IMPACTS OF

RACISM

ON WHITE AMERICANS

White Identity and Counseling

White Allies About Racism

by

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INTRODUCTION

The few insights I offer here about counseling white Americans on the complex problem of racism are drawn from many hundreds of workshops on cross-cultural communication that I have conducted throughout the United States, as well as from my experience of being a Mexican-American who was raised in a politically active household in post-World War II East Los Angeles.

Our home was the hub of organizing activity for local and grassroots politics. The people involved in this movement were from diverse racial and ethnic groups in the community, including many from the dominant white culture. I experienced the 'high' and sense of community that is an integral part of social movements; but I also witnessed people, even though united for a common cause, repeatedly slip into patterns of conflict, dissent, and in-fighting. I became perplexed with this phenomenon and sought to find frameworks and models with which to understand it better.

In the following essay I present a synthesis of my understanding of these dynamics, with particular attention to the interlocking roles of whites and people of color in our society.

METHOD

Although white people in my workshops approach the issue of racism from differing and even opposing points of view, most seem to share varying degrees of discomfort, confusion, anger, and frustration regarding issues of race. Some are deeply aware of the injustice and inequities in our society. Others do not see it at all. Some have allied themselves publicly to the struggles for civil rights. Others are angry and resistant to current social changes. Still, many have acted conscientiously in their personal, daily lives when encountering social oppression against others.

There are whites who want to help, yet feel inadequate and apologetic. Some try to sympathize, and are rebuffed; to lend a hand, and are accused of condescending; or give from a 'privileged' position, and patronize. Others don't seem to know what all the fuss is about. They may feel used, abused, ignored, invalidated, and slighted.

In my experience it serves no purpose to blame or shame whites about racism - this only exploits the confusion and does not produce positive results. Rather, my approach is to help both whites (non-targets of racism) and people of color (targets of racism) move from positions of guilt and shame, or from rage and blame, to more 'workable' frames of reference - toward the building of alliances.

To begin this effort, I teach people how to shift frames of reference, to see the world from another's point of view and not to stay stuck in traditional belief patterns that have proven unworkable. A useful illustration of shifting one's frame of reference is seen in the work of William Perry, who interviewed Harvard male undergraduates across their four years at the college. He asked a single standard question: "Why don't you start with whatever stands out for you about the year?" Based on their responses, Perry constructed a scheme which traced the intellectual development in his students of what psychologists today would call 'vernacular epistemology.' His scheme describes intellectual growth as movement through a sequence of intellectual positions from which people view the world of knowledge, truth, and value.

Pictured as a continuum, Perry's four main positions are Dualism, Multiplicity, Contextual Relativism, and Committed Relativism. Dualists he defined as absolutists, because they assumed a single right answer to every question, saw the world in terms of black and white, and distrusted people and situations that implied things were otherwise. In the next position, Multiplicity, grey areas in understanding appeared. Students at this point considered truth to be personal, privately held, and up to the individual. All

opinions and views were equally valid. In the third position, Contextual Relativism, students decided that some views were 'better than others,' and that truth is 'contextual.' That is, its meaning depends on 'the context in which it is embedded' and on 'the perspective from which it is viewed.' In the fourth position, Committed Relativism, students understood that 'truth' depends on its context, yet at the core of that understanding rests a willingness, capacity, and courage to live a personal code of values and standards. This position permits a clear comprehension of conflicting views, without the moral paralysis which inhibits one from holding strong beliefs. (One can see, for example, why in a given context a person might steal, and yet one might still believe that theft is wrong.) In this position, one learns to live with ambiguity, and still embrace one's own view. One can hold a paradox without being paralyzed. Understanding and action are possible.

I qualify the limitations in Perry's study: his model is linear, so people may get the impression that there is a beginning and an end rather than a continual shifting in consciousness; he studied only white males, therefore reflecting that bias in the study; he does not take into consideration imbalances of power like institutionalized oppressions of class, race, gender, etc.; nor does he consider the role of emotions such as fear. But I believe the progressions he identifies are nonetheless valuable because Perry gives language to the process of intellectual movement; and because I have seen parallel progressions among more diverse groups as people experience shifts in their awareness and understanding on racial and other social issues.

In the years since Perry did his work, these positions have often been applied to developmental models of intercultural sensitivity by scholars like Milton J. Bennett. There are striking similarities as well in the work of James A. Banks.
Dualism in Bennett's scheme applies to a group of ethnocentric stages characterized by denial and defense against cultural difference. Banks similarly describes a stage of ethnic captivity and psychological isolation in which members of stigmatized ethnic groups

absorb the negative 'myths' that are institutionalized in the society. In this stage, ethnic absolutists of the dominant culture (i.e., the non-target group) cleave to a separatist ideology. They are often regarded as racists and bigots by cultural relativists.

Farther along the stages or positions of learning, Bennett's and Banks's typologies both equate the positions of Perry's multiplicity and relativism with a series of ethno-relative states, beginning in acceptance and ending with the global integration of an individual's racial view. People in this last position tend to maintain a broadened human identity that is 'marginal' to any particular culture, while knowing and appreciating their ethnic 'family home.' In other words, they identify themselves as a part of the diversity (i.e., perceiving themselves as a valid participant in rather than as an observer of diversity); they embrace difference, and yet understand the common human bond.

I stress the importance that each of us must understand our own cultural frame of reference. Becoming an ally of others, transferring understanding to the terms of another person's situation, demands a strong pesonal base. The creative models of ethnic and cultural learning developed by Perry, Bennett, and Banks are useful because they crystalize the notion of movement between referential frames. They provide a map people can visualize. The steps between a racist and an ally become, from that moment, identifiable and understandable positions on a scheme.

THE FAMILY MIRROR

I have come to my conclusion about the necessity of claiming one's ethnic base by considering how white people behave without it. For those who don't feel settled in their ethnic foundation there is a tendency, in interactions with people of color, to act out of guilt, pity, anger, or indifference, and their counterparts sense it. For example, if you see yourself as only 'lending a hand' in the fight against racism, you are on the fringe, perhaps feeling sorry for someone. Inherent in that view is condescension. If you feel guilty,

this can eventually lead to anger, and your behavior then becomes reactive and resentful. If you see yourself as having nothing to do with racism, there is a level of detachment and numbness that inevitably leads to a loss of intimacy.

To bring these points home, I frequently draw an analogy with the family. Family analogies are useful for two reasons. First, my audiences are usually racially and culturally diverse. Where historical, political, or literary examples may miss the mark for one group or another, most everyone has experience of the family. Second, the child's experience in the family is often the site of first exposure to racial prejudice and social oppression.

I remind my audience of a common household scenario, the overworked father or mother who has no 'time left over' to spend with the children. To make up for guilt, the standard remedy is to bring one's children a symbolic gift. The strategy usually fails. The children know the difference between a parent and a stereo, for instance. The stereo does not fill their need for love and attention. Gratitude, which might assuage the parent's guilt, is not forthcoming. Inevitably, as the cycle of guilt, bribery, and disregard continues, both sides start feeling cheated. The parent, who sought understanding and forgiveness but receives only indifference, feels taken advantage of. Usually it is the parent who explodes: "After everything I've given you! You don't appreciate how hard I work to provide for you!"

My audience gets the analogy right away. They understand that I am describing a relationship of imbalanced power and that it permeates exchanges across all ages and oppressions. White people see themselves reflected in it. So, too, do people of color, who have had to be successful at surviving. We have had to learn, often with a painful brilliance, that where the genuine article is not available, one can still persuade the holders of the goods - the scholarship, the grant, the job, the promotion. And where these goods are bestowed out of guilt, or wrested away through manipulation or intimidation, there

is no trust, no respect, no real liking, on either side. The recipient feels no accomplishment. The 'giver' feels used.

In this situation, the outcome for whites is predictable. Unlike the analogous 'parent,' they can, and do, quit the struggle against racism. In my workshops I hear the familiar phrases: "Well, I used to help out in the struggle, but not anymore. Nobody appreciates it anyway. I'm sick of being the bad guy." I point out that these phrases are forms of emotional extortion. They actually mean, "I'll do what's just, so long as you behave." To avoid the misunderstanding that comes from these often entrenched patterns, I suggest that the group as a whole shift its frame of reference to operate from a paradigm that gives more equal footing, i.e., a more workable assumption.

A philosophical basis for this approach is found in the work of the late Dr. Erica Sherover-Marcuse. In her book Emancipation and Consciousness, she says:
A dialectical perspective towards emancipatory consciousness understands that as a result of their life experience under an oppressive social system, even people who are engaged in movements for radical social change will have inevitably introjected or internalized various aspects of these conditions. It recognizes that an oppressive system also binds its victims to it, that there comes to be a certain "adherence," on the part of the oppressed themselves, to the prevailing order of unfreedom. Accordingly ... in order to undo this adherence, individuals must engage in a deliberate and systematic attempt to transform their own consciousness in an emancipatory direction.

Sherover-Marcuse goes on to point out that this 'unlearning' process that both whites and people of color must go through, does not simply 'happen.' It is the product of a sustained effort, the 'deliberate undoing' of an oppressive social order.
I then ask people to shift to a 'workable' frame of reference that begins with an article of faith - that all people are born intelligent, good, loving, curious, and with a zest for life,

and that through introspection, emotional healing, and personal commitment people of both target and non-target groups can confront social oppression in ourselves and our surroundings, and so make our immediate world a more equitable and creative place to live.

Having made this shift we then proceed to explore information that can help clarify commonly held misconceptions and confusion about racism.

DEFINING OPPRESSION

oppression: unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power; something that oppresses esp. in being an unjust or excessive exercise of power

Many of the questions that come up in my workshops have to do with the meaning of oppression. By definition oppression is an abuse of power. But oppression breaks predominantly into two types: institutionalized and non-institutionalized. Institutionalized oppression is a belief or attitude that is woven into the fabric of the dominant society. In institutionalized oppression the laws, policies, practices, and traditions of a society reflect the beliefs and attitudes of the dominant group. Jim Crow laws, de facto segregation, unequal job opportunity, and discriminatory school policies are all examples of institutionalized racism. In non-institutionalized oppression the abuse of power is perpetrated by people whose source of power is not their membership in a group but rather some circumstance or coincidence that gives them power unrelated to their group, such as being a boss, a landlord, or an administrator, or having a weapon. Non-institutionalized opppression is an incident isolated from, or at least not reflecting, the policies (written or unwritten) of the dominant society.

With this understanding, when I speak of racism, I mean institutionalized oppres-

sion, which I define in this way: it is not an individual act against an individual. And it contains three components: (1) the oppression is in the national consciousness - it is an attitude or belief shared by the dominant group in a society; (2) that attitude or belief is reinforced through the institutions of society (i.e., the church, the government, the family, and the schools create policies that reflect the attitude); and (3) it is maintained through an imbalance of social and economic power.

RECOGNIZING OPPRESSION

To help recognize oppression, once again I depict the dynamics of racism in terms of the dynamics of the family.

I begin by taking whites in my workshops back to childhood, and to my basic premise, the article of faith - that all human beings are born intelligent, good, loving, curious, and with a zest for life. Whites, in reviewing their early lives, find forms of oppression, analogous to the oppression of racism, by which they have been victimized themselves and to which they responded by forming protective patterns of behavior. By way of illustration, I start with my own experience. I tell them the story of my husband's socks.

In the first years of my marriage in the early 1970s, I felt comfortable staying home, managing the household, and caring for our two children, while my husband went to work outside the home. It was, after all, a familiar family pattern. These gender roles were assumed for people of our generation and they were tightly woven into the institutions of our society. After my younger child was in first grade I decided to go back to work part-time. Before many months went by it was clear to me that, in addition to working three days a week, I also continued to cook and clean and care for my family's

needs. I had not traded responsibilities; I had simply added on. I began to resent this, but I didn't know how to reverse it. My virtue, my sense of self worth, were woven into to the state of my laundry. This went beyond healthy domestic pride. I would stack up all the T-shirts that were white, arrange all the colored shirts, and fold them neatly into people's bureaus. Socks were the focal point of my obsession. I would make sure that every one was paired, then line them up artistically in drawers.

After two years of this, the laundry was no longer laundry. It had turned into a symbol of my oppression. Finally, I mustered up the courage to tell my husband: "I will no longer do your laundry." I expected resistance, but there was none. My husband said, "Okay." He'd simply assumed it was important to me - after all, I had done it relentless-ly all these years.

After weeks of his doing his own laundry, I was present one day when he came into the bedroom lugging a basket of jumbled-looking clothes. I watched while he opened his dresser drawers. Into one, he stuffed his underwear; into another, he rammed his T-shirts; into the third, he dumped his socks. They were not sorted. They were not folded. They were stuffed! I watched this from the bed and began to laugh - the sort of laughter that keeps people from crying. I thought of all the late nights I had spent folding and sorting, because I believed I should do so, long after the work made any sense.

I tell this story because it represents my personal index for the tenaciousness of habits trained into us as children. Once upon a time, our willingness to please saved us from parental disapproval. Later on, this adaptation becomes a handicap. As adults, we persist in it, largely because we still believe it validates our worth. We continue it, even when it does not apply to present circumstances.

I don't need to tell my audiences who taught me to fold socks, or to conform to gender expectations. Like any learned defense against parental or social disapproval, we can lug it right along with us into adulthood, even when those who induced it no longer hold real power over our lives.

I follow such stories by suggesting that people in my audience broaden their focus to apply examples of the family to other institutional frames of reference, and to now start looking at patterns of behavior, also originating from survival, that manifest in other oppressed groups. I say to them: "If you locate the mistreatment in your own lives, you won't become confused, you won't wonder why, you will remember analogous experiences. You will have a landmark, an index for oppression. You will remember having folded the socks."

INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

Among people who are targets of oppression, internalized oppression is grounded in a belief that the worst news we've heard about ourselves is true. It is taking to heart the misinformation, identifying with the message, then directing it against ourselves or others like us. Where there is an imbalance of social or economic power, we tend to turn our fear and rage inward, against ourselves and against members of our own group. We direct it against ourselves through the abuse of alcohol or drugs or other self-destructive behavior. In directing it against our own group, women may believe even on a subliminal level, for example, that women are less intelligent than men and may not trust the competence of women professionals. Or people of color may believe that their own group is lazy, and deserves the stereotypes and mistreatment of the dominant society. Internalized oppression plays out in all groups who are targets of institutionalized mistreatment. As Dr. Sherover-Marcuse states, "Internalized oppression is always an

involuntary reaction to the experience of oppression on the part of the target group. To blame the target group in any way for having internalized the consequences of their oppression is itself an act of oppression."

Occasionally the word 'racism' is misused to describe the phenomenon of internalized racism. In an expression of intraracial prejudice (sometimes referred to as 'colorism'), for instance, we are seeing the interaction of two individuals who are both oppressed by the broader inequities that underlie institutionalized racism. We are not seeing racism - we are seeing its effects. A light-skinned Latino, for example, may feel superior to a darker sister or brother; or the darker person may see themselves as inferior by comparison, and resent it. This is not racism. It is internalized racism - the result of racism.

It is true that some groups of people of color stereotype and denigrate other groups based on race and skin color. These conflicts are racial acts, and it can be a demeaning, disgusting, brutalizing, fearful, dehumanizing experience. But as we broaden the lens to understand the larger society, we understand that the real power, the institutional power (with its larger implications), is not held by either party. In that regard, though terrible, this is not an act of institutionalized racism, but rather an aspect of internalized racism.

In making this distinction I do not absolve people of color of responsibility for any behavior that is degrading to others based on race. But I believe that the distinction is important since people will often dismiss or minimize institutionalized oppression because, seeing oppressive behavior, they say, "There's racism in all groups."
Subtle forms of internalized oppression can also infiltrate other areas of life experience. Students, for example, after getting a low grade on a test, and having internalized the idea that they are not really smart, may look for someone whose grade is lower. We seek

people to look better than, in order to feel better, in order to divert criticism from ourselves. These are the patterns we learned very early to keep from being called 'bad' or 'dumb.' They were useful strategies to sustain one's self-esteem. But the situations in which they first served us no longer exist. As adults, we have options: we may continue to sharpen our defenses, or we can acknowledge their obsolescence, grieve out the pain from the original injuries, and come up with creative alternatives.

Another example of internalized oppression occurs in the academic world - in a system that dehumanizes and demeans certain of its members - in its fierce competition; in the fear that shared ideas will be co-opted or stolen; in the comparative clout of advanced degrees awarded by more and less well-respected institutions; in the brutalizing relationships between colleagues of varying ranks across the system. It shows itself in the behavior between all ranks in the educational process: in the high school teacher, for instance, who performs from an inferiorizing conviction that her position is somehow lower than a university professor's. Buying into this misinformation, she plays out her conflict daily in the way she treats her students and views herself.

Academics continue to engage in internecine, brutalizing behavior sanctioned and veiled by centuries of academic tradition. The book Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class   is a useful contribution to a growing body of literature on academic classism.

Some form of internalized oppression can be identified in all segments of society and professions. If each of us attempts to understand how internalized oppression expresses itself in one's own context, we will be less confused when we see it elsewhere. In my workshops, I suggest that each person find a 'landmark,' a personal experience with internalized oppression, a memory which can be easily called up when we are confused by other people's behavior. The best way to understand it in others is to see it in

ourselves. One of my personal 'landmarks' is the tale of the laundry. That night spent laughing (to keep from crying) over socks, remains a vivid reminder of my own internalized sexism. It is just a pattern, it makes no sense, but to be an effective ally, one has to get a feel for the confusion, to understand it in others, not to take offense or to judge, to come up with creative new and appropriate responses, and move on.

RESTIMULATION

We carry internalized oppression around with us. It is an omnipresent, tenacious force that keeps us on the defensive, ready to jump into protective behavior at the slightest suggestion of remembered pain. The process that unlocks a buried pattern is called 'restimulation.' The sensation is like a relapse into an old illness.

To illustrate the reaction induced by restimulation, I often tell the story of my first job interview. I had graduated from college, bought a new suit, and compiled my resumé. We were in the middle of my answer to a hypothetical question - what would I do in a typical given situation? - when very abruptly the man who was interviewing me leaned across the desk and said, "Has anyone told you that you are a lovely lady?"

By this time in my life, I knew enough about sexual harrassment to know that this man was completely out of line. But I said, "Oh, thank you!" Even today, I tell people, I still have the gnawing fear that I may have even batted my eyelashes. Like a lot of female children in my generation, I had learned that smiling and saying thank you and batting one's eyelashes were all ways of surviving as a female. And so, I did it. I became restimulated and then acted out the pattern of behavior that I had developed in order to survive.

I 'knew' that this man was demeaning me and manipulating power in the workplace. Intellectually and emotionally, I was aware that he had violated my rights, yet restimulation prevented me from acting creatively. Instead, I fell back on defenses. It is worth noting here that I might have attacked him, and still been acting out of restimulation, if that had been a pattern that had gotten me results when I was a child.

KILLING THE GOAT

When we are restimulated, patterns of internalized oppression cause us to "dramatize our feelings of rage, fear, indignation, frustration, and powerlessness at each other and those closest to us." To convey the behavior of internalized oppression that is triggered by restimulation, I sometimes tell a story about two men and a goat. One man owns a goat. The other one doesn't. The man without the goat wants a goat, feels he deserves a goat, and is always upset with his neighbor for owning one. A Fairy Godmother appears to him one day and asks, "Why are you so angry?" The man says, "Look at him! Flaunting his goat all over town! It's disgusting." The Godmother says, "Don't worry! I'm here to grant you a wish. Just tell me what you want, and you will have it." The man thinks this over. Finally he says, "You mean you'll kill his goat?"

Before the parable of the goat becomes a mere fairy tale, I try in my workshops to link it to an event out of my own life. My purpose is to provide an illustration and to encourage people to apply what they are learning to their lives. I like to pick stories not directly related to racial issues, because it helps to drive home the truth that oppression is universal.

My husband tells a boyhood story about a swing he and his friends made with a rope tied to a tree limb, which overhung a swamp. On the other side of the water the

bank was shoaled. They could swing out, but if they swung too far, they would hit the bank. They decided to remove part of the shoal, and began to dig it by hand, but that proved hopelessly time consuming. Fortunately, there was a bulldozer on a construction site a few blocks away. They took it in the middle of the night and dug out the shoal. Upon returning it, they encountered a security guard. He caught the boys, took their names, and notified the police.

Needless to say, my husband tells this story laughing - boys will be boys, and so on - a warm, humorous memory. At the end, where the point of my story comes in, he tells about the policeman who came to his house the next day, pretending to be furious, and how his father played along, to scare the boys. In fact, they got off without serious penalty.

In terms of the workshop audience, the story I am telling is not really about my husband - it is about me. It concerns my reaction when I first heard the bulldozer story and began to compare his childhood in white suburban Minnesota to mine as a Latino child in East Los Angeles. I describe for the audience my escalating anger. I was furious that the cop had merely 'slapped his wrist.' I repeat what I couldn't help saying at the time: "If you had been a Mexican kid growing up in East L.A. you'd still be in the slammer for what you did! If there were justice, you would have gone to jail." Because of restimulation I became confused and my first reaction was to "kill his goat". It did not occur to me that I was casting my anger in the wrong direction. It was racism I should be angry at, not what happened (or didn't happen) to those boys. I only grasped much later that what they experienced is what ought to happen to anyone: that the law can teach lessons and also be forgiving; that doing hard-time for a harmless prank is never right. It's the kind of compassionate treatment I want for the rest of the world.

Concerning my husband's childhood, I still catch myself drawing comparisons:

categorizing his experience as the experience of a white male, invalidating his treatment as a privilege, feeling angry that his childhood was so 'easy,' even though I know that it was not. While my irrational anger has become a signal I have learned to recognize as restimulation, I still continue to heal from these emotions, to try to overcome the confusion, rather than be engulfed by it over and over.

Increasingly, as we come to see that restimulation from an old hurt is delusional, that it can transform fairness into "killing someone's goat," and as we discharge emotions and heal from the old wound, we can stop the old response.

SOME MYTHS ABOUT OPPRESSION

THE MYTH OF REVERSE RACISM

Occasionally, I meet white people in a workshop who have been painfully mistreated by a person of color. I tell them I am sorry it happened to them, I agree that it must have been horrible, the incident may even have occurred because they were white, and yet what we are discussing is not 'racism in reverse.' They may have been personally violated, but they are not the victims of an institutionalized policy. That is, people of color as a group do not create and implement policy that determines where white people live, the quality of their education, the promotions in their jobs, etc.

Whites as whites are not at the continual mercy of a systematic racial oppression that demeans their humanity and dilutes their rights with policies that ignore and disenfranchise them (white people may experience this as targets of other oppressions than racism, e.g., sexism or classism, but this is different). In my workshops I never minimize the horror of the emotional, psychological, or physical injury of a victim of an unjust or violent act, nor do I align myself in any way with those who would use this distinction to justify mistreatment of people from the dominant culture.

However, I believe that it is important to understand the difference, because people often confuse non-institutional mistreatment with institutionalized oppression; they have never thought about the 'institutional' aspect in the definition of an oppression like racism. It is not uncommon for some white people, for example, to challenge as "unfair" policies which are implemented to alleviate institutionalized oppressions on the grounds that they have 'experienced racism' too.

I am not suggesting that people of color cannot be oppressive. In my workshops I list eight common institutionalized oppressions, into some of which everyone must fall. I include the oppressions of adultism, classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, ableism, and ageism. I use myself as an example, checking off in each case whether I am a target or a non-target of that oppression. This tally defines me as a target in half the cases and as a non-target in the others. On those oppressions where I am a non-target, by virtue of being a non-target, I hold the institutionalized power.

For example, I point out that around the oppression of ableism (the oppression of the disabled, including hidden disabilities such as speech, hearing, and learning, etc.) in our society, I am a non-target. This means that I might go for weeks without noticing if the curb I just stepped off was wheelchair-accessible. I have, very simply, failed to see life from that perspective. It is not my intention to discriminate against disabled people. Nonetheless, the inability of the non-target group to 'see' the problem continues inadvertently to have am impact on the lives of the target group.

THE MYTH THAT OPPRESSION BUILDS CHARACTER

Oppression is a powerful phenomenon, partly because breaking patterned responses is such hard work. Defense mechanisms spring up to convince the most dis-

cerning person that oppression has value, that it 'taught us something,' or 'made us strong.' I often hear people say, "Yeah, my father kicked me around a lot, but it made me strong, it built character." If we give credit to the oppression, or the mistreatment, this keeps us in the denial of the pain of the experience, thus impeding our healing. The tendency then is to re-enact the mistreatment, to pass it on, instead of coming up with a new, effective, supportive, creative response. I ask my audience to entertain the premise that they were always strong, that they always had character, and that they managed to hold onto it in spite of mistreatment and oppression, not because of them.

Similar confusion often surrounds physical illness. In Bill Moyers's book, Healing and the Mind, he interviews Rachel Naomi Remen, who says:

> There is nothing romantic about illness .... Illness is brutal, cruel, lonely, terrifying. You have to understand that anything positive that emerges out of a real illness experience is not a function or characteristic of the nature of illness but of human nature. People have the natural capacity to affirm and embrace life in the most difficult of circumstances, and to help each other despite their circumstances.

THE MYTH OF EXPERIENCE

I begin exploring the myth of experience by asking workshop participants how they believe a typical white person becomes prejudiced against a black person. The most common reply is, "experience," i.e., the white person has a bad experience with a black person, and therefore begins to distrust all black people.

Dr. Sherover-Marcuse made a 'survey' in one of her workshops which sheds light on the myth of experience. She began by stating that an incident never creates the 'ism,' that the 'ism,' the social oppression, is a prejudice spread from non-target to non-target.

A white man in the audience raised his hand. "I just can't buy that," he said. "My father was a minister. I was raised to believe all people were equal in the eyes of God. I really had no prejudice at all, until I moved to a poor, racially mixed neighborhood. The first week, my hubcaps were stolen. The next week, my stereo was stolen. Two days later, my tires were slashed. After a number of these incidents, you'd better believe I'm becoming prejudiced."

Sherover-Marcuse then asked how many people had had a one-to-one negative experience with a person of color? Fifteen or twenty people out of about a hundred raised their hands. "All right. Am I to assume, then, that you were not prejudiced before? This incident occurred, and then you became prejudiced?" The answers came back: "Yes, of course." Sherover-Marcuse posed another question: "How many people here have had a negative experience with a white person?" Most people in the room raised their hands. She asked, "Am I to assume, then, that you are prejudiced against white people?" The replies were almost uniform: "I never thought of them as white people. I just thought of them as jerks."

The implication of the 'survey' should be clear. If the theory of 'experience' is valid, if prejudice arises directly from specific incidents, it should be applicable to every group. But, of course, it is not.

Then Sherover-Marcuse returned to her first assertion, that prejudice, which is the rationalization for systematic racism, is a message passed among non-targets. At this point she turned to the son of the minister and said, "I bet your parents would have loved it if you had brought home a black girl." The man's eyes darted. "That's where you learned racism," she said. "Right there."

These stereotypes are further reinforced through the system of the dominant cul-

ture via television, movies, textbooks, history classes, curriculum, tracking, etc. Once this message has been instilled, the first time a person of color's actions conform to the stereotype, the white person feels justified in rejecting that person's group. "I knew he would do that. They're all that way," the conclusion goes.

THE MYTH OF THE MORE OPPRESSIVE CULTURE

The dynamics of every oppression would have us believe that certain cultures are more oppressive than others. For example, I have heard people of color define European and American cultures as the most oppressive, while romanticizing their own. I have heard white American groups define cultures such as Middle Eastern cultures or Hispanic cultures as most oppressive to women, etc. The result of this is that people often either become defensive of their culture and rigidly dualistic in that defense, or they may feel shamed, becoming apologetic and over-compensating. People of color, buying into the myth that their culture is oppressive, believe on some level that in order to avoid mistreatment, they must become less 'cultural.' They then begin the slow and painful process of alienation and self-exile from their group. Calling oppressive behavior 'culture,' therefore, is not a workable frame of reference.

Oppression has a lot to do with society, but nothing whatever to do with culture. If an action devalues human life, it is not culture. It is oppression. Agreed, oppression comes in many forms. Sexism among Latinos, for example, may look different from sexism among whites, but it is still sexism. For instance, I hear people say that, as part of their culture, Mexican women defer to males. The suggestion is that they do not mind this 'aspect of their culture,' even to the extent of physical abuse. This notion is based on the fact that frequently the women do not leave their oppressive situations. However, it is finally becoming common knowledge that many battered white women are in precise-

ly the same situation. But in their case it is called 'syndrome' or 'pathology.' When refer-ring to the dominant group, oppression is called what it is. When referring to non-dom-inant groups, it's called 'culture.' When a white male treats women with disrespect, it's called sexism. When a man of color does so, it's called culture.

When I suggest that no group is more oppressive than any other, I am really ask-ing people to shift perspectives. Of course we could go on calling oppression 'culture,' but how does that help us? What is the usefulness in identifying as ethnic, forces that devalue us and other human beings? Do we really need to hold on to oppression in order to maintain cultural authenticity? Culture doesn't tell men to batter women. Oppression does that. I should be able to stand with one hundred percent of my cultural integrity intact, and still refuse to be a victim of oppression. All women should be able to unite against sexism and still not abandon their group. Similarly, all men should be able to fight sexism and not feel less 'manly'. I believe that the function of culture is to make us whole and to inspire.

THE MYTHICAL HIERARCHY OF OPPRESSIONS

Part of the effect of oppression, when we are stuck in the pain of it, is to to rank our pain above that of others. The worse the experience, the logic goes, the more valid or heroic the survivor. For people of color, this aspect of internalized oppression plays out as we assess each other's authenticity in our group - who's 'more Latino than whom, who's 'more Black' than whom. Accepting the premise that we can rank each other's validity as authentic members of our group, we then must become 'super-Latino' or 'super-Black,' etc. Or, we leave our group because on some level, depending on our per-sonal experience, we feel like we cannot measure up. In either case, we must invest in pretense, in an image with no substance; and then we have to protect that image (always

fearful that someone will blow our cover) by keeping each other at bay. Under these circumstances, our relationships can never be real, lasting, or intimate.

Some white participants in my workshops express their belief in the myth of the hierarchy of oppression in two predominant ways. One approach is to minimize everybody's pain and dismiss the specific circumstances of racism. They may say things like, "Life's been hard on all of us," thereby misunderstanding the difference in experience and, ultimately, minimizing their own experience. Sometimes this will lead them into what I call the 'what about me' syndrome, because they feel the pain of their experience but the myth gives them no arena in which to express it. So in turn they minimize everybody's pain and feel angry and reactive when people of color 'complain' about racism. The second way to reinforce the mythical hierarchy of oppression is to romanticize the painful experience of racism and to minimize the pain of their own experience as individuals or as members of other oppressed groups. Those who take this path end by feeling embarrassed to complain or even acknowledge the depth of their own injuries.

For example, when I was a counselor at a school with predominantly Mexican migrant children, idealistic young white teachers would seek me out to let me know that they were the 'good whites.' In the course of our conversations we would inevitably get to their backgrounds and where they had done their student teaching. Many had done it at a white, affluent local high school.They would seem apologetic and start to minimize the concerns of the white students at that school. They would say things like, "The only pressing problem those kids had was the color of the car they were going to buy that year." They would try to assure me that they were happier being at our school, where the problems were 'real.' I wanted to say to them, "Don't do that. If you can't see the pain in the eyes of white children, you will always condescend to brown children." I employ other methods to uncover the pain of oppression. One of these is to engage the workshop in an experiential exercise. First, I ask them to stand and clear the floor. Then

we divide the room down the middle. We reserve one side for those who feel themselves to be targets of an oppression, and we reserve the other side for those who see themselves as non-targets. Then I ask people to disclose, by their location in the room, whether they are the targets or the non-targets of each oppression I name. Like a caller at a square dance I will say, for example, "Men on my right, women on my left," to delineate the oppression of sexism. Then I call out, "White people on my right, people of color on my left," to delineate the oppression of racism. The composition of the room visibly shifts. I go on this way, calling out twenty forms of oppression commonly experienced in this country. The room goes into motion each time I call. (In this setting, I stress that people should not disclose more than is comfortable for them, i.e., not reveal information about themselves that they are unwilling to have known outside the workshop.)

The constant shifting, as people cross and re-cross the room, illustrates the various power imbalances everyone experiences. People see themselves, and they see each other. I ask them to make eye contact, to make a human connection.

The oppressions, as manifested specifically in society, are endless. The exercise confirms two things: no one is always a target, nor always a non-target; and no one feels good in either category. We have all been objects of oppression; we have all been its victims and its perpetrators. I ask people in my workshops to shift their frame of reference and to accept, as a workable premise, that the pain derived from any one oppression is as valid as the pain of any other. How can I, for example, as a person of color, claim that my pain is greater than the pain of one who is physically disabled? How does one grade pain? I don't think suffering can be graded. In Man's Search for Meaning, Viktor E. Frankl writes:

...a man's suffering is similar to the behavior of gas. If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber, it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind, no

matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore the "size" of human suffering is absolutely relative.

Moreover, attempting to rank suffering leads to thinking that colludes with internalized oppression. It encourages us to invest in the pretense of an authenticity based on such questions as 'who is poorer than whom?' It contains the potential to set oppression's victims against each other, as well as against the non-targets.

Exercises like these help whites and people of color to see that the patient exploration of one's own background can provide the crucial bridge to becoming an ally, because it opens ground that must be claimed for any honest cross-cultural communication to take place. It leads whites to locate the sites of their own oppression, to see that both target and non-target are dehumanized by oppression, to understand that oppression is universal, and to see that, on the receiving end, pain is not black or white or brown, etc. It is pain.

THE PATH TO ALLIANCE

White people tell me, as they shift frames of reference and come to an awareness about oppression, that the process is emotional, and for the first time they understand emotionally as well as cognitively the loss to them because of racism. They see that they were misinformed by people they loved and trusted, and so they feel betrayed; they belong to a group that has had dominance for generations, and so they feel guilt. If white people only confront these issues on a cognitive basis, they will wind up as hostages to political correctness. They will be careful about what they say, but their actions will be rigid and self-conscious. When the process is emotional, as well as cognitive, the state of being an ally becomes a matter of reclaiming one's own humanity. Then there is no fear, because there is no image to tear down, no posture to correct. The movement to a glob-

al, ethnic point of view requires tremendous grieving. I encourage white people not to shrink from the emotional content of this process.

For people of color an encounter with a white person who knows what is right, but has not processed it emotionally, can be frustrating and exhausting. Every word, every signal breeds confusion. Whites busily guarding a politically correct posture are impossible to reach on a human level, because they have an image to protect. When people of color invalidate whites, impugning their pain or rejecting their views as 'privileged,' it is usually a response to despair, to the hopelessness marginalized people feel when faced with a lack of the social access which white people enjoy simply by not being 'colored.' There are choices to be made in these transactions. The white person can be miffed, condescending, obsequious, or defensive - they may dismiss a whole race, if they choose; or they can back off from reactive behavior, remember who they are and what they believe in, locate a landmark, shift their frame of reference, and come up with a new, creative, human response.

As people of color we will have to heal from the experience of racism in order to embody what we want for the world. If we want justice, we must be just. If we want fairness, we must be fair. And if we want real and lasting change, we must be willing to touch others from the core of our humanity and our integrity which means we must be real and without pretense.

Returning to William Perry's committed relativism, where people are willing to live a personal code of values and standards, I tell white people in my workshops that I expect them, as allies with power in the oppression of racism, to act justly and not dominate, regardless of the fact that we may never love them. For my part, I say to white people that I will always see their humanness even if they never understand about racism. Neither party can shrink from their commitment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIDE

Collective pride, which is a form of nourishing group self love, is an emotional experience that many white people find elusive.

I want to be clear about what I mean by 'pride' - for, even as I write, there is an increase in various forms of supremacy, or separatist or nationalist groups using the idea of 'pride' as a framework for their philosophy based on hate. When I talk about pride, I am using the word in its purest sense, like love in its purest sense. The paradox, that we can only love someone else to the extent that we love ourselves, applies to 'pride' as well. I am not talking about false pride, the pride that says, "I am something and you are nothing." I am talking about the pride that says, "To the extent that I love and appreciate myself, I can love and appreciate you." In collective pride we say, "To the extent that I can love and appreciate my group's difference, I can love and appreciate yours."

Again and again I see that collective pride is veiled for many whites. In its place, they often feel a collective shame. Or they feel detached. Whites easily identify themselves as individuals, but not as members of a group. They may take a healthy pride in their personal strengths and accomplishments but, when it comes to recognizing a collective supportive cultural or ethnic foundation, they seem to be standing in quicksand to the waist.

In an essay for Clinical Psychology Review, Hope Landrine explains why whites and especially white males have difficulty feeling collective pride. She identifies two schools of thought concerning the way people identify with 'self.' These are the 'referential self,' which is egocentric and western in origin, and 'indexical self,' which is sociocentric. Simply put, the referential self focuses on the 'rugged individualist,' whereas the indexical self focuses on 'membership in community.' Landrine points out that the con-

cept and experience of the referential self is limited to a few Western cultures (and may be pronounced in America) as well as to white, male, middle-class Americans. The indexical self experience applies to Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Native-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and most white American women.

It is important to note here that one perspective is not better than the other - both the indexical self (collectivism) and the referential self (individualism) have benefits as well as costs. However, I believe that those who seek to understand another group's collective experience, but cannot make the shift into an understanding of collective pride in their own group, operate from an irresolute position in any cross-cultural exchange.

In my workshops I often use a verbal exercise to help people explore this territory. The audience is usually racially diverse. I select from among them a white person who I encourage to acknowledge and appreciate the freedoms whites enjoy and take for granted, the rights that are as unquestioned as the air they breathe. I say that what matters is how each of us thinks and acts in our daily lives. What counts is the ability to shift our frames of reference, and be able to understand and communicate from a place of personal integrity and intimacy. Then I ask the person to articulate racial pride - to say, "I am proud to be white." The first reaction is very often laughter. "I can't say that," they answer. Or they state their pride in a shallow way.

By the third or fourth exchange, the response hasn't changed much. Some say, "Don't be ridiculous. I can't relate to this." Others display discomfort, embarrassment, or denial. I ask them to think of their ancestors, in isolation from anything that is wrong with society. I urge them to remember the essence of their grandparents - their hard work, their wisdom, their kindness, their survival, their family devotion. I reiterate the paradox: that one can only love someone else to the extent that one loves oneself; one can only recognize and appreciate another person's difference to the extent that one can

recognize and appreciate one's own. It is in the interest of real communication across the races that white people go back and claim their frame of reference, a collective appreciation of their group.

This exercise does not usually have a fairy tale ending. Where there exists no frame of reference for a concept, it can't be conjured from thin air. On the other hand, their discomfort carries a weight they can't dismiss.

The loss brought about by racism affects the target and non-target groups in different ways. The loss to the target group is usually evident - emotional, psychological, and physical injury, as well as unequal opportunity in all realms of society. But the loss to the non-target is usually masked. Landrine goes on to say that Westerners (particularly white males) may pay psychological 'costs' for this individualist concept of the self, and quotes from authors Shweder and Bourne that among these costs is the

... lack of a meaningful orientation to the past. We come from nowhere, the product of random genetic accident .... Cut adrift from any larger whole the self has become the measure of all things....Community, nation, family, roles, and relationships are all secondary to the self .... Each of these larger social units is presumed to exist in order to meet the self's needs, and will be rejected if it fails to do so.

Using the language of my workshops, it appears that for whites there is a loss of collective pride - not as a posture, but in its purer sense, as a connecting form of love. For whites who are oblivious to their own essence, their appreciation of others will be postured and lacking substance, and therefore devoid of peerness, which is required for genuine human connection. Collective pride is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end - authentic human connections and intimacy across differences.

The concept of collective pride is much more evident to people of color. As we

heal from institutionalized racism, we usually understand early in the process the need to hold onto our identities and have pride in our own group. Even as we sort through our rage and despair and have to come to terms with our internalized misinformation in order to reach a state of healthy pride, there remains for most of us a general awareness that pride and identification with our group are central to our being and central to our healing.

The white person who understands collective pride on a deep personal level is usually our best ally. For example, when I was a counselor for students in a school whose population was one-third Mexican migrant students, we fought feverishly to improve bilingual services and to install a multicultural curriculum. As I reflect on my relationship with a white teacher who was one of our most ardent supporters, I believe it was no coincidence that he was also the president of the local chapter of the Sons of Norway.

I say in my workshops, "If you don't know pride, in your gut, then our pride will always threaten you. It will always feel as though people of color are something because you are nothing, that we are colorful because you are bland, and that anything we gain is at your expense."

In areas where we are non-targets of oppression we must learn to love who we are, not just individually but collectively as well. The freedom to respond creatively cannot be achieved from a purely intellectual position. We must venture in, uncovering our personal essence and honoring our connection to our group. For example, we can denounce the socialization of males that perpetuates sexism and reject sexist behavior, but I believe that in order for men to be true peers and allies to women they must love the essence of their maleness. Without the emotional ground claimed through this process, their behavior will be based on a foundation of shame, guilt, anger, or detach-

ment. No matter how well meant, their actions will be contaminated by condescension and patronage. No effective change can come from that.

THE LOSS

Throughout the text of this paper I have made reference to the loss to non-targets of oppression. I have suggested that we work from a premise that whatever we do to fight oppression, it must be in each of our best interests.

The loss to all non-targets on any oppression is twofold: the lost capacity to assess a situation and act creatively and appropriately, and the loss of meaning between fellow human beings - the loss of intimacy, the loss of genuine human connections.

One of the best examples I have of this loss came out of a conference of women police officers (which was also attended by men). A white female police officer told a story about the way sexism played out in the police department where she worked. In the story she recounted, another white female officer had become the object of sexual harassment in her department. She reported the incident and the offending male officer was suspended. When the officer returned from his suspension, he launched a retaliatory campaign against her. It escalated for months. She found soiled sanitary napkins in her locker. She found used condoms in her desk. She found her reports deleted from her computer. This was a concerted effort, not the work of a single man. A 'code of silence' was in effect. She continued to file complaints, but no one would break the code or 'inform' on the offenders. One day, while working in the field, she was assaulted. When she ran to her car to call for a backup, she found her radio equipment had been jammed. As a result, she was wounded. She never learned who had jammed her radio. She resigned from the police force a few months later. There were many males on the force who had taken no active part in her harassment, but not one policeman crossed over to

her defense.

By the time of the conference, this incident was two years old. The woman who told the story about her co-worker began physically shaking. She turned to the audience, pointed her finger, and said, "If one male, just one, had spoken up, it would have made all the difference in the world."
At this point, I turned to the audience and asked, "Are there any men here who were there at the time?"

At the back of the room, one white male raised his hand, very inconspicuously. His integrity wouldn't let him keep quiet; but I believe he was praying I wouldn't see him. I asked him to stand and I asked, "What were you feeling while all this was going on?" He put his hands in his pockets and replied in an academic tone, "I felt that it was highly unprofessional." I said, "Yes. But what were you feeling while all this was going on?" He thought about it. He said, "Well, I guess I felt somewhat confused."
Already, he was shifting his frame of reference to a more human point of view. I said, "Okay. Just keep talking about it. What were you feeling?"
He said, "Well, I guess I felt scared." Scared, of what? He said, "Well, scared that if I stood up, if I said something, the attack would fall on me."

Gradually, he made small shifts in his frame of reference - he spoke more softly. His hands were shaking. He was, if you will, moving along Perry's continuum, beginning to see from a different place, and announcing every shift in his body language and in the things he said. Finally, he said, "I guess I felt sad."

I asked, "What did you lose? " This man was at least 6' 3", a large white soldier of the law, standing with his hands stuffed into his pockets. Little by little his chin began quivering. His eyes were beginning to fill with tears. I had expected him to be defensive,

to give excuses, or to remain detached and academic. To see him choosing to do otherwise was deeply affecting for the people in the room. I never learned his name, but I will love this man forever. He said, and I quote, "I lost the ability to be soft, I lost the ability to be kind, and I lost the ability to be just."

It is always in this intuitive, systemic shift that a person arrives at the right place to oppose oppression. It is Perry's 'committed relativism,' where one understands that 'truth' depends on its context, yet at the core of that understanding rests a willingness and capacity to express a personal code of values and standards.

In the case of our story, I watched a policeman arrive at the right place to combat sexism. In another context, he might have been a she, might have been grappling with racism, classism, adultism, or one of a dozen versions of oppression. Because the policeman saw his own loss he began acting for himself - not for 'women,' not for that 'poor ex-police officer,' not for his own self image. He saw what he had been missing. I would call it his humanity. He saw that the loss was also to himself.