

Beyond Allyship

Multiracial Work to End Racism

BY JULIE GREENBERG



CHALLENGING RACISM IS KEY to creating a just world. Concerned activists already know which institutions and ideologies to target: the prison system, the urban education system, the distribution of wealth, and the value systems that privilege some and put others in peril.

What many of us haven't figured out is how to create powerful, sustainable, cross-race and cross-class movements for change. Speaking from a place of humility and yearning, I'd like to share some of my own reflections on where I feel stuck in challenging racism and some ideas on how that could change. My sense is that the stuck place for me and other white people in my community involves our activist relationships and our approach to working in multiracial settings to build this movement. How can we be more effective? What is stopping us? What old models need to shift for us to be in powerful coalitions working for change?

The Question of Allyship

The question I've been struggling with most is the idea of "allyship"—how to be an ally to people of color in the struggle against racism. Many anti-oppression and diversity trainers talk about becoming allies to people with less structural power in our society, retracting a bit of self to make room for the other, giving one's all to support the empowerment of people of color. Activists JLove Calderón and Tim Wise explain this idea of allyship in more depth in their "Code of Ethics for Antiracist White Allies":

As antiracist allies, we seek to work with people of color to create real multiracial democracy. We do not aspire to lead the struggle for racial justice and equity, but rather, to follow the lead of persons and communities of color and to work in solidarity with them, as a way to obtain this goal. We do not engage in the antiracist struggle on behalf of people of color, so as to "save" them, or as an act of charity. We oppose and seek to eradicate white supremacy because it is an unjust system, and we believe in the moral obligation of all persons to resist injustice. . . . It's not enough to be in contact with people of color as we go about our work. We also need to be prepared to change what we're doing if and when people of color suggest there may be problems, practically or ethically, with our existing methods of challenging racism. Although accountability does not require that we agree with and respond affirmatively to every critique offered, if people of color are telling us over and over again that something is wrong with our current practices, accountability requires that we take it seriously and correct the practice. And, all such critiques should be seen as opportunities for personal reflection and growth.

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"I've started organizing with imams, priests, and rabbis from PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing) who are reaching across lines of race, class, gender, and geography nationwide," the author writes. Here, PICO members meet for a June 2013 gathering in California.

I'm not sure whether the problem is with this allyship framework itself or with the way in which I am engaging with it. I have found that my attempts to work within this model have left me silencing myself on issues that I have passionate strategic energy to address. My self-imposed silence deprives organizations of the experience, energy, and input I could bring to our critically important work. I also wonder whether my attempts to engage in allyship actually reinforce the feelings of superiority that I have been taught to have as a white person. Sometimes I wonder if I am basing my understanding of allyship in a condescending view of myself as more developed than the "other." If these attitudes limit our work, then they are counterproductive.

I grew up as the child of a white activist in the Civil Rights Movement. I witnessed firsthand the complex mixed messages involved with that work. "Maximum feasible participation of the poor" as an organizing principle coexisted with a dynamic of Northerners showing up to liberate the South. I'm noticing similar paradoxical dynamics in white activists' contemporary attempts to engage with the idea of allyship. In the pages that follow I will take an in-depth look at both the scenarios of the 1960s and of today, asking how we can break through the relational places in our organizing that keep us from being effective makers of change.

Growing Up in the Civil Rights Movement

In the summer of 1965, when I was almost eight, my mother piled her four little girls into the station wagon to drive three days from our home in Washington, D.C., to Mississippi. Clothes, toys, pets, and all other essential articles of life filled that station wagon until it was packed from floor to almost ceiling. Then we four little girls crawled into the space left at the top.

My mother, Polly Greenberg, had been in the Office of Education when ideas for Head Start started percolating, brewing links between grassroots activism and the massive resources of the Great Society. My mother had been part of the earliest meetings where a national, federally funded campaign to raise children out of poverty by giving them equal educational opportunity was taking shape. My mother's role was to accept applications from people who wanted to open Head Start programs in the South that very first summer.

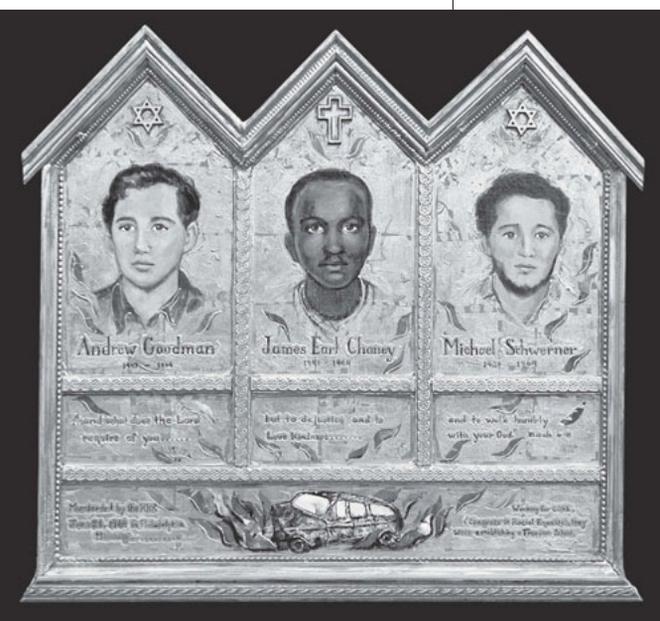
At the time I didn't know how much violence civil rights workers had confronted. Only one year earlier, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Earl Chaney were murdered for inciting voter registration. The KKK was powerfully organized into Citizens' Councils and the police, prison system, media, public schools, and state and local governments were all run exclusively by whites.

Young as I was, I understood my mother and her co-organizers' strategy for change. They were creating a revolutionary version of Head Start in which poor parents were trained to do all the jobs in the program that enrolled their children. They became the teachers, administrators, cooks, bus drivers, and more, so that a huge economic infusion, in the form of wages, accompanied the early education offered by Head Start. The aim was comprehensive economic and educational social change and participation of the poor in decision making.

When we arrived in Mississippi, we landed in Edwards, a tiny town about an hour from the state capital. The ubiquitous "colored" sign hung over the dilapidated water fountain outside the town's general store.

We moved onto an abandoned college campus called Mount Beulah that had a dirt road running through its center, scrappy lawns, and some run-down, scattered buildings. We ate in the communal dining hall. The food was mostly white—mashed potatoes, grits, white bread, noodles—but the people eating it were a real mixture of skin tones. At that time, to sit with people of different races was a radical act in the

Klansmen murdered civil rights activists Andrew Goodman, James Earl Chaney, and Michael Schwerner in Mississippi, just one year before Julie Greenberg moved there. This art piece from Pamela Chatterton-Purdy's *Icons of the Civil Rights Movement* series memorializes the three young activists.



Pamela Chatterton-Purdy (chatterton-purdyart.com)

South. In the evening our racially mixed community gathered for long hours of freedom songs.

The heat on those hot Mississippi nights rose, making my top bunk swelteringly hot. The civil rights workers decided to build a swimming pool. Machinery came and dug out a swimming-pool-size hole; more machinery came and covered it with concrete. We waited for water from a spring to fill the pool. But that pool just wouldn't work right. The water was a rusty, mucky color with a strange smell. We never did swim in it.

Northern Activists in the South

When the local Head Start program opened on the Mount Beulah campus, its organizers had not yet found enough local teachers who felt qualified to teach. Somehow, my seven-year-old sister and I stepped up to fill the gap. We took on a Head Start classroom of our own with thirty children. There were official teachers who sat around watching, but we led all the activities. We taught the songs and games and activities that we had learned at our high-quality early childhood programs in the North.

After Head Start hours we played with the civil rights workers' children and with the local black girls. They spoke in a deep southern dialect that we could barely understand. But we understood how to build strollers for our dollies out of cardboard boxes and how to pull them on strings together. We understood how to make a fort on a landing under the staircase and another one up in a tree. We kids got chiggers, lice, and a scabby skin disease called impetigo. My mother consulted a doctor who assumed we were too poor, like everyone else in the county, to pay for the treatment of choice. The conditions lingered and lingered.

One day I was hanging out in the cool, air-conditioned office when bullets ricocheted through the walls of the building. The adults in the office herded everyone to the back of the office house, where we hid behind stacked cardboard storage cartons. More bullets rent the air. It turned out that a local racist was giving his young son shooting lessons and had decided to pay a visit to the mixed-race invaders at Mount Beulah. Later we learned that our people had called the local sheriff who said nothing could be done, and then had called the F.B.I. who arrested the shooter.

Another day a bunch of civil rights activists reported with hilarity how they had entered a whites-only swimming pool at a fancy hotel and integrated it by swimming together. Later some of them went back with ink bottles. They enacted the whites' worst fear by leaving a trail of black ink in the swimming pool, saying, "They're worried we'll pollute the pool, our black will rub off; well, we'll show them."

In the fall, when the school year started, my family moved to Jackson so we kids could attend the white, segregated neighborhood public school. Adults were called "ma'am" and "sir" and children were paddled if we didn't comply. In fifth grade, my class studied the civil war. Chapter by chapter, the textbook recounted glorious victories of the South. As an afterthought, at the end of the book, notice was made that the North had won the war.

On weekends we often visited rural counties where we witnessed debilitating poverty. We visited shacks with leaky roofs, caving floors, and no running water. We saw the radical Head Start movement emerge from the cotton fields and kudzu-laden trees: people built their children playgrounds, created classrooms, invented curriculum, met on hot, dusty evenings to plan, and stayed up all night with shotguns protecting their work from the KKK.

When the Office of Economic Opportunity withdrew funding for the program, my mother helped organize an action in Washington that involved taking a cohort of Mississippi nursery school children to protest the funding cuts on the steps of the Lincoln



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Memorial. They also set up a nursery school in Adam Clayton Powell's hearing room, becoming a magnet for media to mobilize support for further funding, which they did get.

I was aligned with this spirit of pride and possibility. Excitement filled my ten-year-old self. Even though it took courage for both Northerners and Southerners to defy the racist status quo, what needed to be done for racial equality seemed so simple in those days. To sit with, learn with, play with, and organize with people across color lines was an obvious contradiction to segregation. Hope was high. The process and the product were the same: the action itself accomplished the goal.

My childhood within this inspiring movement for change helped me to imagine a world in which racism does not separate and violate people. It cemented the anti-racist commitments that I have carried with me throughout my life. But some of the lessons that I learned as a member of a Northern family working against racism in the South were not helpful messages. I learned that "they" needed to be rescued and that "they" needed "us" to empower them. The people we worked with in Mississippi in the 1960s were definitely not peers in the Northerner's eyes.

The truth is that these Southerners started and ran the local Civil Rights Movement and they changed their lives and their society. Northern activists added a useful catalyst to a process that had its own indigenous origins and momentum. Having been a child who absorbed the mixed identities of "savior" and "colleague" in the struggle to end racism, I am still seeking an authentic, effective way to work well in multiracial activist groups.

Anti-Racist Struggle in the Twenty-First Century

Today the manifestation of racism has morphed from separate water fountains and lynchings to racial profilings and genocidal incarceration. Challenging racism today means confronting the huge spread between haves and have-nots, changing a system that fails to make possible a life of dignity for great swaths of society, untangling the immigration crisis, and solving the conundrum of urban public education.

My experiences in Mississippi inspired me to carry anti-racist work into my life as a primary organizing current. I partake in many different racially diverse organizations, some of which have a stated intent to challenge racism. I'm on the Board of the Jewish Multiracial Network. But anti-racist work feels so much harder today than it did when we had a powerful movement to make change. What are the next steps? What is my role? What can be done to end the destructive patterns of American racism?

This is what I notice: race is part of every social interaction across racial lines. It is not unimportant. If you can't read the racial subtexts, you are not socially competent. And if we can't be socially competent participants and organizers, we can't make a movement.

In her poem "For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend," Pat Parker writes, "first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black. / Second, you must never forget that i'm Black." That seems to sum up the paradox of relationships across race lines. I need help navigating the path toward racial justice. I am seeing the limitations of what I learned in Mississippi and I'm not sure how to move past the places where I feel stuck.

A Failed Allyship Effort

I am questioning the idea of allyship in part because I have not found a way to incorporate it into my practice while continuing to bring my full self to the table in multiracial activism. Materials on allyship like the "Code of Ethics for Antiracist White Allies" quoted at the beginning of this piece instruct white people to "not aspire to lead the struggle for racial justice and equity, but rather, to follow the lead of persons and communities of color and to work in solidarity with them." They also urge us to "be prepared to change what we're doing if and when people of color suggest there may be problems, practically or ethically, with our existing methods of challenging racism." While I realize that this

does not mean simply agreeing with every proposal put forward by a person of color, I am struggling to incorporate this framework as a practice that moves our collective agenda forward.

One memorable example of this dynamic took place in the winter of 2012 in a group of clergy called Occupy Faith, which grew out of Occupy Philly. Because of unaddressed racial concerns, I bumped up against a very stuck place, as did others in the group, and we weren't able to accomplish what we meant to accomplish.

When Occupy Faith emerged, there had already been various religiously oriented outgrowths of Occupy Philly. Prior to this group's launching, Occupy Philly had decided to focus its work on the homeless population. Clergy of color had formed their own caucus called Occupy the Dream because they didn't want to support gay marriage. Some other outgrowths didn't want to commit to nonviolence, and another faction had decided to concentrate on voter registration. The remaining clergy were invited by some Quaker organizers to become Occupy Faith. Most of us did not know each other yet and naturally there was not yet a clear mission or purpose. As we brainstormed together about how to proceed, the pastor of our host church suggested that we take a position of radical inclusivity, that we do "asset mapping" of the needs and resources in the city of Philadelphia, before moving forward. I looked at the group of clergy, maybe twenty of us, and I thought about what asset mapping involves: labor-intensive door-to-door interviews and outreach. I thought, we're in a big city, this is a huge project, and it is likely that some kind of assessment like this has already been done by a local foundation. Most members of this group were overworked leaders of busy congregations. I did not think this task was an appropriate focus for this particular group.

However, the whites in the group wanted to work in an interracial coalition, and this idea had come from a working-class African American woman who was well respected and liked. No one, including me, wanted to speak against her. It was like being in elementary school and not wanting to defy the "cool kid." So for months we broke into small groups to discuss asset mapping. But there was no energy or interest around that activity and eventually the Occupy Faith group fizzled into dissolution. I considered this a systems failure with unspoken issues of race relations at its core. In our effort to be anti-racist allies, the white clergy in the group had in many ways set up this African American leader to fail by outwardly endorsing her proposal even though we lacked the enthusiasm necessary to implement it. This experience left me discouraged, wondering what I needed to change to find a way forward in anti-racist, interracial work.

A Turbulent Attempt at Integration

I had a similar experience at an annual Jewish feminist retreat that I've been part of for thirty years. The group consists of wise, creative leaders in a diverse range of fields, with shared commitment to Jewish feminism.

Years ago, the members of this group committed to growing as a multiracial Jewish community. Most American Jews don't realize that large populations of Jews are and have always been people of color. This unrecognized truth about our own community felt like a good place to grow our anti-racist work both as Jews and as feminists. Our group has a limited membership of thirty-four people, which meant that moving from being an all-white Jewish group to being inclusive of racial diversity required a targeted, conscious process of change. Many hours were spent reaching agreements about how to diversify with the intention of forging ourselves into an anti-racist support system for challenging racism in the Jewish world and beyond.

By now, this group has a smattering of racial diversity that aims toward overcoming tokenism and begins to move in the direction of healthy diversity. There are Jews from Syria, Iran, Guatemala, and for the second year in a row there is one African American Jewish feminist. We have achieved this even though there is always a contingent that

wants to expand only once every five years in order to “protect the culture” of our community. I’ve always been on the opposite end of that continuum, believing that the group’s well-being depends on integrating new members regularly. We work by consensus.

The integration process has been both successful and challenging. In the spring of 2012, a cluster of members of color opposed a proposal to invite two new members of color into the group. They said they were hurt coming into the group as fairly isolated tokens in the untenable position of having to educate people about racism even while bonding as new members of the group. “The whole idea of categories is really suspect,” they argued. “We should spend a year examining our own process for welcoming new people.”

I disagreed with this argument, believing strongly that the best way out of tokenism and isolation was to expand the numbers of people of color. Yet I did not want to speak against the position of the women of color who made it. I let their proposal for waiting to include new members of color achieve consensus without blocking it. Did my silence in this situation help the cause of racial justice, or did it hurt it? This was another moment in which the frame of allyship did not feel wholly helpful.

Yearning for Collaboration with Peers: Is Co-Resistance Possible?

I have started to question whether there might be an anti-racist position beyond being an ally—not instead of being an ally but in addition to it. Or perhaps the problem is with my understanding of allyship: I’ve struggled to see allyship as something other than a way of subtly one-upping a person whom one sees as “in need” by withholding one’s own best offerings. I know that most materials on allyship describe it as grounded in radical notions of solidarity, not charity, but I am still struggling to break free of the idea—planted during my childhood in Mississippi—that being an ally involves helping people whom one sees as “less than.” Is being an ally in this way keeping me in a position of not having to engage fully because my role is just to support the other person, hard as that can be? Is it limiting my work against racism?

I am yearning for an anti-racist stance that embodies a deep sense of respect and equality between peers. But is it even possible to be a peer when there is objectively unequal power? And is it possible to attain the mutuality of the peer relationship when working in white-dominated settings rather than in groups that are truly co-led by a robustly interracial group? What does it mean for both me and a colleague of color to let our light shine fully, powerfully, as human beings when the world endorses and privileges one and not the other?

I am looking for peers who, within the context of a mutual effort to end racism, can cross race and class and other lines of difference to join as partners. I am inspired by people such as Bernice Johnson Reagon, Audre Lorde, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, and Cherie Brown, who have furthered our understanding of coalition work with peers. The best term that I’ve heard for this work, coming from the Israel/Palestine justice movement, is “co-resistance.” With shared goals to dismantle the “isms” and to create a society of caring and justice, I don’t want to stop at being an ally. I want to be a peer.

Anti-oppression and diversity activists now teach about intersectionality—how people simultaneously hold pain and power in different arenas of identity, e.g., someone may have white skin privilege but be disabled, or someone may be upper class but have experienced gender discrimination. Even people who are privileged in multiple arenas were once powerless as infants. Every human being carries both pain and power. Understanding intersectionality is crucial for forging effective movements for change. As the pastor Rev. Alvin Herring teaches, “We have to speak truth *and* flood our hearts with generosity.”

Being in touch with my yearning for peer collaboration melts a substratum of despair for me and rekindles optimism. I’m charged up for further work in anti-racist coalition,

energized with a new direction to break through the inner barriers to this work. I've started organizing with imams, priests, and rabbis from PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing) who are reaching across lines of race, class, gender, and geography nationwide. I have high hopes that this coalition of multiracial peers will effect significant change in my city and beyond. I still have so many questions, but I also have a personal recalibration for continuing the mission: I am seeking to grow into a peer. We each need to hang in there—refusing to settle for a society that tolerates racism, poverty, and injustice, and continuing to seek strategies for change—for the grand mission to have a chance. I have found a growing edge that allows me, for now, to keep moving forward. ■

