

Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

The Official Journal of The White Privilege Conference and The Matrix Center for the Advancement of Social Equity and Inclusion.

An Open Letter to White “Allies” from a White Friend

Deen Fair

OneTrenton Project, Trenton, NJ

Abstract

We mean well. White allies who want nothing more than peace and harmony among all walks of life. But what we don't realize is that often times our well intentioned efforts are actually as harmful as the blatant racism and discrimination we so adamantly oppose. It is our number one responsibility to make sure that we are not participating in oppressive allyship.

Deen is a self-identified “artist,” artist and activist. She is a writer and spoken word artist and founder of the OneTrenton Project in Trenton, NJ, a grassroots organization that promotes community connectedness to provide programming and raise awareness about relevant issues in the community.

To my dearest White friends and acquaintances that identify as allies,

Thank you. Thank you for having a heart for justice and equality. Thank you for showing up. Thank you for doing work; and thank you for being open-minded and unfettered by your defenses as you read this beseeching petition to reconsider your allyship.

As of late, I have been both encouraged and deeply, deeply troubled by the convergence of White “allyship” with the fight for Black liberation and an end to police brutality; encouraged, because it is galvanizing to see masses of White people feeling called to action around a cause that likely does not directly affect them, but troubled because their participation, in many cases, has resulted in a co-opting of the message and of the movement. Troubled, because often times I find that White people unintentionally hang their “allyship” over the heads of the oppressed, as if it is a privilege that must be earned through good behavior; or worse, they hang their participation on their ability to control the message.

This is an inherent part of the problem that we are fighting against.

One of the biggest examples of this is the insistence by many White “allies” to use the phrase “All Lives Matter” in lieu of the message “Black Lives Matter,” and the arguing or inserting of this message over the voices of those whom the movement represents. Listen, I get it. Saying “Black Lives Matter” is uncomfortable for you. It feels unrelated to you. And that's because it is. And it's supposed to be. Let me explain to you why: Historically, White life has not been undervalued or dehumanized. Period. Currently, we live within a system that was

created by White Supremacist principles. Yes, White supremacy. It doesn't have to mean white hoods, nooses, burning crosses, and the Aryan Nation. The systems in this country were created to support and sustain White people. For my White women folk, White supremacy is as fundamental to this country's systems as patriarchy. Hopefully, that provides some perspective for you. With this being said, no argument needs to be made that “all” (which really equates to “White too!”) lives matter, because from a systemic perspective, the value of White life is not, and never has been, in question. It is a given that White life in this country is valuable. This is not the case with Black life. Black life in this country is often viewed as inherently less valuable, even sub- or nonhuman. This is evidenced by the way Darren Wilson talked about Michael Brown in his ill-advised interview, referring to Mike as a demon. So here's the long and short of it: The insistence that “All Lives Matter” over the message that “Black Lives Matter,” is racist. You are derailing and decentering the important conversation about the devaluing of Black lives in America and thereby silencing the voices of the very people you are claiming to be allies of. You are participating in Black erasure, actively exercising (and ignoring) your White privilege, and thereby, being racist. Even though you mean well. Even though you are at the march. Even though you are holding signs, and chanting, and have Black friends.

Let me provide a parallel:

You wouldn't go to a Lupus benefit and demand that the speakers acknowledge heart disease. You wouldn't go to the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure with a tee shirt that says “All Cancer Matters!” Not because all cancer doesn't matter, but because well, we aren't talking about all cancer right now.

We are talking about breast cancer; and because that's not what you're there for. You are there to show your love and support to people who have suffered from breast cancer. Period. So for you to try and make the conversation about anything other than breast cancer would be insensitive and selfish. It's hard for us to conceptualize this at times in the context of the “Black Lives Matter” movement however, because the message that is being preached, despite its truth, is one that doesn't include us. It is uncomfortable to subscribe to because we don't understand where we fit into it. And that's because it's not meant to serve or represent us. For that reason, being involved in this movement is going to be unavoidably uncomfortable for you; and you have to be OK with that.

Please understand, it is OK (and frankly, important) for you to feel uncomfortable in your participation in this movement at times. You will squirm. You will not know what to say. You will not know what to do. I, myself, feel incredibly awkward when someone says to raise your fists in the air. I get scared that I am going to do or say something, with the best of intentions, that is offensive. There will be moments when you want to run the other way and head for the hills. That is absolutely normal, and it's OK. That is the nature of being a White person who is involved in this cause. But please, hang in there.

I am going to provide a few guidelines that are important to understand when identifying as a White “ally.” Admittedly, in my frustration with White “allies,” it has become increasingly difficult for me to be patient and graceful in communicating some of these points, but I understand that in order to be effective, one must also be compassionate. I also understand that as a White person in the

work, a large part of my responsibility is to help coach other White people in this area. So being that I am a Christian, and because I want to be effective, I am going to do my best to be gentle about it, as that is what God instructs me to do. However, I am also going to be straightforward and honest with you. So here we go:

1. If your “allyship” is contingent upon how you are treated or how you feel, you are not an ally.

It is important to understand that some Black people are angry. And many of them are angry with White people. This is not a personal attack on *you*. You must decentralize yourself, and depersonalize people's reactions to you. You need to understand, and accept, that not everyone is going to receive you with open arms. And that is OK. They don't have to. This should not impact your commitment to social justice and equality.

For example, when I was told by a fellow member of a group that I belonged to that the first step in the liberation of Black folks was to kill all the White women because they were tools of re-colonization, my gut reaction was to argue him down to the ground. But as uncomfortable, and hurt, and offended as I was in the moment, and as much as I may have disagreed with his point of view, I knew I couldn't engage him on that; primarily because I don't know what his lived experience has been. He may very well have had legitimate experiences that tell him that this is the most reasonable and effective solution to the problems that we face. In fact, rather than arguing with him about it, as I may have been initially inclined to do, I removed myself from the group because I did not want to become a distraction from the work that needed to be done, or make anyone uncomfortable or

upset in what was intended to be a space primarily for Black folks. It wasn't until all the members of the group, including him, asked me to come back, that I rejoined the group. Sometimes, often times in fact, we have to fight out inclinations to engage on certain topics and make the conscious decision to stand down. Sometimes that is going to be the absolute hardest thing to do, but that doesn't mean it isn't the right thing to do. We can't know what others have experienced in their lifetime that has contributed to their current ideological view. That being said, it is safe to say that it would be imprudent to challenge or engage in a “discussion” (read: argument) about it, particularly in movement spaces; and, moreover, it will rarely be effective in those moments.

2. Our job, as White people, is not to dictate to people how to get free while our proverbial foot is on their necks.

Our only job lies in listening, aiding as requested, and stepping aside when suggested. We should not be trying to insert ourselves into spaces and conversations that we are not invited to or welcomed in. Sometimes our input is just not desired, and frankly, not needed. Recognize that you are not an expert on anyone else's experience besides your own. We should not be trying to control bullhorns and megaphones. We should be making space for people whose voices are underrepresented and often unheard. We should be helping other “allies” learn how to become better allies. But we should never, under any circumstances, be trying to control or lead the narrative.

3. Your voice should never be louder than that of the people you are supporting, and should never stand in the place of those voices.

Think of it this way: You are a backup singer to the movement. Your voice should merely serve as a part of the chorus, supporting the leading roles in the play, if you will.

4. This is not a photo-op or your nightly news debut.

If you are only here for (or even mainly here for) the pictures to post on Instagram and Facebook, or are itching for a reporter to interview you so you can share your righteousness with the prime time audience, go home. This is not what we're here for.

5. Save your “I totally understand cause once I got made fun of for being White” stories.

This is not empathy, it is racism. As a rule of thumb: If the conversation is about Black people, it is safe to assume it would be both inappropriate and racist to start talking about your experience as a White person or any other topic relating to White people.

6. Educate yourself.

This doesn't mean go around to all the Black folk you know and ask them to explain to you what oppression and privilege are—because, well, that's oppressive. There are a plethora of phenomenal authors, bloggers, and other personalities that have discussed these topics at length. Do your Googles. Trudy of GradientLair.com does a phenomenal job of discussing the unique experience of Black womanhood and oppression in the form of misogynoir, as well as the role that White people play in perpetuating this and other forms of oppression. Robin DiAngelo has also discussed the concept of White fragility at

length, and does a wonderful job of breaking down what it means and how to work against it. If you take the time to look around a bit, you will find that people have been discussing these issues for years. Jane Elliot’s brown eyes experiment and Peggy McIntosh’s article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” although both over 10 years old, are great examples of the way White people often interact (or fail to interact) with issues of race. There is even a whole conference you can attend to learn more! Dr. Eddie Moore, Jr., founder and director of the White Privilege Conference and former Director of Diversity at Brooklyn Friends School, is hosting his seventeenth annual White Privilege Conference this year in Philadelphia. This four-day conference features national and international professionals and experts who host workshops, panels, and discussions that address issues of diversity, privilege, and leadership.

7. One of the best ways you can help in this movement is by educating your fellow White people on how to be an effective “ally.”

Aka: Teach other White folks how not to be so racist (both intentionally and completely unintentionally) so that Black people don’t have to keep spending their time trying to teach their oppressors how to set them free. And if a Black person happens to be so gracious and patient as to take the time to explain to you...

8. SHUT THE HECK UP AND LISTEN.

No explanation needed. Just listen, reflect, and internalize.

Lastly, and in my opinion most importantly,

9. Stop being a *BLEEPING* ally!

If you have been wondering why I have been using quotation marks around the word “ally” throughout this article, it is because I do not believe in the concept of allyship. Allyship implies contingency. It implies condition and impermanence rather than a true belief in and commitment to the movement and the cause, despite the possibility (and probability) of discomfort, inconvenience, and the potential for being received less than pleasantly. Don’t be an ally. Be a brother. Be a sister. Be a shoulder. Be a hand. Show the people you are standing with that you are standing firmly by their sides, that this is about them, not you, and that you are good with that.

Friends, thank you. Thank you for having a heart for justice and equality. Thank you for showing up. Thank you for doing work; and thank you for being open-minded and unfettered by your defenses as you read this beseeching petition to reconsider your allyship. I love you.

Now go throw out your “All Lives Matter” signs. Please.

Love Peace,

Your White non-ally friend