

# Becoming Trustworthy White Allies

Twenty years ago, an African-American friend and colleague, Lynnette Stallworth, challenged me to critically examine why I, as a white woman, so often looked to her as the expert on racism, depending on her to call me out or advise me when racist words, behaviors, or policies were at play.

“What happens when I am not here, Melanie?” Lynnette asked. “How are you, as a white person, holding other white people accountable? How are other white people doing that for you? Racism is a white problem and it is long past time for you all to do your own work!”

I was stunned and convicted by her challenge. I had to acknowledge that I and many of my well intentioned white friends did not have vocabulary to talk about racism in an everyday kind of way. We were frequently mired in feelings of guilt. When we encountered racism, we could not be counted on to speak up and confront it. Too often, we fell mute, became confused, reacted with defensiveness, or simply wanted to disappear. I could see that I was not trustworthy, especially when things got hot.

To understand what it means to be white in America and break the silences that surround it requires arduous, persistent, and soul-stretching work. Sadly, too many of us stop short of that deep work. We assume that our good intentions and eagerness to help are enough. We come into multiracial gatherings or organizations expecting to be liked and trusted. But trust isn't something we are granted simply because we finally showed up. Trust has to be earned, again and again. Or better said, we need to become trustworthy white allies, people passionately committed to eliminating systems of oppression that unjustly benefit us.

Lynnette's challenge inspired me to launch *Doing Our Own Work*, an anti-racism program for white people who seek to deepen their commitment to confronting racism and white privilege where they live, work, study, and worship. *Doing Our Own Work* is designed as a supplement to, not a substitute for, contexts where people of different races discuss and strategize together how racism can be confronted and dismantled.

It has been an honor and a joy to do this intensive work for the past two decades with hundreds of people from communities all across the U.S. and Canada. Out of that work, I want to share some reflections about the deep and sustained work I believe white people can and must do if we want to be effective and trustworthy allies in the struggle for racial justice.

## ***Own that we are “raced”***

As white people, we have inherited an intergenerational legacy of silence, looking away, pretending not to notice, and numbness to pain. As Robert Terry said, “To be white in America is not to have to think about it.”<sup>1</sup>

As a beginning exercise in *Doing Our Own Work*, we ask participants to take out a blank piece of paper and write this incomplete sentence at the top: *To me, being white means...*<sup>2</sup> They are given three minutes to list as many things as they can think of to complete the sentence. We then invite them to take out a fresh sheet of paper and write the same incomplete sentence at the top: *To me being white means...* Again, they have three minutes to list their responses. By the third and fourth time they are asked to complete this same sentence, some people are laughing nervously, others are scowling, yet others put their pens down and stare out the window.

“This was really hard,” is the most common feedback. “If the sentence had been, ‘*To me, being a woman means...*’ I could have written pages. But I had nothing to say about this.”

“At first I wrote really negative things, and then I made a list of privileges I have as a white person. The third time, I tried to go deeper, write about things I had never thought about or allowed myself to feel before.”

In the conversation that follows, we talk about why we so seldom have to think about our white racial identity when people of color have to think about and navigate race and racism day in and day out. We also reflect on what might happen if we paused several times a day and asked: “What does it mean that I am white in this situation, in this encounter? What am I failing to see? What is the work I need to do, here and now, as a white person?”

The challenge Lynnette issued twenty years ago I’ve heard restated many times since by other people of color in my life who’ve said: “I appreciate that you want to understand my experience as a person of color in this country. But what I most need from you, Melanie, is that you begin to understand your own. I need for you to do the strenuous work of understanding what it means to be white in America. Unless you do that, you are dangerous.”

In my experience, those of us who are white are far more apt to identify people of color by their race than we are to identify ourselves as “white.” Too many of us have not begun to explore how we feel about being white or how racism has shaped our lives. This means we frequently enter multiracial conversations and collaborations expecting people of color to open up and share how racism affects them without being willing to share an equivalent level of vulnerability and self-disclosure.

### ***Make privilege visible***

One meaning of being white is that we are granted unearned privileges and structural power simply by reason of our race, without regard for our personal attitudes, values, and commitments. Peggy McIntosh has noted that “privilege is a fugitive subject” about which white people were meant to remain oblivious.<sup>3</sup> Making privilege visible to ourselves and others demands constant vigilance. Without that vigilance, we are indeed dangerous because we behave like dinosaurs that drag a large tail behind us. Unable to see the tail, and convinced of our good intentions, we are oblivious to the havoc we wreak as we move through the world, knocking people over and flattening things in our path.<sup>4</sup> How do we do this? By presuming we can speak for others, imposing our mission and outreach projects on others, discounting as “ungrounded” the fears and criticisms voiced by people of color, dismissing their pain as overreacting, accusing them of “playing the race card” when they call us on our oppressive behavior, and then shifting the focus to our hurt feelings.

Making privilege visible is only the first step. In our spheres of influence, we need to interrupt racism by challenging the practices and policies that protect privilege and keep it in place. We can use privilege to ensure that power is more equitably shared. We can shine a light on every program, ministry, and endeavor we are engaged in, asking: Whose voices are being sought out and heard? Who decides what is right, beautiful, true, and valued? Whose cultural perspectives are overrepresented and whose are underrepresented? Who is seen as important to the mission and who is seen as less important?<sup>5</sup>

### ***Work collaboratively with people of color***

As we seek to make privilege visible and interrupt racism, it is essential that we do this in partnership with people of color. Otherwise we may do more harm than good. If we charge ahead, eager to impose our solutions and interventions, we replicate old patterns of missionary zeal as we plant our ally flag and run the risk of jeopardizing those we are presuming to “help.”<sup>6</sup> Our work as allies must always and everywhere be grounded in humility, collaboration, and accountability. This means becoming

engaged in organizations led by people of color, respecting the priorities they identify as strategies for change, and sustaining our engagement over time. It also means learning about the ways people of color have resisted racism long before we arrived on the scene. By showing up consistently and acting collaboratively, we have the possibility of developing authentic relationships of mutuality and accountability with people of color.

### **Nurture truth-telling relationships**

Becoming trustworthy white allies is something we cannot do by ourselves. We need the support and challenge of relationships where there is a shared commitment to speak our truths and hear each other all the way through, no matter how uncomfortable the revelations may make us. This, too, takes time and effort. Such relationships “do not spring ablaze of themselves;” they need to be sought out, nurtured and sustained.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Work through shame and guilt***

When denial gives way, and the breadth and depth of racism is acknowledged, a profound sense of shame or guilt can consume white people for a time. While shame and guilt are not the same, both can surface in us as we awaken to the devastating realities of racism. Neither is particularly useful to people of color because both have the effect of turning the spotlight on white people once again. For example, white people may seek forgiveness from people of color to lessen their shame. This request can be toxic for people of color if the focus is the feelings of white people rather than the continuing inequities of racism.

I do not believe it is possible for white people to go around shame and guilt, but we can learn to move through those feelings into something deeper and more productive. The critical question is what we do with those feelings and the discoveries that birthed them. As Audre Lorde said, “If [guilt] leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge.”<sup>8</sup>

### ***Do the work from a place of self-love***

When Lynnette and other people of color challenge me to understand what it means to be white, I don’t think they are asking me to be consumed by guilt, shame, or self-hatred. On the contrary, I believe they want to be met by white people who love themselves and others enough to do the deep work of truth-telling and healing so that together we might repair the breaches that racism creates. I am utterly convinced that those of us who are white will not be able to keep showing up, resist checking out, or stay in difficult yet essential conversations across racial difference if we cannot come from a place of self-love.

We need to love ourselves and others enough to forge new ways of being white in this world by nurturing an anti-racist identity. We need to recover the stories of white ancestors who resisted racism and worked with people of color to keep hope alive by creating change. Their witness and resolve can strengthen our own.

We need to feel, claim, and give voice to our grief, distress, and rage at racism. The hunger and thirst for racial justice must be our own. Otherwise we will be driven by the desperate need to seek approval and love from people of color. Writing about her work as a Latina multicultural educator, Lillian Roybal Rose says: “I tell white people in my workshops that I expect them, as allies with power in the oppression of racism, to act justly and not dominate, regardless of the fact that we may never love them.”<sup>10</sup>

### ***Stay on the journey***

I believe it is possible to become trustworthy white allies if we are willing to move out of our comfort

zones, risk having our assumptions challenged, our lives disrupted, and our way of viewing the world transformed. Most important is the commitment to stay on the journey. Unlearning and interrupting the

habits, practices, and policies that keep racism and white privilege intact is life-long, life-giving work, never done once and for all.

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## Notes

1 Robert W. Terry, "The Negative Impact on White Values," in *Impacts of Racism on White Americans*, ed. Benjamin P. Bowser and Raymond G. Hunt (Sage, 1981), p. 120.

2 This exercise is adapted from an activity created and led by Frances Kendall and Paul Kivel at the 2003 National Conference on Race and Ethnicity.

3 Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies," Working Paper No. 189, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, p. 9.

4 I am indebted to Kate Runyon for this image.

5 In his article, "The Culture of Power," Paul Kivel provides a helpful list of questions to identify and assess cultures of power within organizations. See [www.paulkivel.org](http://www.paulkivel.org).

6 In his essay "Authenticity in a Community Setting," Dionardo Pizaña describes how "outreach" programs are too often grounded in a savior mentality that fails to honor the wisdom and culture of the people being targeted. Pizaña suggests an alternative model – "in-reach" programs – that seek to incorporate and build upon the wisdom, assets, and leadership of all parties involved. "Authenticity in a Community Setting," (2003), pp. 3-4. See this essay at [alliesforchange.org](http://alliesforchange.org).

7 In "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," Adrienne Rich writes, "Truthfulness, honor, is not something which springs ablaze of itself; it has to be created between people." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (Norton, 1979), p. 193.

8 Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. (Crossing Press, 1984) p. 130.

9 I am indebted to Ruth Frankenberg for her insight that antiracist work by white people requires "doing the work from a place of self-love." Frankenberg's journey as an anti-racist activist and writer is described by Becky Thompson in *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (University of Minnesota, 2001) pp. 162-166.

10 Lillian Roybal Rose, "White Identity and Counseling White Allies about Racism," in *Impacts of Racism on White Americans*, ed. Benjamin P. Bowser and Raymond G. Hunt (Sage, 1981), p. 28.