

Allies: Are You Really About This Life?

There's been a lot of great conversation taking place on the interwebs about allies, allyship, and solidarity lately. And when this week's guest contributor sent me this post, I knew I had to publish it. It definitely says plainly and clearly what any of us who fashion ourselves "allies" need to know.

This week's post comes from Marcus Simmons, a writing and diversity educator based in Chicago. Marcus Simmons is a native son of Texas who has worked as an intercultural communications educator/artist and a writing coach in Chicago for the last nine years. With a background in performance, conflict transformation and higher education, he views his work as amplifying stories that reconcile, build community, and push deeply into the end of abuse culture. Marcus currently serves as the Coordinator of Student Engagement and Lecturer at North Park University, where he is completing graduates studies in theomusicology. He's also involved in a number of creative projects ranging from blogging to video game modding. He is absolutely obsessed with music and double stuff Oreos.

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I'm tired of people making anti-abuse alliances all about tolerance and benevolent privilege. Being an ally is more than promises, pretty words, and potlucks. It's more than re-posting liberal think pieces on facebook and winning arguments with bigots on twitter. You call yourself an ally, but are you really about this life?

Sayin' It Ain't Bein' It

You may think yourself an ally, but that doesn't make you one. Too many crusaders, dripping with self-belief and entitlement, elbow their way into spaces wanting to make a difference without really investing in the community.

Anti-abuse spaces are clogged with slacktivists who study the community from a distance, expecting to impact the lives of people they know precious little about. These people show up with great ideas that are great because they said so. They usually have a limited understanding (if any) of their own privilege and the power dynamics that animate it. They act with a lot of passion, but often lack people skills and wisdom.

You can't be a good ally if you don't know how to care for people. I've done work with numerous fair-minded, sincere people only to learn that at the end of the project, meeting, rally or dialogue, I become invisible again. **Don't be one of those people who are married to the cause and divorced from the people.**

Becoming an ally begins with asking permission to be a listener, a supporter, and a co-worker. Be motivated by a love for people – not a need to erase whatever guilt, fear, or shame you feel because of the privileges you have. You can't base a movement on that. To be an ally, you actually have to join the community, be mentored in it, and take your cues for action from your relationships with the people there.

Do the Work

Here's the thing about privilege: it teaches those who have it to press your own well-being and desires over and against others. It conditions you to think that people without social advantage must take time to teach you, the one with the social advantage, how to be a better person to them.

You're wrong.

I've lost count of the number of white "allies" that have accused me of not providing them with enough inspiration, education, suggestions, and closure to sustain their anti-racist work. This is a textbook example of internalized privilege.

Alliances are mutual so I don't mind partnering with you, but I refuse to be held responsible for you "getting it." I am confident in your ability to get your stuff together without me having to get it together for you.

Allies Do Not Give Agency

If you think oppressed people need your help to survive, do not apply.

Many well-intentioned (but ill-informed) allies make the mistake of thinking their job is to speak *for* the voiceless. This is another textbook example of internalized privilege. There is **no such thing** as a person without a voice or the ability to articulate their situation. It's just that sometimes that voice is in a language, a body, or tone that some of us would rather not acknowledge.

Allies understand that they can be helpful without being the hero. Fighting abuse culture is less about "empowering people" in their humanity and more about making sure that people's **inherent humanity** is recognized.

What the oppressed require more than anything else are ears to hear, eyes to see, a heart that won't forget, and feet that won't turn and run for the hills (or suburbs) when the fight becomes difficult.

Allies Are Not Experts

Your privilege has also taught you that your assessment of the world is universal, despite your appalling lack of experience in many areas. Your intelligence and passion are duly noted, but don't let that lead to arrogance or cultural appropriation.

Avoid assuming control, policing the agenda, giving instructions, and being the spokesperson for that which you don't experience. For instance, if we're fighting anti-black racism together – my lived experience trumps **all** of the volunteer work you did, all the books and manifestos you read, that ethnic studies class on your transcript, anything Jon Stewart said, and all the passes you got from your other black friend.

One of the best ways to kill an alliance is to assert that the injustices people experience are all the product of their own thinking. **If you think that the disenfranchised are looking at their world with the wrong set of eyes, you're not ready to be an ally.**

Allies do not dismiss or silence people just because they disagree with their opinions. They reject the notion that they can access and replicate the experiences of oppressed people, and they certainly don't pretend to have all the answers.

Not All Allies Are Created Equal

That "*it's-the-thought-that-counts*" thing doesn't apply to allies. You are absolutely wrong if you think good intentions and a good heart is all you need.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, you actually have to do work – and it has to be good work. When I moved from

the south to the Midwest, I noticed that many of my “allies” here expected to be able to talk about oppression without ever identifying any oppressors. For example, people would say and do terribly racist things and accuse me of being divisive and judgmental for telling them that their behavior was racist. Or they would demand forgiveness because they didn’t mean it or were just really curious – often without even acknowledging that they had done anything wrong. A lot of these people are pastors, teachers, parents, etc. today (*shudders*).

Telling the truth paves the way for healing. I don’t believe too many people get up in the morning bent on destroying society, but I’m not in the habit of calling abuse culture a box of cupcakes.

If you sympathize with (or behave like) a racist, sexist, ageist, etc. – every now and then, someone might refer to you using one or more of these titles. That someone might be me. Allies can’t be afraid to name and condemn abuse when it occurs – even if they think it might hurt the abuser’s feelings (this applies to me as well). Sugarcoating works on pound cake, not alliances.

As an ally, you’re going to mess up a lot despite your good intentions. You’re going to make some bad impressions, say some wrong things, and have a negative impact on some people. Everybody makes mistakes, but **any ally worth their salt will acknowledge their impact on others, apologize for causing pain, and see to it that the abuse does not occur again.**

But wait – if you’re going to apologize, please make it an actual apology. Don’t throw a “*if I offended you*” caveat in there. Don’t make the conversation about how the other person should be stronger, more graceful, less angry, or the bigger person. You just concentrate on being a better ally and not abusing people.

Who Do You Wanna Become?

This work is about your becoming.

Don’t mistake saying the right things, reading the right books, attending the right events, or having the right friends for doing good work. If you invest fully in these relationships, a lot of what you need to do to support abused people will become apparent.

You can’t runaway when people refuse to do your thinking for you.

You can’t quit when you feel uncomfortable.

You can’t disappear when it begins to cost you time, money, relationships, and opportunities.

You’re involved because you want to participate in ending abuse and oppression, not because it’s easy and profitable
Right?

Your role as an ally should be inspired by a deep sense of obligation and connection to other human beings. So much so that you feel a profound desire to be a safe, affirming presence in their lives – even when you don’t have the answers or lack the empirical evidence to make sense of their situation.

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