How to Be a White Ally

As a gay, black, tall, shaved-head man living with HIV, I've got five recommendations for you.

June 15, 2020 By Aundaray Guess

I was going to start this blog by saying these are new times, but unfortunately what we're experiencing in the world with racial inequality is the same as it's always been. Yet the murder of George Floyd ripped off the Band-Aid this country continues to place on racial hatred and exposed a wound that may never heal.

The world has witnessed the actions of another white cop killing yet another unarmed black man. This time was different. In previous cases, some would doubt the black person's story or ask to see the rest of the video of the murder. As if the watching the beginning of the confrontation will offer justification for what they eventually see. In George Floyd's case, we not only saw the beginning of him not resisting arrest, but we also saw the tragic end as George, with a knee to his neck while laying on a dirty street, telling the policeman, "I can't breathe." Words we've heard before and with the same ending.

As a gay black, tall, shaved-head man living with HIV. I don't have the luxury shared by many. When I walk out of the house, they don't see a gay person living with HIV. But they do see a tall shaved-head black man—and these attributes make me a threat, despite my being educated, gainfully employed and able to "speak well." No matter my or any black male's status, whether we are in the professional space or out in the world, we are viewed as a threat.

This blog is not about the protests, which I fully support. It's not about the looting as we bare witness to more concerns about buildings than we do about black bodies. And although we are learning that there are those not of color also causing damage, in the end, the looting will be blamed on us. This blog entry is about the multitude of people of non-color who reside in my circle asking how they can be allies.

My first response is, What took you so long? How many of us had to die before the thought of being an ally entered your consciousness. Was it this particular video, one of a grown man not only saying he can't breathe but also calling for his mama? Was it when a white woman standing in a park threatened an African-American man that she was going to call the police on him, only to do so and falsely report to the 911 operator that a black man was attacking her? Or was it the accumulation of numerous killings caught on camera that finally caused you to think that maybe there is some truth to our cry?

Yet the support of allies can make an impact. Our nation has witnessed the coming together of

people of all races to announce that Black Lives Matter. It's a rainbow collection of people around the world that consider themselves our allies.

As far as how to be an effective ally, I recommend the following.

1. Educate yourself about systemic racism

To even begin to know what a black person is going through, you have to look at the root of racism in this country and the continued attachment of how slavery remains the platform of today's racial inequality. Learn how that same system provides inequality as it relates to education, health care, employment and, as we now clearly see, policing. Understand that racism is indoctrinated and passed on by generations to sustain these systems. And I would go deeper to see how those not of color benefit from these systems and in some cases are rewarded.

2. Ask yourself why everyone around you looks like you

When asked by a friend on how to be an ally, I asked him to look at his social media list of friends. To look at his workspace. Look at the people he hangs around with and the social spaces where he ventures. If you live in a rural area, this exercise may be harder due to the limited demographics, but for people in large major cities, hopefully, asking this question will open one's eyes. Having friends and colleagues who look like you in no way makes you a racist, but it taps into the subtle way that we don't see color because we have no color around us to see. As diverse as New York City is, sometimes it feels like the only diverse space is within a subway and once those doors open, we all go back into our segregated spaces.

3. Recognize your privilege

This is a controversial subject to address because it is assumed that if you have privilege then you're racist, but that is not the case. It simply means you're afforded a certain lifestyle based on your race. This is gifted to individuals by society whether they asked for it or not. Sometimes people don't see when they are receiving privileges, so when they're challenged on it they don't understand why their treatment is not normalized. Privilege can manifest itself in the way you're treated in stores, restaurants and workplaces, and in how the police react to you, to name a few examples. What many people not of color don't accept or have a hard time dealing with is that to be a true ally, they have to be willing to give up that privilege. But will they? Or can they at least open their eyes truly to what privilege is? Here's just one example. Right now, gentrification is rampant across the country. Privilege is being able to move into an existing cultural neighborhood and then shape that neighborhood into ways you think it should be rather than what the current residents want. Privilege is understanding that if a white person moves into a predominant minority neighborhood, it's viewed as improving it, but if a person of color moves into a mostly white community, it's viewed as lowering the value of the neighborhood.

4. Don’t waste your time with diversity training

With the current conversation about race, some corporations may be looking at what they can do to enlighten staff. To me, this is a waste of time. If you really want to make an impact within your workspaces, instead of investing in diversity training, have workshops about undoing racism. Diversity training is simply window dressings and something you can pat yourself on the back about and promote in your annual report. Undoing racism gets to the heart of the issue and challenges organizations to ask questions such as, Why are the leadership team and the board of directors all white? Why are promotions mostly given to white workers despite a person of color who may have been there longer and is more qualified? And why is there no person of color at all? Diversity training won’t help solve these answers. Undoing racism will.

5. Don’t say, “I don’t see color”

I’ve always found this statement offensive, as it says we’re all the same when that’s far from the truth. By saying you don’t see color, you also don’t see my cultural heritage and my history of being a black man in this country—and that’s dismissive of my story. When we try to stop seeing color, we stop seeing the cultural aspects of people that makes us different. And we are different, which is not a bad thing. Yet we also have so many similarities. To truly see me or any person of color you can’t be color-blind. If you don’t see color, you don’t see me.

These are my own personal views, and some people of color may have differing opinions. And I fully accept that fact because we must embrace different views and stop attempting to make everyone buy into one’s belief.

One hopes that George Floyd’s untimely death has not been in vain, and that out of something so horrible will spring something good. One hopes that there will truly be a time when we can stop shouting that Black Lives Matter and maybe, just maybe there will be a day that we can believe that all lives matter.

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