

WHAT'S A NICE WHITE GIRL TO DO IN AN UNJUST WORLD LIKE THIS?

Guideposts on My Social Justice Journey

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When I am asked what led me to do social justice work, the best answer I can give is that I feel this is what I have always been called to do. For as long as I can remember, I have been concerned about issues of equity and fairness. As a child, I would often speak up when I felt things were unjust. For example, as a sixth grader, in about 1969, I helped organize a sit-in to protest the fact that girls could not wear pants to school. (Yes, I know that policy seems unbelievably archaic now.) Many of the girls wore pants to school that day in a form of civil disobedience. I had to sneak out of my house so my parents would not see me. We won. I can now appreciate the significance of my being a “nice” white middle-class girl who did well academically. In this situation, and many others, these characteristics contributed to how I as a person and my challenges to the status quo were generally perceived in a positive light.

I grew up in a family that was not particularly political in an almost all-white working- and middle-class suburb in northern New Jersey. While I was in high school, we moved to a more affluent and slightly more racially diverse community on Long Island, New York. One message I heard repeatedly as a child was to stand up for what I believed in. I am not sure my parents realized

I would take it as literally as I did. While my parents thought I would make a good lawyer since I liked to argue, I always felt drawn to education. I wanted to raise people's consciousness, help them shift how they thought about the world and what was possible. This felt more enduring to me than changing particular laws or policies. While I have come to deeply appreciate all the ways people work for social justice (and I have participated in many kinds of efforts), I have always felt my niche was in the realm of education, in the broadest sense of the word.

My social justice work has taken different forms over the years. I've been a faculty member, an Affirmative Action officer, a trainer and consultant, a community educator, an activist, a speaker, and a writer. Regardless of the role, my passion and pull for wanting to foster individual and social change to create a world with greater love and justice has never waned. At times I focus specifically on racism; frequently, I look more broadly at systems of oppression and the interconnections among them. There have been countless influences on my evolution as a social justice educator and activist, but here I highlight a few significant experiences and then discuss some of my key learnings that still guide me today.

My early political involvement and consciousness-raising experiences were through feminism. The works of Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Marilyn Frye, Alice Walker, Carol Gilligan, and Barbara Smith, among many others, lined my bookshelves. Their writings and lectures moved, taught, and inspired me. I participated in many women's gatherings, political events, and conferences. It was particularly through these experiences and the lens of being a woman that I began to explore racism, homophobia, classism, and other forms of oppression.

My graduate work was also critical to my growth as a social justice activist. In my early 20s I did not have the language or concept of doing social justice education, particularly with adults. Yet, the minute I walked into the first meeting of the Social Justice Training Project at the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, I knew I was home. I found kindred spirits in this diverse group of graduate students committed to social change. This network of people supports and sustains me to this day.

Guideposts

I have learned and continue to learn more than I can possibly recount or convey. My journey has been less about particular transformative moments and more a steady stream of experiences that has continued to deepen and widen my understanding of racism and white privilege. The following are five guideposts (with interconnected themes) that help keep me on my path.

I am particularly speaking as a white woman to other white educators/activists, although I hope these perspectives are helpful to social justice activists more generally, especially when dealing with issues as a member of a privileged group.

*"We can't teach what we don't know and we can't lead where we won't go."*¹

Good intentions go only so far. My ability to be an effective educator, role model, activist, or leader is tied to the degree of consciousness and competence I myself have developed. Gaining the needed awareness, knowledge, and skills is not only an intellectual process but also one that involves deep personal and emotional work as well, and these aspects complement each other.

Understanding racism and other systems of inequality is, of course, critical. Facts, theories, history, critical analysis, alternative visions, and strategies for change are all necessary. Since issues evolve and there is always more to learn, I need to stay current and curious.

My self-development has also been essential—exploring how my racial (and other) identities and socialization shape how I view, act, and experience the world. A powerful experience during my years in graduate school was my involvement in a small antiracism group for white women. We spent a couple of years doing intense emotional work unlearning racism, confronting our racist conditioning, and working through myriad feelings. I know from this and many other experiences since that personal growth and learning involve a willingness to take risks, make mistakes, sit with discomfort, and find ways to deal with feelings to stay engaged.

Particularly challenging is the task of becoming ever more conscious of how I enact my sense of internalized superiority: Do I more readily give white people the benefit of the doubt on being competent? Do I feel the same degree of empathy and urgency to act when people don't look like me? I also keep learning about my sense of entitlement and how my white privilege allows me to take things for granted and be oblivious to the challenges faced by people of color. I remember when I was facilitating a workshop and I first told the story about how I would open up a bag of snacks in a store to taste them so I could decide if my kids would like them and how many I should buy. (I would always pay for whatever I opened.) Seeing the look of shock on the faces of the people of color, it dawned on me that my unconscious assumption that I could just sample food with impunity, because no one ever suspects me of any wrongdoing, was an expression of my white (and class and gender) privilege and sense of entitlement—of being a "nice white girl."

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the way I would like, is a central piece of personal growth. White people in multiracial groups need to learn how *not* to be in charge and in control. Especially as I engage in antiracism work, I try to navigate how to support and follow the lead of people of color while also contributing the knowledge, skills, and resources I have to offer.

It takes courage to be a leader, to speak up, challenge the status quo, try new initiatives, put oneself out there. I struggle with this frequently, doubting the importance of what I have to say, worrying I will get it wrong, fearing judgment and ridicule. But if I expect others to take risks, I can expect no less of myself. "We can't teach what we don't know, and we can't lead where we won't go."

Everything is about relationships. I increasingly believe that everything comes down to relationships. What I care about, how I learn, my motivation to stay engaged, my ability to engage others, the support I get on my journey, opportunities for work, and the effectiveness of my change efforts are all connected to relationships with others. The more I do my own work (see previous guidepost), the stronger and more authentic those relationships can be.

Relationships of many sorts have been critical to my learning and evolution as a social justice activist, and doing this work has created many openings for personal connections. In graduate school we formed a community that worked and played together, endlessly discussing theory and our personal experiences related to our social identities and systemic inequalities. In addition, since I often work with diverse co-trainers and colleagues, we have opportunities to talk about how our social identities inform how we collaborate and think about social issues. Every time I am in a setting where people share who they are and how they experience the world, it is a privilege and a gift, and some of my most powerful learning. Hearing these stories not only gives me insight into other people's realities but also helps me reflect on my own. I clearly remember a dinner at a conference many years ago where for the first time I heard black women share their worries and strategies to keep their black sons safe as these boys went out into the world, especially if they engaged with police. (I have since heard similar stories many times.) It struck me how different it was from my experience as a "nice white girl" and the jingle I learned as a child about "Officer Friendly" if I ever needed any help.

When developing relationships with people of color, I always expect that I will have to earn their trust; I never expect that I will be given the benefit of the doubt that I am one of the "good" white people who "gets it." A black student told me that he assumed when I was first hired that I would just be another "white lady administrator." It is usually only after I have demonstrated and continue to demonstrate my authentic and ongoing commitment

to racial justice that relationships with people of color can become more honest and open.

I often think about and refer to the words of Pat Parker (1990) from her poem "For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend": "The first thing you do is forget that I'm black. / Second, you must never forget that I'm black" (p. 297). This seeming paradox highlights the importance of seeing people's full humanity, including the significance of their race, if we are to have meaningful interracial relationships.

Relationships with other white people are also indispensable. We can nurture and challenge each other in ways that take the burden off people of color to educate or take care of us. I regularly look to other white people to be role models, providing inspiration and examples of what solidarity and effective action look like.

White people and people of color provide essential support and accountability. I could not do this work without people to encourage and challenge me intellectually, politically, professionally, and emotionally. I need people to check in with when I feel confused, to provide reality checks, give me hugs, let me know if I am being an effective ally, push me to think and write more critically, reassure me when I doubt my abilities, and give me feedback to help me grow. One extremely valuable piece of advice came from a friend of color after I was obsessing about how I inadequately facilitated a racial discussion. She finally said, "Get over yourself! Learn what you need to learn from this and move on. We need you out there doing this work." Relationships with people of color and other white people committed to racial justice help ensure that I, especially as a white person, am acting in ways that are responsible and in solidarity with the efforts of people of color. I cannot (and should not) do this work alone. Moreover, when I enjoy the people with whom I am working, it helps me persevere through the inevitable challenges and disappointments. Since social change requires collective action, I need to be able to forge bonds and work collaboratively.

"Can you love them enough to help them learn?" (Romney, 2000, p. 71). Whether in formal educational contexts or casual conversations, in front of the classroom or across the kitchen table, this question reminds me of the importance of relating to people with compassion and respect. This can be especially challenging when working with white people (and others from privileged groups) on social justice issues. Yet, I believe I am most effective as an educator and activist when I can employ "critical humility" (Barlas et al., 2012) and when I can recognize individuals' full humanity and not just see them as their social identity or some stereotype. I try hard to empathize with how they are feeling and how they see the world. People shut down when they feel judged, blamed, shamed, or attacked; they do not want to engage

if they feel they're being told they are a bad or racist person. While we may be quick to call people out when they do something we find racist, I suggest we think more about how to call people in to the community of people concerned with racial justice.

By "loving them enough" I am not referring to being nice or keeping people comfortable but creating meaningful connections with individuals that can promote growth and learning, responsibility, and accountability (Goodman, 2015). When I am able to love them enough, I feel more confident that I will not be acting from a place of anger and judgment and that my humor (which tends to be a bit sarcastic—a cultural style) will not be mean-spirited. I can constructively challenge people and trust that my actions more likely will be received as they are intended. When I do this work rooted in love, the process and outcomes are enhanced.

Think structurally and intersectionally. Looking at racial issues structurally and intersectionally (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1993) is central to how I approach social justice work. These forms of analysis have not only expanded my own thinking but also have provided me with invaluable perspectives to help others understand and address racism and other forms of social inequality.

Over the years I have repeatedly heard variations on the following questions from white people: If my immigrant family could make it in America, why can't they (referring to black or brown people)? or, Why do they have to be so . . . (angry, violent, uninvolved, lazy, etc.)? I have found that providing a historical and structural analysis is one of the most effective ways to help people change how they interpret the racial disparities they see and to develop strategies for change. This lens enables people to see that racial and other inequalities are not simply a result of individual behavior but the consequences of deeply embedded structures, policies, practices, and belief systems that create, maintain, and perpetuate inequities (Katznelson, 2005; Lui, Robles, Leondar-Wright, Brewer, & Adamson, 2006). A structural perspective helps challenge assumptions of meritocracy and equal opportunity. This approach reminds me to ask, What are the historical, social, economic, and political realities that are affecting this person or situation? What toll have these factors had on people's body, mind, and spirit? When I and others can recognize the larger societal forces that affect people's experiences, opportunities, and access to resources, there is less victim blaming and often more empathy.

A systemic analysis also leads to systemic change. Changing the hearts, minds, and behaviors of individuals is critical. Yet, that approach needs to be joined with people working together to make changes in the institutions, structures, and ideologies that foster inequality.

Intersectionality at the institutional and structural levels builds on the importance of using a systemic analysis by looking at how different forms of

oppression simultaneously interplay with racism. For example, in the grass-roots group I am part of that addresses the mass incarceration of people of color (which I'll discuss more later), our focus has been on the experiences of black males (as has most of the research). However, when we only use the lens of race, we miss differences because of gender (and other social categories). In particular, in the school-to-prison pipeline, black females are more likely to face harsh exclusionary discipline for "being unladylike" (rather than being a perceived threat to public safety) and may have different pathways to incarceration (e.g., being a perceived coconspirator to a partner's criminal behavior; Morris, 2012). Unless we take these differences into account, our analysis and change strategies will be limited in their effectiveness. An intersectional perspective helps me consider how policies, laws, programs, and practices may have a different impact on people of the same racial group depending on the other forms of privilege or oppression they experience.

At the level of the individual or group, intersectionality underscores how various axes of identity interrelate. An intersectional approach allows me to explore how my own and others' social identities shape our racial realities, perspectives, and experiences. My multiple social locations, being a member of privileged and marginalized groups, increases or mitigates my racial advantage. My class privilege clearly enhances my white privilege, for instance, by increasing my access to employment and by benefiting from others' positive assumptions of my intelligence. As a white woman, sexism often diminishes my perceived authority relative to a white man when I walk into a classroom or a meeting of administrators. Being Jewish shapes my experience of whiteness in ways that are different from those of an Anglo-Saxon Protestant, such as not feeling part of the traditional white power structure or not sharing some of the communication norms. When I am collaborating with people of color, we need to navigate not only culture and power related to our racial differences but also the impact of our other social identities as well. For example, when I co-facilitate with males of color, I try to be conscious of how I enact my white privilege (e.g., thinking I know best how to do something), yet I may also experience their unconscious sexism (e.g., their assumption that I'll do the administrative tasks).

An intersectional perspective need not dilute or shift the focus from race and racism. It can provide a more complex, nuanced, and multifaceted understanding of racial issues. As Audre Lorde (2007) cautioned, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (p. 138).

This is about liberation—for everyone. Unlearning racism and doing social justice work is deeply liberating for me. For starters, I am more comfortable in my own (white) skin, more at ease and authentic with people of color, feel less stupid in conversations about racial issues, am a more effective educator and advocate, have a much more meaningful and interesting life, and can live more aligned with my values. There is real joy in shedding layers of destructive

conditioning and working with kindred spirits who share my passion and commitment to justice. I have never questioned that I am a healthier, more capable, and more compassionate person because of my involvement in efforts for social justice. I know these feelings are shared by other white antiracist activists (Goodman, 2011; Warren, 2010). By staying rooted in the fact that this is about my liberation too, it helps avoid patronizing helping (just doing it for *them*) and helps sustain my long-term commitment to social change.

I also find it deeply, deeply painful to witness, participate in, and benefit from the oppression of other people and experience disconnections from other human beings. As Nelson Mandela (1994) observed, “The oppressed and oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity” (p. 7). This is not to say that the ways I and other white people are dehumanized or harmed are equal to the ways people of color are oppressed; the experiences are not the same nor comparable. However, this recognition highlights that eliminating racism and all forms of social inequality holds benefits for everyone, individually and as a society. Dismantling racism is not only about personal liberation but also our collective liberation and well-being. Justice frees us all.

The Guideposts in Action

To illustrate how I currently use these guideposts, I briefly discuss my involvement in a local volunteer grassroots group that examines and addresses the ways mass incarcerations and the criminal justice system are used in the United States to maintain white supremacy. I became familiar with this fledgling group when I was invited by a colleague to co-facilitate one of several study groups around the county on Michelle Alexander’s book (2010) *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. I decided to become involved because I knew and liked some members of the group, it was multiracial, it focused on systemic racism (not just social services), it would expand my circle of relationships, and it would deepen my understanding of racism. As the group struggled to find its footing, I became one of the six core members—three white and three people of color, two of whom were formerly incarcerated—who temporarily took on some of the leadership for the group. As we tried to clarify our specific actions, I was vocal, along with others, about ensuring we were working collaboratively with people who were most directly impacted and were developing our goals and campaigns based on their needs and priorities. I was clear that as a white middle-class woman who had no criminal history I was not the one to be setting the agenda for the group. Yet, we acknowledged that having a multiracial team reinforced the idea that these issues matter for all people. We also talked about how those of us with certain skills and experiences could

best help develop the leadership of people who were formerly incarcerated, especially those recently released. One of our major campaigns has been to get our county legislature to “ban the box,” the question on employment applications that asks if one has a criminal record. Once the box is checked, employers rarely pursue that applicant. We highlight the benefits of having formerly incarcerated people employed, not only to those individuals but also to the community at large.

I try to practice critical humility, compassion, and respect as I talk with predominantly white community members to educate them, address their stereotypes and misconceptions, and enlist their support and involvement. It has been challenging to maintain that approach as we deal with our own internal power (and personality) dynamics, and name and address ways white, male, and class privilege and dominance get played out in our group. However, it is the commitment to this work and bonds that we have been building that I hope will help us move through these tensions.

Conclusion

As I reflect on my social justice journey as a “nice white girl,” a few things stand out. First, I see how intertwined my whiteness is with my other social identities (especially class and gender). These intersections of identity shape how I experience being white and the opportunities it grants me. Second, I realize how often I am seen as nonthreatening and credible (something I have never heard from a person of color). This perception allows me to move relatively easily through the world and reap not only material benefits but also psychological freedom. I continually think about how to appropriately use these privileges to advance social justice, knowing that I will often be seen and heard differently than a person of color. Last, I realize how easy it is to be oblivious to the realities of people of color and how much persistence and vigilance it takes to learn, notice, and act.

So, even though I have been engaged with social justice work for many years, I am acutely aware of how my personal journey is far from over. I continue to see how much I do not know and need to learn, uncover ways I have absorbed and act out my internalized dominance, grapple with the many contradictions in how I live my life, and notice how much I still need to do to be the smart, skilled, compassionate, and courageous person I seek to be. I continue to be immensely humbled by and grateful to the amazing people who have come before me and who currently do this work in all sorts of ways and places far more skillfully and extensively than I. They serve as my beacons. So this “nice white girl” (now middle-aged woman) will continue to work to create the world I want to live in, rooted in love and justice.

Note

1. The quote is generally attributed to Malcolm X.

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