how systems work, about organizing, fundraising

**Access to and credibility with white people:** family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates

**Access to young people:** as parents, teachers, youth workers, aunts, uncles, grandparents

**Your body on the line:** showing up for rallies, vigils, protests, city council meetings, school board meetings

**Witnessing, recording, interrupting, and reporting:** incidents of police harassment and brutality, incidents of discrimination and marginalization, overheard personal comments, organizational practices and policies, or on online sites

**Amplifying information, analysis, needs, and calls for action from People of Color and Indigenous-led struggles:** through personal networks, Facebook, twitter, letters to the editor, public signs, t-shirts, yard signs

Please educate yourself in the issues, work with others, be accountable to the Movement for Black Lives, Indigenous nations, and other people of color in your community, and use your resources to support them.

# An Ally Educates, Mobilizes, and Organizes Other White People

THERE IS MUCH a single white person can accomplish, but large-scale social change is a collective effort. From the Civil Rights period's Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panthers to today's Black Lives Matter movement and Indigenous struggles, the primary request to whites has consistently been to break white silence, show up in solidarity, and *educate and organize other white people so they participate in multiracial alliances for justice*. It is important I show up in the struggle, but if I show up with 2, 5, or 25 family, friends, and other educated and prepared white people, my impact is amplified.

After Barack Obama was elected President of the US in 2008, African Americans came to some of us who were white and said that, in a period of rising militia activity and racist backlash to Obama's victory, they needed more white voices challenging racism. Under the leadership of Pam McMichael at the Highlander Center and Carla Wallace at the Fairness Campaign of Kentucky a number of us began to organize a national network of organizations and individuals whose mission is to "organize White people for racial justice.... We work to connect people across the country while supporting and collaborating with local and national racial justice organizing efforts. SURJ provides a space to build relationships, skills and political analysis to act for change. This mission is in service to our vision,... a society where we struggle together with love, for justice, human dignity and a sustainable world.... That work cannot be done in isolation from or disconnected from the powerful

leadership of communities of color. It is one part of a multiracial, cross-class movement centering people of color leadership.

Therefore, SURJ believes in resourcing organizing led by people of color, and maintaining strong accountability relationships with organizers and communities of color.”<sup>1</sup>

There are now over 200 SURJ chapters and affiliates across the US moving this work forward. Whether it is with SURJ, another group, or people you bring together yourself, I encourage you to think about the work of an ally not only as a daily personal practice but something much larger, becoming part of our collective struggle for liberation.<sup>2</sup>

# An Ally Makes a Commitment

NOBODY NEEDS fly-by-night allies. Being an ally takes commitment and perseverance. The struggle to end racism and other forms of injustice is lifelong. 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 article was about the 17-year struggle to change the “Birmingham Braves” name and caricatured image of an “Indian” used by the school’s 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, 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. During the 15 years she was involved

with this group, this woman learned a tremendous amount about herself, local Native cultures, and the nature of white resistance. The group 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 victory for Native American dignity and respect. Her work as an ally reminded me of what commitment as an ally really means.

# I Would Be a Perfect Ally if...

WHITE PEOPLE 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, we must reject the constant temptation to find excuses for inaction.

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

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 "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 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 their money on...”

Such justifications set 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 one person to exemplify 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 issue is *justice* for everyone. 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. US 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 their race...
- (Turning to an individual) What do people of color think about that...?
- Let’s ask so and so—they’re a person of color.

We would never say a white person was representative of their race, even if the person were Babe Ruth, Mother Teresa, Hitler, John Lennon, or Margaret Thatcher, much less the only white person who happened to be in the room.

- 
- *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 there isn't just one white perspective and 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

“DID YOU HEAR the one about the Chinaman who . . .?” What do you do when someone starts to tell a joke 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 punch line? How do you respond to a comment containing 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, no matter how unsafe it is for you, it is 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 linguistic assault and white racial performance. The joke teller is claiming “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, the so-called joke makes it 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, comment, 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 the abuser expected. If a person of color speaks up first, then you can support the 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 such inhibitions are much lower in all-white settings.<sup>1</sup> If you pay attention, you will probably notice many negative racial jokes, comments, put-downs, and stereotypes made in your presence when it appears 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 the speaker, 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 punch line. 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 me 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 them off, interrupting abuse is a form of public education. It is a way to put your knowledge about racial stereotypes and abuse into action.

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 the impact of what they say.

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 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."

Unfortunately, a claim of innocence or virtue by a white person often trumps a claim of injury by a person of color. Many white people believe if a person says something racist, they are racist and racists are bad or marginal people. Since they are certainly not a bad or marginal person, if they've said something that sounds racist, it is not actually racist and you must be mistaken or you didn't understand that what they said was a joke (and you lack a sense of humor and are oversensitive to boot). <sup>2</sup> It's important to keep the focus on the impact of the comment and not on the virtue or moral state of the speaker.

In our society, the importance of one's moral worth is reinforced by centuries of Christian persecution against those who don't measure up. Anxiety about one's salvation combined with terror of damnation enforces compliance.<sup>3</sup> Because purity of intent is believed to absolve an individual from the consequences of their actions, when someone is confronted with a simple mistake, an uncharitable act, or any questioning of their integrity, often the speaker's first response is to defend their innocence.

- I didn't do it.
- I didn't mean it.
- I didn't know about it.
- It wasn't my fault.
- I didn't intend it.
- It was only a joke.

Behind such statements is the justification, "I am really a good person regardless of what happened." In a culture based on a God who

judges sinful individuals, an immediate claim of good intention can seem a defense against personal complicity in a situation where something is not right. This dynamic makes it even more important to keep the focus on the impact of the comment and not on the virtue or moral state of the speaker.

Sometimes the speaker will try to isolate you by saying everyone else liked 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 the 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 when I respond to jokes or comments, other people come up to me afterward 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, white allies 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 impact their 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 need 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 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 with each other about the ways we talk to each other.



# 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 mean? If we look at Western history, we see that exploited groups have rarely gained by converting more and more members of the group in power to their side.<sup>1</sup> Groups in power don't generally make concessions to disenfranchised groups just because they come to understand that it is right, moral, or just. Social change comes when people organize to challenge the practices and policies of organizations and governing bodies with non-violent or violent direct action, mass mobilization, electoral campaigns, or other strategies. Popular opinion is important at certain times in efforts to create change, but I believe it is unrealistic to think 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 racism is a serious problem they should do something about, 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 racism exists. Sometimes loud and vociferous, sometimes soft-spoken, they demand lots of time and attention from the group. They assume they and their concerns deserve center stage. I have noticed 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, 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 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, which 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 your personal behavior, although you do have a responsibility for your 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.

I have never found it 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 I don't want to be an anti-racist missionary trying to convert white people to a belief in racial justice. (Besides, many white people believe in racial justice, they just aren't doing anything to make it happen.) 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 defense 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 environment, information, and tools that allow people to understand their role and responsibility in working for racial justice. I have no control over what they do with the opportunity. As much as I would like to have magic dust to turn everyone I spoke with into racial justice activists, I know each person makes their 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, we are not talking about winning people over. We are trying to achieve some concrete changes in the institutional practices we confront which 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 an effective tactic in achieving organizational or institutional 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 active were so effective in confronting white power, the US 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 that protects white interests and colludes with injustice? Or the side 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.

Organizing with other white people to canvass in predominantly white neighborhoods is another useful activity SURJ and other organizations have employed to talk with white people. We need to get better at breaking the silence in white communities about racism and specific issues like police brutality, militarization of the local police force, the prison/industrial complex, attacks on the public school system, and local Indigenous struggles. Canvassing works best when it is tied to local issues, recommending current actions people can take. You can also have materials to offer or sell like window and yard signs ("Black Lives Matter," "I Stand with Standing Rock," or "I Love My Muslim Neighbors").

### 3.3. 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?  
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 build 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?

# 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 them may be at issue. Here again, unfortunately, there is no magic dust to help you 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 to the person and/or how 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 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 their attitude, comments, and behavior. I want them to know 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 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 the word you used is very offensive. Did you know that? Are you trying to hurt people?

I find I can quickly tell if someone is well-intentioned but unaware of the effects of their words, or if they are resistant and unlikely 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 we work with other white people. But not every white person, not all of the time, perhaps not even most of the time.

# Tips for Talking with White People about Racism<sup>1</sup>

IF WE'RE GOING to make significant change in our country, we have to break one of the taboos we have developed as white people to maintain racism—"Don't talk about race explicitly with other white people." As people in the Movement for Black Lives have emphasized, *silence = complicity*. To interrupt this silence and keeping in mind the ideas on strategic conversations discussed above, we can initiate courageous and loving conversations about racial justice and other difficult issues. All white folks need to talk about racial justice, including those of us who see ourselves as progressive. These conversations are opportunities to discuss what we can do to address racism in ourselves and our communities, and to challenge the scapegoating of "other" white people—especially poor and working-class white people and/or white people living in rural or rust belt towns.

## Before You Start

- Ask yourself, "Am I coming from a place of respect, caring, and compassion?"
- Remind yourself that conversations aren't about proving yourself right, they are about changing hearts and minds.
- Drop shaming, blaming, and stereotypes. Call people in to encourage new thinking about the issues.
- Conversations about race can stir up strong emotions. Check in with yourself before you begin a conversation, and remember to be gentle with yourself and with the people you are talking to.
- Model vulnerability and validate people's fears.

- Many people will not be reached with a framework of “white privilege” or “systems of oppression,” particularly rural, poor, and working-class people because they are not economically privileged. Use language and references people relate to.
- Most folks will shut down if they feel like they are being attacked. Try thinking about what you know about this person. Are they a parent? Do they volunteer in their community? What are their values? Approach from this place, not from one of disagreement but from curiosity.
- If the conversation is online, it can only progress so far. Once things get tense, take the conversation off Facebook, email, or text message. Meet in person or talk on the phone.
- Find a stopping point. You are not likely to change someone’s worldview in one sitting. End when the conversation is in a place of agreement, and revisit it again later.

### **Ways to Get Started**

- When someone asks about how you are doing, say, “I am feeling really [sad/scared/upset] about what’s going on in our country.”
- “I feel nervous to bring this up, but I think we really need to have a conversation about what is happening in communities of color.”
- “What are you thinking about Black Lives Matter/the attacks on immigrants/something else of current interest?”
- “Are you concerned about how afraid people are feeling, particularly people of color?”
- “What would you do if you were an immigrant or Muslim person in our country right now? What would you want to happen?”
- “What are your hopes for our economy?”
- “Many people are very upset about the state of things in our country and about how their communities are suffering from racism and violence. How do you think they should express these views?”
- “People should have access to basic human rights, like the ability to feel safe and have access to healthy living-wage job,



quality education, and health care. What do you think you and I can do to make a difference?"

If it feels safe, consider sharing your personal story. Often times, personal connection between people is what creates the possibility of transformation.

If people are defensive and say "I'm not a racist," "I'm against racism," "I think people should be treated equally," respond with something supportive such as "I'm really happy to hear you say you are against racism. So am I, and I'm worried because of how people of color are being treated in our country. Have you thought about ways to show up for people of color during this period?"

### **General Suggestions**

**Listen:** Start by asking questions like those above. Empathize with and affirm their hopes and fears, without agreeing with the ways they see the problems or the solutions. Keep listening, especially when you don't agree. Be sure you aren't just waiting to respond.

**Frame issues using shared values:** If they care about concepts such as equality, human rights, justice, and international law, use that language. If they care about strong and vibrant communities, go from there. Give them a way to take a step closer and without feeling like they have to give up membership in their community.

**Share a personal story:** "I've realized that even though I work hard to be against racism, I have work to do too, for example, one time, I did \_\_\_\_\_ and I learned/realized \_\_\_\_\_. Have you had similar experiences? How do we help each other grow and live up to our values?"

**Focus:** Discern what you can agree on and then steer the conversation in the direction you want to explore.

**Reframe the problem:** Ask them what they think racism is really about. Talk about what you think racism is really about.

**Use historical examples:** People resonate with stories already familiar to them. You can talk about black demands for full equality, dignity, and freedom from institutionalized discrimination through the lens of the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. You can make the analogy between current public policies to the system of institutionalized segregation and oppression that constituted apartheid policy in South Africa. You can draw on the history of boycotts to demand political change, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, or the 1970s farmworkers' Grape Boycott.

**Don't make it a competition or a history lesson.**

**Avoid triggering the framework they are using:** Start by describing your vision for change with a positive framing.

**Show don't tell:** Speak in language they can hear; don't use jargon or academic language. If you choose to use buzzwords like segregation, or colonialism, or police violence, give concrete examples.

**Ask them what they know:** Often people know less than they think they do. By simply asking calm questions and sharing facts, you can help them realize that they may be missing pieces of the story.

**Be confident and don't worry about making mistakes:** You don't have to be an expert to have an opinion about human rights issues. Start with what you know, and then learn together.

**Take care of yourself:** These encounters can be painful. Hang in there. Give yourself and the people you are talking with lots of appreciation for having difficult conversations.

# Allies, Collaborators, and Agents

AS WE HAVE SEEN, an *ally* takes an active, 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). 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 our whiteness, 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 and not share all of the information or resources we have. We might set limits on the participation of people of color 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 they are not as welcome, not as legitimate, not as acceptable as friends, neighbors, shoppers, 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 many of us have become agents of the ruling class

in maintaining racism through the roles we play through our paid or volunteer work.

People in the ruling class—those who are at the top of the economic pyramid—have never wanted to deal directly with people on the bottom of the pyramid, but have wanted to prevent them from organizing for power. Therefore they have created a space that protects them from the rest of the population. I call this space 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 on the bottom of the pyramid. If there were a literal free-for-all for the 6% of the financial 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 6%, and take care of those who aren't really making it. Social welfare workers, nurses, teachers, counselors, caseworkers and caregivers 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, there is a level playing field, and racism and other forms of discrimination are just minor inconveniences to be overcome. 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, food, shelter, or health care. 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 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 supposedly 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 may say, "What more could they possibly want?" or "Why are they still complaining?" We can pretend to be color-blind and simply ignore persistent discrimination, criminalization, marginalization, and the everyday racism 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 they too can make it. But more importantly, it misleads white people into thinking the system works, and those for whom it doesn't have only themselves to blame.<sup>1</sup>

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 to 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 maintain the *status quo*.

Some of us are in more powerful positions, where we supervise people of color or allocate benefits to them such as jobs, housing, public benefits, or 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.



## 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. Schoolteachers, counselors, and administrators often monitor youth of color closely, isolating them in “special needs” classes, writing them up as behavior and discipline problems, readily suspending them, 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 often than they do in white families. Because of system-wide white assumptions that people of color are more likely to scam programs for unneeded benefits and because of limited program funding requiring 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 needed access to 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. Young people 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 clerks—there are literally tens of thousands of white people whose jobs include monitoring people of color and limiting where they can be and what they can do.

Studies show that many of these people exhibit unintentional and unconscious discriminatory behavior (implicit bias). Of course there are many apartment owners, real estate agents, and bank loan officers who try to be fair and unbiased in their practices. Even so, the National Fair Housing Alliance estimates there are over a million race-based acts of discrimination a year just in the rental market alone. Overall, 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.<sup>2</sup>

The official surveillance and punishment of people of color is enhanced by the many ordinary white people who informally monitor people of color around them for “suspicious” or unliked 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, criminal/legal and immigration systems devastates young people 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 communities of color, 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, family and friends are traumatized, normal human relationships are disrupted, and the social and economic capital<sup>3</sup> of the community is seriously diminished. No one is unaffected.

When the media use the negative impact of such community attacks to further reinforce negative stereotypes and justify discriminatory 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 African American and Latinx youth are systematically pushed out of schools, the media portray the problem as lack of family support, violence in the community, or lack of 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 operating in a racially discriminatory manner.

White people are almost never subject to reprimand, much less more severe consequences for regular, routine, and pervasive patterns of racial discrimination 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, a temporary lapse in judgment, or extenuating circumstances so we can exonerate and forgive them. This allows us to avoid holding wrongdoers accountable and avoid examining their role (and ours) in maintaining the web of control over communities of color.

The cumulative impact of the pervasive, everyday web of surveillance, control, and enforcement on 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 comprise a large category of working and middle-class jobs and are necessary in our society. People go into the helping professions to serve people, and they 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 their impact. 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*.

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- *Are you an agent of the racism that reinforces the racial hierarchy, do you work as an ally to people of color, or are there elements of both roles in your work? How can you become more of an ally and less of an agent?*
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To quote Taiaiake Alfred (and 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 nations.<sup>4</sup>

### **3.4. 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?
5. Who are white people who have challenged racism in your work?
6. Who benefits from the work you do—people at the top of the pyramid, people in the buffer zone, or people at the bottom?
7. 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?
8. What will you do to act less as an agent of the wealthy and more as an ally to people of color?