

Windows and Mirrors for All

Ally or Savior?

By Florence Sprague

“Ally: a person or organization that cooperates with or helps another in a particular activity.”

First definition in Google

When I hear the word ally, I’m afraid that my mind first leaps to wartime and how allies help one another to fight against a common enemy. Sometimes this has worked to a mutual benefit, and sometimes it has dragged more and more nations into a quagmire. But in peacetime, we still feel more secure if we have our allies lined up; our team against their team.

“An ally is a member of a dominant group in our society who works to dismantle any form of oppression from which she or he receives the benefit.”

The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvasian

When contemplating the long, complicated, and unfinished story of U.S. race relations Dr. Ayvasian’s definition gives us a more relevant definition to think about. Many are the white people of good will whose work as allies to help Blacks has been important, from abolition to anti-lynching efforts to school desegregation, to name just a few, and now perhaps in the Black Lives Matter movement. People who have benefited from white privilege are often looking for their place and role in the never-ending challenge to improve mutual understanding and equal opportunities for Blacks and Whites; their role is as allies working for change--valuable, but not always easily effected.

“Please, Mother, I’d rather do it myself!”

Anacin commercial circa 1968

One of the dangers of white privilege is the temptation to the good hearted person to want to be a savior. Why do I call this a temptation? I call it a temptation because stepping in to “help” someone when one has access to power as a white person can make the savior feel good and powerful and generous, but it can feel demeaning or diminishing to the one being helped. It is not the same as working to eliminate the underlying problem, rather it is exercising your privilege to make yourself feel good. You may indeed help an individual in the immediate situation, but it does nothing to solve the need for help.

Now think about it...do you really believe that most people want to have a more privileged person swoop in and “save” them? Not likely. Most people want to be able to take care of themselves and to be treated with respect and parity so that there is no need for anyone to save them. If all people were treated equitably, saviors would not be needed. Men would not need to “save” women, whites would not need to “save” blacks, the wealthy would not need to “save” the working class. There are better ways to help in times of inequity or individual need. The key is to work WITH people instead of FOR them.

Two points made in a radio program about Freedom Summer, the major push to register African American voters in the South, make this last point forcefully. Allies may not always fully understand the issues and needs. In one situation black and white volunteers were being trained to do the dangerously provocative work of voter registration in the Deep South. The volunteers were shown a photo, or video, of a strident, fat, white local official bombastically and officiously pronouncing that he was not going to

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allow their work to succeed. This caused the young white volunteers to laugh. To them the man was a comic caricature of a bigot, a depiction of so many stereotypes held by northern whites about southerners. This laughter, however, deeply offended the black volunteers. To them this man, ridiculous as he might appear, was truly dangerous and threatening. He had, and used, the power to harm them, their families, friends and communities.

The white volunteers were brave, but deeply naïve, about the reality they were entering.

A second point was the fact that blacks were regularly being killed violently for seeking civil rights, yet it was only after two young white volunteers were also killed that the attention of the media and the public nationwide were truly engaged and outraged.

Help is good; invisibility and diminution are not.

Armies of thoughtful white allies are needed, but first egos and privilege must be laid down and the allies must be prepared to listen, learn and follow, not barge in and try to dominate. Dr. Andrea Ayvasian wrote an excellent article which discusses the role of white allies- “Interrupting the Cycle of Oppression: The Role of Allies as Agents of Change.” One place it can be accessed is at https://www.mtholyoke.edu/sites/default/files/diversity/docs/interpreting_oppression.pdf . This article was written at least 30 years ago, but her clear explication of the role and power of allies still sets the standard for explaining this complex concept. I *strongly* encourage you to seek out and read the full text. It is only about six pages long.

She teaches us that the struggle we are in is a long one, requiring patience and a commitment to the long haul. The results of those efforts may not be obvious in the short run, but that doesn't make those efforts unimportant. Perfection is not needed; we must each do our best and persevere. She notes, that strong allies can help to reduce violence and serve as good role models to rising generations, countering the negative messages prevalent elsewhere. It is interesting to think about her statement that “Allied behavior usually involves talking to other dominants about their behavior: whites confronting other whites on issues of racism, men organizing with other men to combat sexism, and so on. Allied behavior is clear action aimed at dismantling the oppression of others in areas where you yourself benefit- it is proactive, intentional, and often involves taking a risk.” (Ayvasian, above)

The work of an ally can make one uncomfortable at times, and often that the discomfort is coming from putting oneself at odds with one's own community in an effort to make that community better. Ally behavior could result in censure, condemnation or anger from your family, neighbors and coworkers when you highlight hidden inequities, challenge the status quo, and reject racist speech. Tact, guiding questions and thoughtfulness are important to help others see new perspectives, but silence seldom leads to change and progress. The progress may be incremental, but over time the impact can be substantial. As we know, no one likes to feel guilty, and few want to give up privilege, but we cannot let that keep us from working for improvement. It would all be so much easier if change didn't feel like a zero sum game. But as Dr. Ayvasian quotes William Strickland, an aide to Jesse Jackson, saying ‘ “When a critical mass of white people join together, rise up, and shout a thunderous ‘No’ to racism, we will actually alter the course of history.” ’

Next month we will look at some more specific ideas of what being a white ally in the work against racism might be like in the 21st century.