



Courage and Commitment: A Vision for Antiracist White Leadership

By Patti DeRosa, MSW, MA

“The battle is, and always has been, a battle for the hearts and minds of white people in this country. The fight against racism is our issue. It is not something that we’re called on to help people of color with. We need to become involved with it as if our lives depended on it, because in truth, they do.”

Anne Braden (1)

I once lived in a suburban community south of Boston that was celebrated for its racial and ethnic diversity and lack of residential segregation. On every block, in every part of town, people of different races lived side by side. This kind of housing pattern is a unique and significant accomplishment in the United States where communities most often remain segregated, and it’s a tribute to the dedicated community activists who made it happen. Yet, now, decades later, a closer look reveals that despite a significant increase in the percentage of people of color (2) in the town, as well as in town leadership, institutional power remains firmly in White hands and the resistance to the leadership of people of color continues.

There is an urgent need for White people to commit to the work of racial justice in both racially diverse and in predominantly/all White communities. Those of us who have been studying, teaching, and organizing about racism for decades know that the unfortunate truth is that far too often, when the subject of racism is raised with White people, predictable obstacles and barriers promptly get erected, whether they be from corporate executives or

community leaders, social workers or teachers, employees or community residents. I am not speaking of the resistance of the overt bigots and haters (that's a given), but rather from those who perceive ourselves as the "good guys", who say we want to do the "right thing", who believe ourselves to be caring, open, and fair-minded people.

As I too am White, I will use the term "we" to include myself in what I am asking of others. While this discussion is intended for White people, people of all backgrounds may find these suggestions valuable. For White people to be responsible, ethical, antiracist leaders (that means all of us, formal and informal leaders alike!), we must:

FACE OUR FEARS ABOUT NAMING, DISCUSSING, AND ADDRESSING RACISM

"Given how seldom we experience racial discomfort in a society we dominate, we haven't had to build our racial stamina. Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we are either unaware of or can never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race."

Robin DiAngelo (3)

When racism enters the picture, White people often panic – we get flustered, defensive, confused, guilty, ashamed, angry, and nervous. We resist having our racial worldview challenged and are terrified of having our biases revealed and exposed, to ourselves as well as to others. We engage in a variety of predictable behaviors that shut down or derail the discussion. This pattern, known as "white fragility", is an emotional reaction that expects racial comfort in all settings, lowers our stamina for racial stress, and limits us from dealing with the realities of racism/White supremacy. It can help if we think of racism like pollution in the air – whether or not we can see it, it surrounds us and we inhale it with every breath. None of us can remain totally healthy or untouched. Better that we face the potential racism in our own attitudes and behaviors than deny the possibility – indeed, the inevitably – of its existence.

Our fear causes us to try to avoid or deny the racial aspects and implications of situations or to shut down the conversation entirely – thereby controlling the agenda of what is permissible to discuss. The end result is that racism does not get addressed, White comfort is protected, and the status quo is preserved. Rather than getting defensive when people of color, or other White people, challenge us about our racism or our racial worldview, let's instead embrace that feedback as a gift that helps us better align our stated values with our behaviors and moves us closer to authentic dialogue and action for racial justice.

EXPAND OUR DEFINITION OF RACISM

“I was taught to see racism in individual acts of meanness, not in systems conferring dominance.”

Peggy McIntosh (4)

One reason we White folks are so terrified of being called “racist” is because of the way we usually define that term. If we think of racism as being only about individual attitudes and behaviors by bigoted, hate-filled, and violent people, it makes sense that most would not identify with that label and would want to distance ourselves from it. Racism, however, is much more than that. Defining racism as primarily individual acts of personal prejudice, rather than a historical and current system of institutional structures and policies that advantage White people has limited our understanding of racism and its impacts. This system can be as mundane as easily finding “flesh-colored” band-aids designed and named on the presumption of White skin tones as the norm, as unconscious as the security of knowing (without ever once having to consciously think about it) that the majority of the business people, political leaders, and educators we interact with are likely to be White just like us, or as insidious as the implicit bias that favors White people in housing, lending, education, and policing. None of these situations require the individual White person to hold explicit racial prejudice or conscious animosity. Yet regardless of our personal beliefs or actions, the system of White supremacy works to favor and support White people, as it was designed to do since our nation’s founding, accruing cumulative privileges, benefits, and advantages over generations. Racial justice cannot be achieved until this structural aspect of racism is understood and addressed.

White people will fight to the death to defend privileges we claim we don’t have. When we are truly honest, most White people will admit it is easier to be White than to be Black in this society, both historically and currently. We know we have more “grease on our wheels” just for being White – regardless of how hard we worked for what we’ve achieved, regardless of how poor we are/were, and regardless of the struggles our European immigrant ancestors may have faced. I know that I continue to benefit from racism every day, even though I have spent my personal and professional life challenging it.

Defining racism as only individual acts leads to only individual solutions that are insufficient to solve systemic problems. Understanding racism as an entire system that works to either advantage or disadvantage gives us a new road map, which is more historically accurate and less personally condemning. Limiting our definition of racism to personal prejudice and hate is like saying the world is flat. The reality is that the world is, in fact, round, and we can only navigate so far with a flat map before we become stuck.

EDUCATE OURSELVES

“They (white people) are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.”

James Baldwin (5)

White people often have very strong feelings about race and racism, but simultaneously have limited accurate knowledge that informs those feelings. People in dominant social groups (white, cis-male, heterosexual, etc.) tend to have little insight into our own identities and social position and think of ourselves as somehow “neutral” while everyone else “has an agenda”. Our miseducation has given us little more than superficial knowledge of the cultures, histories, and systems around us, and we equate and substitute our limited personal experience for scholarly systemic analysis. We define racism on our own terms and think we know it all, when in reality, we know very little about what racism is and how it operates. Arrogance and ignorance are a deadly combination.

The murder of George Floyd in June 2020 was as transformative as it was tragic. It mobilized a global multiracial movement for racial justice and forced many White people to see and ask hard questions about systemic racism, both in America and abroad. Books on racism and anti-racism flew off the bookshelves, with antiracism titles dominating the New York Times, Barnes and Nobles, and Amazon Bestseller Lists for both adults and young adults. (6) While this is encouraging, my hope is that this interest is more than a passing fad and that the desire for learning about racism and anti-racism will continue and establish the foundation for collective action for racial justice.

While it is, of course, essential to study and learn about the history and continuing impacts of 400+ years of brutal systemic racism on people of color (side by side with learning about their resistance, survival, and cultures), we White folks would also be well-served by examining the impacts of that same history on ourselves. What does it do to us morally, psychologically, spiritually, and materially to participate in, collude with, bear witness to, and benefit from such a brutal system for centuries? How has that inhumanity numbed us to pain, reduced our empathy, distorted our understanding of the world, and ultimately reduced our own humanity? What are the costs?

White people, especially leaders, need to work harder and make conscious, and conscientious, efforts to learn about ourselves, the people we serve, and the history that shapes us. Reading a few articles, or that great book and then putting it back on the shelf, or talking with that one Black, Asian, Latinx, or Native American friend (yet once again) just won't cut it (it also annoys the friend!).

REALIZE THAT GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH

“People with good intentions but limited understanding are more dangerous than people with total ill will.”

Martin Luther King Jr. (7)

We’ve all seen (or been) these folks. We’re the White folks that when our racism is pointed out to us exclaim “But I didn’t mean to offend or exclude anyone!” We are the ones who list our “non-racist” credentials, reminding everyone how we marched with Dr. King or Black Lives Matter, how our beloved niece/boyfriend/etc. is Black, or how we taught kids in the “inner city” from every background, as if contact, love, or just showing up somehow excludes us from the possibility of still harboring, exhibiting, or perpetuating racism. These things are usually said by those of us who believe in our hearts that we are not part of the problem. We mean well, and we don’t intend to reinforce racism, yet our denials and testimonials do just that and expose the limits of our understanding and solidarity. We simply don’t know what we don’t know.

Regardless of our intent, we are responsible for the very real impacts of our attitudes and behaviors on people’s lives. Intent does not equal impact, and contact and love do not equal equity and justice. You would not trust your health care to a doctor filled only with good intentions, but no serious training and experience in medicine. If contact, or even love, alone guaranteed equity and justice, then sexism would have been long gone because people of all genders have lots of loving and even intimate contact, yet gender equity is still an elusive goal.

Our “good intentions” can all too often exacerbate the very problems we claim we want to solve and become a kind of saviorism that only serves to reaffirm White supremacy. Good intentions, without committed and vigorous reflection, knowledge, and action, are major obstacles to racial justice. We must understand this and hold ourselves and others accountable from a place of love and humility. We must commit to do better, repair harm, and work tirelessly for racial justice.

LISTEN AND ENGAGE

“The problems of structural racism aren’t caused by conversation, nor can they be solved solely by conversation, but by getting better at the conversational challenges, we may be better positioned to get down to the real work of social change.”

Jay Smooth (8)

It is often difficult for White people to listen, without judgment, when people of color share their stories and experiences. We rush to debate or minimize, rather than understand and trust, the perspectives of people of color, and pay attention only enough to gather information for our rebuttal. We may get particularly enraged by other White people who challenge our racial worldview and push us to examine our whiteness. Our responses all too often fall into predictable categories, of which I offer *only* a few:

1. False parallels (“The same thing happened to me/my ancestors . . .”)
2. Inverting the injustice (“By bringing this up, YOU have offended ME . . .!”)
3. Outright dismissal (“Race had nothing to do with it . . .”)
4. Minimization (“Aren’t you over-reacting?...Things aren’t so bad anymore . . .”)
5. Righteousness (“How dare you! I’m a good person so I can’t be racist.”).
6. Colorblindness (“People are people. I don’t see color.”)

What if we White people instead suspended our disbelief and asked ourselves “What would it mean if what I am hearing is actually true? What would it mean if all this was happening and I have been unaware of it? In what ways am I contributing to or benefiting from this situation? What do I need to understand and do in order to make a real difference?” Authentic listening, with the goal of truly understanding and trusting other’s experience and expertise, is sorely needed.

A mentor once told me “The first job of an activist is to get heard.” He meant that not only *what* we communicate but *how* we communicate matters. Having respectful and effective conversations about race and racism requires not just concrete knowledge about the issues (though that is essential) but also the development of a very specific skill set to communicate that knowledge. It is a communication style that invites dialogue, expects and works with discomfort, engages with conflict, and helps us grow through “caring confrontation” that holds us accountable without being demeaning. Let me be clear – this does not mean that we cannot be forceful in our critiques or passionate in our tone or delivery. It simply means that when we “call out” (identify) racist attitudes, behaviors, and practices, we can simultaneously “call in”, without tearing people down. Otherwise, we simply replicate the very inhumanity we claim to be challenging.

As White people talking with other White people about racism and White supremacy, we must start where they are at, not where we want them to be or wish they were. That means speaking in precise, clear, and accessible language that they understand. While academic terms and “activist-speak” are certainly effective with some audiences, they are generally not quite as

effective - in fact, it can feel condescending – to White folks on Main Street who haven't thought much about racism before. If it is indeed our first job as activists to get heard, then we need to learn how to break down, share, and discuss complex concepts more effectively, without resorting to jargon (there's always time to layer in the sociological terms later, after the concepts have been grasped).

We have to remember that whatever it is that we think we know and understand now, we did not always know and understand, and what we know and understand today is less than what we will know and understand tomorrow. Mistakes will happen – we all make them – but they should not be fatal. We must enter from a place of love, be humble, and always remember our own learning curve.

BE COURAGEOUS

“Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently. You can practice any virtue erratically, but nothing consistently without courage.”

Maya Angelou (9)

I've heard it said that true courage is not acting without fear, but acting *despite* fear. Like training at the gym to improve our fitness, learning about, facing, and challenging our own racism can be a tough, long, and painful process. It is ultimately healing and liberating but results are only achieved when we put in consistent hard work over time.

Engaging in “good trouble” (thank you John Lewis!) always involves risk but all levels of risk are not the same. Risk can range from temporary discomfort and awkwardness to actual physical danger, harm, even death. But do we accurately assess the risk in any given situation? Or do we get stuck in the “what ifs” and inflate the potential consequences, thereby justifying our inaction in our minds? If we don't take risks, then what is the alternative? How is racial justice even possible without risk?

To achieve racial justice, we must be committed to getting the values we claim to hold in sync with our actual behaviors, policies, and practices. Everything we say and do, and everything we don't say and do, either supports or undermines racial justice and equity. Silence and lack of action is not neutral. It is collusion with an unjust system of racial hierarchy. Antiracism must be a daily practice. Like personal hygiene, it's not something we do once and we're done.

We have to continually examine our actions and inactions to see if we are aligned with the antiracist values we claim to hold. When we express antiracist values but our behaviors, policies, and practices are not aligned with them, we are faced with two choices: If we really

believe the values we espouse, then we have no alternative but to change our behaviors, policies, and practices to reflect them. But if we are so tied to our existing behaviors, policies, and practices that we are reluctant/refuse to change, then we have to face the fact that perhaps the values we espouse are not the values we really hold. This is an old Civil Rights Movement strategy. The idea was to hold up the mirror and force the nation to either live up to the ideals it claimed to have, or admit that those “ideals” were fraudulent.

UNDERSTAND HOW EVERYONE LOSES AND HOW EVERYONE CAN BENEFIT

“You have to speak truth and love to power to people who are not always ready to hear the truth. People want to believe the beautiful lie rather than lie with the ugly truth. The ugly truth is that race, White supremacy, racial hierarchy, however you want to talk about it, is robbing every single individual in this country of their full humanity.”

Pastor Michael McBride (10)

Heather McGee opens her insightful book, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, by asking “Why can’t we have nice things?”. Whether the issue is the financial crisis, rising student debt, lack of universal health care, job loss, failing public schools, collapsing public infrastructure, mass shootings, or dysfunctional democracy, she identifies the root problem as racism supported by the pervasive Zero-Sum mindset (if some win, others must lose) that sabotages the equitable sharing of resources. The book guides us to see that when we work together, we can all gain a “Solidarity Dividend” that guarantees the high quality of life we all need and desire. (11)

Nelson Mandela often said that when we dehumanize another, we also dehumanize ourselves. White supremacy may not directly target or harm White people as it does people of color, but White people still pay a high price in a system designed to ultimately serve only the wealthiest and most powerful, despite the perks. Politicians purposely instill White racial fear and resentment and use it strategically to manipulate White people to scapegoat people of color as the source of their pain and troubles, masking how the system of white supremacy and out-of-control capitalism serves their own greed while it imposes high (albeit different) costs on everyone else.

As Malcolm X told us long ago, a key role for White people in the movement for racial justice is to work directly with other White people. (12) Courageous and committed antiracist White leadership is desperately needed in White communities (as well as in racially diverse communities). As White people, we must re-learn most everything we thought we knew

about racism; we must share and relinquish power and control; we must support, respect, and trust the leadership of people of color, we must work to build alliances across difference, and we must understand that we have a personal and collective stake in ending White supremacy.

It is only when we can come to see the destructive nature of the entire system that we can work together to create a world where we all can thrive and benefit from the “Solidarity Dividend” that McGhee talks about. Our interdependent multicultural future depends on it.

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