

On Being an Ally

By Florence Sprague

“White people who are sick and tired of racism should work hard to become white allies.”

This assertion of Janee Woods (JW below) in her blogpost “Becoming a White Ally to Black People in the Aftermath of the Michael Brown Murder” takes us directly to the heart of our conversation about being an ally. (<http://janeewoods.com/2014/08/14/becoming-a-white-ally-to-black-people-in-the-aftermath-of-the-michael-brown-murder/>) I urge you to read the entire posting; there is not space in this context to examine all of her points. After discussing her sorrow that her white friends were not actively grieving or protesting Michael Brown’s killing, she enumerates a number of reasons that white people might be silent—they might not see where they fit, they are unsure of what to say and afraid of saying the wrong thing, they feel that they are not touched by racism, they might make things worse, or they are afraid of being put into harm’s way themselves. But in the end, it is imperative that white people be actively engaged in this country’s struggle to root out systemic racism and she offers a dozen pointers about what to do.

I have spoken with a number of white people who have gotten hung up on the “facts” of one murderous situation or another. Did Michael Brown steal some cigars? Was Eric Garner apprehended while violating the law (against the sale of single cigarettes; thinking about why there is a market for singles is another interesting exercise)? Did Trayvon Martin beat up George Zimmerman? Why did this one run? Why didn’t that one cooperate? Stop. Just stop. Don’t waste time and energy trying to justify police action or inappropriate use of deadly force. That is just a distraction. I can rise up in righteous anger against law breakers, too, but being shot and killed is not a proportionate response to low level infractions (or white fear). Would a white youth be shot for being a little bit insolent? Shouldn’t the person with the gun be trained to only use it when necessary to protect lives?

A well trained police force is necessary to a well ordered community and the entire community will benefit from good policing. We ask our police officers to protect us from those who would do us harm and who violate the laws of a civil society. This can often put officers in dangerous situations and it also compels them to see the ugly underbelly of human nature. They deserve our respect, *but not our blind allegiance*. When they are seen to be using the force they command with bias, we need to respond.

This brings me to Ms. Woods’ point #2 “Reject the ‘He Was a Good Kid’ narrative and lift up the ‘Black Lives Matter’ narrative.” “Goodness” is not relevant to the discussion of disproportionate violence. An assertion of goodness “may provoke some sympathy but what it really does is support the lie that as a rule black people, black men in particular, have a norm of violence or criminal behavior...This kid didn’t deserve to die... he was a human being and black lives matter.” (Woods, above)

If you need another way to approach this--think about rape prosecutions. For decades women have been fighting to ensure that a woman’s charge of rape will be investigated and prosecuted without regard to her virginity or purity. A sexually active woman can still be raped. A woman in a short, tight dress can still be raped. Men need to be responsible for their actions and not blame the victim. Even husbands. Young black men need to be policed fairly and safely without prior proof of purity.

Windows and Mirrors for All

Ms. Woods' point #5 is "Examine the interplay between poverty and racial equity." She notes that "The twin pillar of racism is economic injustice but do not use class issues to trump race issues and avoid the racism conversation." [emphasis added] Families of color are disproportionately living lives restricted by poverty and "the fact remains that the number one predictor of prosperity and access to opportunity is race." (Woods, above)

Now, if you are more comfortable taking advice from white men, here are some pointers from educator and activist Paul Kivel. (PK below) (quotes are from his article "Guidelines for Being Strong White Allies" adapted from *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Social Justice*, www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/kivel3.pdf) Mr. Kivel states that what people of color want from white allies ranges from the overarching "respect us" to the practical "money" [i.e., donate to causes and support jobs and pay equity] to the transgenerational "teach your children about racism" and "Interrupt [racist] jokes and comments." He incorporates these into his 13 guidelines for white allies, beginning with "Assume racism is everywhere, every day." And "Notice how racism is denied, minimized, and justified." Read them all and think about them. It could lead to a radical reset of your thinking.

While these two activists speak in different voices and see their audiences from different perspectives, one doesn't have to look far to find a great deal of overlap in their lists. For example, #1JW and #4PK both highlight the importance of knowing the historical context for current events and our lives, #8JW and #s11and12PK touch on the need to work with others and find a support network, and #4JW and #5PK both point out the interconnectedness of different types of injustice or oppression. Read **both** articles.

We live in substantially segregated communities. Sometimes this is a matter of choice, sometimes a matter of economics, history, or forces more sinister. You may feel that you will have few opportunities to be an ally. An incident which occurred at a Vikings game last fall highlights that opportunities can arise just about anywhere. A highly educated and successful man with brown skin and a name that implies a South Asian heritage, was angrily accosted out of the blue by another football fan with accusations of being a refugee, implying that he did not belong and perhaps might be dangerous. (Deepinder Mayell is an attorney and human rights activist.) He was frightened and on game day he received little support from stadium staff and none from the other fans who witnessed the event. (<http://www.startribune.com/my-run-in-with-hate-speech-at-a-minnesota-vikings-game/361117251/>) (This was not the end of the story, search his name at the Star Tribune website for more.)

A letter to the editor soon thereafter reported another incident at that same game in which some fans challenged the unsportsmanlike taunting of the opposing team by other fans, noting that this offered a good example for youth attending that game. Well, fans could also challenge the behavior of the man who verbally attacked Mr. Mayell--that, too, would offer a positive example to young football fans.

I have just skimmed the surface of this topic. Keep studying and thinking about it. Then act on it. If a protest inconveniences you, focus on the **why**, not the annoyance. When activists are interviewed, listen closely and try to see the **whole picture**. It is likely that many people could protest at length at the 4th precinct in Minneapolis because they didn't have jobs. Work for full employment. There are opportunities to be allies in our daily lives, and we must take them.