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SILVER CITY, NEW MEXICO, USA
JUNE 2020

Divisions, Allies, and Remaking the World

As we begin to understand the kinds of changes a global pandemic is making, some will be permanent, others not so much, we suddenly witness a global outbreak of demands, calls, prayers for racial justice and equality and an end to police brutality. Something new to deal with. Something else to cope with. And yet, it is the perfect movement at the perfect time for humanity.

Social justice warriors like me who've been working for equality and fairness for myself, but mostly for others, others not like me, others without my access and privilege and so I have tried to speak for those who cannot.

But this moment in time is different.

The protests aren't dying down with each passing day. They're getting bigger. They're happening in cities and towns of all sizes. They're happening on a global scale in solidarity with Black Lives Matter; the concept and organization and rallying cry that's taken center stage and is not leaving. Not this time.

What are we to do in this seemingly chaotic, even frightening time?

My desire with this article is to explore what people motivated by the principles of this Sufi path and concerned about the, "secular," and, "earth plane," matters that are taking so much energy and time, might do to help, to inform, to join in, to be an ally.

Being an ally in this context means being a person intentionally committed to assisting people who are not, "like them," to work for their equal rights, their equal treatment under the law, and ending their oppression. No social justice advance occurred or occurs without allies. Women had men who supported their efforts to gain the vote. Disabled people had able-bodied people who, "got it," and helped get the Americans with Disabilities Act passed.

People of color have had allies since before the Civil War. These were called, "abolitionists." The, "Civil War Amendments," numbers 13, 14, and 15 were passed by mostly white politicians. They are imperfect and have led to the mass incarceration of young men of color among other injustices, but chattel slavery ended because of the work of people of color and white allies. Likewise, the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act improved access to voting and other social and civil arenas for people of color in the early 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement was a movement of, by, and for people of color, but widely supported by white people who organized voting drives, joined in marches, lobbied their representatives, and yes, wrote checks to help make it happen.

But there is a shadow to being an ally, especially a white ally. We tend to take over. Our privilege and experiences convince us we can help a lot. We can use our privilege to help others. What a good person I am when I take charge of a demonstration or a voter drive or ...

This happens in every group of people seeking justice. For example, among LGBTQQIA+ groups, white gay men tend to be heard more, speak more, and wind up, "in charge." At an academic conference at Starr-King Seminary focusing upon transgender folk and trans spirituality, hetero women kept speaking more, speaking longer, and on the last day one even shushed a trans woman who had spoken for all of one minute.

This doesn't make allies bad people. Entitlement creates blind spots. And it is very, very difficult for us to constantly be aware of every eruption of privilege and entitlement. But if one wishes to be an ally one remains open to the probability that you are overstepping in some way.

What to do?

How can we become an ally to people of color if we are plagued with our own institutional racism? Should we even try if we've never tried before?

Second answer first: Yes, absolutely, do it now.

Our, "isms," the array of biases and prejudices in which we are raised are in place by the time we are five years old. Among these are racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, ageism, religious dogma, and so on. We are not bad people because we grew up with all this. Everyone, every single person in this culture (Western, Euro-American) carries these biases with them their entire lives. In fact, having an, "ism," on its own isn't bad, it just is.

However, acting upon that, "ism," in speech or attitude or behavior is a bad thing. Activating hatred and bigotry is never a good thing. Doing it unconsciously would be worse, but that is how most discriminatory behavior happens. People just act or speak according to their inner beliefs and ideas. And, if they have not spent any time at all learning how to not speak or act in ways that promote their, "isms," then behavior and speech may well be rude, angry, insulting, bigoted and the person acting or speaking out will be clueless as to the harm it's causing.

Everybody has the opportunity in every day, sometimes in every breath to decide to act from ideals of love, harmony, and beauty or from unconscious biases held for a lifetime. When we decide to overcome our raising and to begin to unlearn our personal biases no matter what they are, then we are taking a step to being an ally to people unlike us.

This physical realm, this universe, is based upon the concept of the binary. Yes, no. Black, white. Man, woman. Truth, lie. Love, hate. Us, them. So, the biases that plague us come directly from this binary since the divisions the binary creates are used by this culture, this patriarchal system to elevate straight, hetero, cisgender, white, able-bodied Christian men with wealth while oppressing in any way possible every other category or kind or group of humans.

Inayat Khan addressed this reality. "All conventionality, that has limited the life of man and has removed it far from nature, comes from sex distinction." ("Vadan, Chalas.") Most people start life being categorized into, "male," and, "female." A very few more aware governments now allow for the third sex distinction, intersex. This includes up to four percent of all of humanity and always has. It's just that patriarchy requires two sexes, two genders, and the sexes are forever joined to

one of two gender identities, man and woman, period, and so intersex people are forbidden in this culture. In practice, any person in a patriarchal culture who is outside of the gender binary is treated as less than human.

The biological reality of at least three sexes shows the two gender identities of man and woman to be made up by humans. Historically, almost all human cultures had/have three, four, five, even six gender identities. Each culture included all their members in unique and beneficial ways. Only patriarchal cultures like ours have two genders tied to only two biological sexes.

Once we accept such sorting at birth then accepting the other categories as, “real,” seems natural. Skin color is used to determine, “race,” another made-up category. Race has been weaponized in patriarchal cultures to keep entire populations under control with institutions like slavery, economic domination, warfare, etc.

Race is made up by humans. So, we humans can change it, fix it, or discard it completely. Right now, we are at a moment when our culture has the opportunity to make real changes in our designed-to-be-racist institutions such as the police. The need for change is greater than only the police as our governing bodies, banks, schools, businesses, and so on are all steeped in the white supremacy that supports patriarchy.

All of this is to help give context for being an ally in the struggle against racism and any other category.

Being an ally is hard. You can show up for a march or a meeting or a work session and want to help and be ignored. Think about this for a moment. I walk into a space filled with people of color getting ready to organize an event and nobody’s acting happy I’m there. But, I’m a white woman with education and I can help and ... So what? First thing to remember is that being an ally is NOT, NOT AT ALL about a person wanting to help. Being an ally is about being sincere in your desire to help out.

So, offer to help.

And listen.

It is most important when starting out to be an ally to any group of people not like yourself to sit down, shut up, and listen. You are there as an ally to learn how to help. And, if you are told to go away. Go away. Entitlement leads especially white folks to feel they belong everywhere. Sometimes, there is not yet enough trust in white people for people of color to welcome anyone who shows up with open arms.

Early in my process of unlearning my biases I asked an African-American man how I could learn more about overcoming racism. “This Bridge Called My Back,” he replied. We went back and forth three times before he clarified, “There is a book with that name. Read it.” One of the first lessons I learned was that I was asking a black man to teach me about overcoming racism and he pointed me directly to the book that contains the message for potential allies to People of Color that it is not the place of people of color to teach white folk how to deal with our racism. Ouch. And, thank you.

This is a time to learn about these matters if we haven’t done so before. This is a time in which people dedicated to improving their lives by improving their spiritual lives can increase the

energies of love, equality, and peace by continuing whatever practices they use but also to truly stand with the mystics, “at the point where the secular intersects with the spiritual.” (Inayat Khan) We can go into the streets and join peaceful demonstrations. We can talk to one another. We can use social media to spread ideas and information. We can provide direct support in the forms of counseling, encouragement, water, milk, food, bail donations. Standing up for what is right is a spiritual practice.

But mostly this is a time to learn. To listen. To organize. To help in any way we can as we are asked. The last thing anyone wants is anyone, “white knighting,” their way around an event or meeting or class. We white folk can no longer just show up and be a hero. People of color don’t need saving. They need allies. People ready to help as needed.

Some ways this has shown up include, “white shield.” During protests if people noticed the police were getting edgy or aggressive, the call went out, “white shield!” and white people moved up to place themselves between the police and the people of color. Reportedly the police immediately seemed calmer and less aggressive toward protestors.

For me, I don’t go into the streets. My head is, well head and shoulders above most crowds. It’s a very tempting target and I elect to not be a target. Besides, since I can’t move like I used to I am an impediment in a moving crowd. What I can do is write from my experience, my education, and my passion for social justice. And, as a queer lesbian intersex disabled woman with the privilege of higher education and lots of whiteness each of my, “isms,” intersects with other peoples’. I cannot know the experience of a black lesbian; be we share our sexual orientation as a point where we both experience discrimination. It is that commonality that gives us a place to begin building a relationship of mutual understanding and respect. Academics call this, “intersectionality,” and it simply means that every difference or uniqueness we have intersects with another person’s difference of the same kind. We used to call this, “building bridges,” but intersectionality recognizes that the bridges already exist, we just need to listen to one another well enough to recognize them.

When trying to be an ally learning which points of intersection we may share with others can help us connect in positive, helpful ways. Ultimately, the root point of intersectionality is our humanity. Sufis are particularly poised to connect with people at this very basic point since we make the effort to connect with the Divine in each person; any differences are enhancements making the relationship richer and more true.

Whatever comes next this is a time we will likely look back upon and realize we witnessed and participated in a turning point for humanity. The world is changing and so are we all. In my very humble opinion, we are all the right person in the right place at the right time.

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June 13, 2020

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