

Becoming a White Ally: Stories of Mentoring Toward Social Justice.
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Thank you. I am very grateful for this opportunity to think with you. To ask questions and to be inspired by your individual and collective commitment to learning and to social justice.

Today, I will share personal stories, reflections, and questions about the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, gender, and social class. The title of my talk is: *Becoming a White Ally: Stories of Mentoring Toward Social Justice*, but I can assure you, rather than having arrived here with answers, I have arrived more than ever full of questions.

I am very grateful that I have been well mentored toward social justice in my own life by teens, peers, and elders. But, I am still always *becoming* to use the title of Michelle Obama's wonderful autobiography—trying to learn more each day, in each hard, honest interaction when I am confronted with the world as it is experienced by another person.

The first set of questions for us to consider comes from Chimamanda Adichie's teaching on "the danger of a single story," reflecting upon themes from her fabulous 2009 TED Talk. We will consider the ethics of interpretation in a politically charged and increasingly "single story" framework.

How might we be vigilantly suspicious of our interpretations, increasingly aware of our assumptions, and open to complexity and multiple stories, while simultaneously *not* veering away from certain fundamental truths about the insidious nature of power, privilege, and oppression?

I will also address the primacy of transformative experiences in the lives of adolescents and emerging adults. How can we be allies and hold space for their activism, leadership, and questions, while also being a teacher *and a student*, a caring witness and a mentor?

First, I ask you to pause for a one-minute meditation on some of the defining moments of *your* adolescence and emerging adult years. Who and what were most influential to you in your way of understanding and being in the world? What reverberates in your life, even today, from those early influences?

So... I will begin with thinking about what happened, and the continuing interpretation and analysis of what happened last week at the Lincoln Memorial—the alarming sequence of events that raised tensions among Nathan Phillips, a Native American elder, part of a group representing Indigenous Rights; Nick Sandmann and a group of his classmates from Covington Catholic High School in Kentucky; and a group of Black Israelites.

Media has been on fire with explanations—the assumed behavior, motives, beliefs, and attitudes of each of these groups—each version of the story irreconcilable with each other version of the story.

We are experiencing times locally, nationally, and globally, when racial, cultural, and political worlds collide, and tensions are fully charged. Rather than momentum toward an attempt at understanding, a search for truth, there is momentum toward coopting these stories for a political purpose that has nothing to do with understanding. There is an obsession with the “single story” that will prove a particular point of view, rather than engaging with the complexity of multiple stories and varied possibilities.

What was going on in the hearts, minds, and bodies of each person in the chaos of this encounter at the Lincoln Memorial? How are adolescent boys taught in multiple ways, through cultural and societal messages, to posture in the face of conflict in ways that are loud and aggressive? What was in Nick Sandmann’s heart and mind as he stood, smiling (or, perhaps, smirking?) in front of Nathan Phillips?

How have historic and multi-generational trauma imprinted in the bodies of indigenous and black people and how might the everyday trauma of racism influence the emotion and experience of Black and Indigenous people facing a group of mostly white adolescent boys? What were the teachers thinking, saying, and doing? I will quickly add that I am not at all sure I would have had the presence of mind or the skill to do anything useful in that moment.

No doubt, this is an experience that will not be forgotten by these teenagers. This is an ideal moment to optimize learning for the best possible impact on the lives of the students. Phillips has offered to go to Covington to talk with the students there. This gesture reminds me that the 6th and last step of Dr. King’s steps of non-violent social change is reconciliation.

How would this scenario and other scenarios like it play out differently if we learned to pause and thoughtfully employ these 6 steps of non-violent social change outlined and used by Dr. King and the Civil Rights movement?

- Gather information
- Educate others
- Reflect and make a personal commitment
- Discuss and negotiate across differences
- Direct action
- Reconciliation

How often do we find ourselves, in small and big ways, in similar circumstances where action *precedes* learning, speaking, reflection, and negotiation, and where there is no imagination for reconciliation?

Years ago, teens from Appalachian Mountain Teen Project and the youth group from New Hope Baptist Church in Portsmouth came together in Wolfeboro for an all-day program on Martin Luther King’s 6-steps of Non-violent Social Change. Reverend Arthur Hillson led the Portsmouth group. Sadly, Rev. Hillson died a week ago after a lifetime of inspiring social justice work and mentoring youth.

There is a memory that keeps coming back to me from the day we got together—White teens from central NH and Black teens from New Hope Baptist church. At the beginning of the day,

white and Black participants sat on opposite sides of the room. But as the day progressed, and stories were told by Black and white teens of how they make meaning of these 6 steps, a white teen from AMTP moved closer and closer to the other side of the room until he was sitting in the midst of the group of Black teens. Hearing stories of the historical trauma of slavery and ongoing, everyday abuses of racism, this teen said he shared that background because his own family emigrated from Ireland and were indentured servants in the US.

Rev. Hillson gently challenged that indentured servitude and slavery were not the same thing. But now when I look back, I think of my own failure to fully use this moment to mentor toward social justice. To make sure the experiences of Black teens were not “white washed” while simultaneously holding space for the white teen from my group to say something about the injustice of his own family history.

I knew this teen in my group had experienced poverty, hospitalization, and his own childhood trauma. I remember thinking that he found comfort and, perhaps, an important perspective from his Black peers that helped him understand his own life. I do not know how the Black teens in the room experienced his attempt at establishing, prematurely, some common ground.

There are many similar stories of teens that have taught me over and over again what it means to mentor toward social justice. In 1972, I was a 20-year-old resident tutor in a program called A Better Chance—a program for Black, Latinx, and Native American high school students coming to mostly white schools to get a “better” education. I was the only white woman in the house of 18.

I was strident in my defense of these students in the various injustices that happened in the community and in the high school—like being stopped on the street by police officers when they walked to a nearby store because they “looked suspicious.” But when something unfair happened to me, I did not speak up. At a meeting, one of the students wisely said, “Don’t stick up for us, if you are not going to stick up for yourself.”

The Black women in this group of students also taught me that the white feminist movement was not addressing the urgent issues of Black women. When I attempted to confront the sexual harassment of the Black men in the house toward the Black women, I was quickly reminded by the women that my white, 20-year old version of feminism was not going to work for them. I knew nothing of the history of gender politics, power, and oppression in the black community. I knew nothing about the way Black men had been systematically and intentionally emasculated by an oppressive and violent white system. Like the student in Appalachian Mountain Teen Project tracking toward his Black peers, I had assumed common ground without knowing the history of the ground we stood on.

It strikes me over and over again that when we tap adolescents’ natural altruism, courage, curiosity, and defiance against the status quo, we possibly put into motion a lifetime of choices that embrace diversity, compassion, and activism. The person I spoke about from Appalachian Mountain Teen Project, now in his mid-40s, lives and works at a school of Native American youth on an island in Puget Sound.

In the last decade, a young woman who grew up in a tiny apartment over a gas station on Rt. 16. and had a highly disrupted home life, started an independent school for children on the coast of Maine because, as she said, “I wanted to give them something that I never got.”

The oldest of five children, a very quiet middle school student, took care of his younger siblings while his single mom worked two jobs. He now assists with an educational non-profit in Tanzania. Another young man who struggled mightily with depression, anxiety, and a sense of isolation became connected to an Alaskan Native American community and made an award-winning documentary on generational trauma and suicide in the Native American community. His documentary highlights resilience in the face of the consequences of genocide and ongoing abuses of Native American people, and it profiles a particularly effective and beloved mentor whose work restores hope and possibility to young people who have little reason to feel a sense of hope and possibility.

Our local white youth—perhaps particularly those from low income backgrounds—track toward cultural and racial diversity when they have the opportunity to do so.

Becoming a compassionate and attentive mentor matters a lot and it can happen in small and large gestures. When I was in 8th grade, horrified by civil rights protesters attacked by water hoses and dogs, and bloodied by clubs, I wrote a letter to the editor. As a shy, not very articulate 13-year-old, this was my first step in finding my voice. The letter was published in the Eagle Tribune, the city newspaper of my hometown of Lawrence. The letter was full of my 13-year old understanding of how “we are all the same and should all be treated the same”—a good, developmentally appropriate start to becoming an ally.

A few weeks later, a package came in the mail from a woman in Salem NH who responded to my letter with the powerful gesture of a card and books about the Civil Rights movement. I was not a big reader, but I read those books: *The Negro Revolt*, *Black Like Me*, and others. Because this stranger took me seriously, I began to take myself seriously.

A few months later, I was elected May Queen for the annual May procession that would wind through the streets of Lawrence and culminate with the crowning of the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the May Queen – me. All other 8th grade girls were various queens and we got to choose attendants of children from grades 1-3 who would walk with us in the procession.

Lawrence is a wonderfully racially and ethnically diverse city and the school I attended in the 60s was a place where newly arrived Cuban and Dominican students would attend. A little Black first grader ran to the door when I came to pick my attendants. She pleaded that I choose her. I did not want to. I was rattled by this assertive, Black 6-year-old. She did not fit my 13-year-old, self-conscious image of what “perfect” would look like, and, as the granddaughter of Italian immigrants, with barely a foothold in American society, I wanted to be something that others would accept. She was going to ruin that. My reaction to her was loaded with bias and stereotypes.

At the time, I was too shy to resist her appeal, so she was chosen. That day, I went home and complained to my father about this little girl. He quickly reminded me that just a couple of

months earlier I had written a letter to the editor about equality. I got it and, for the first time I can remember, I was aware of my own contradictory thoughts and feelings, some of them based on personal insecurity.

Italian immigrants, and other immigrants from southern and eastern European countries, were subject to stereotype, abuse, and discrimination. Anzia Yesierska comes to mind: A Jewish woman who arrived from Poland as an adolescent and found herself robbed of dignity, assumed unintelligent, and with nothing to give. Later, in her book *Hungry Hearts*, she wrote: "I got grand things in me and America won't let me give nothing." The US holds a high-interest mortgage on the hope, desire, aspiration, and access of immigrant people, and to some, offers no mortgage at all.

But Italian and other immigrants of the early 1900s became whiter and whiter over the course of the 20th century. And, as this happened, as though their tiny foothold was threatened by newcomers, these early 20th century immigrants were often unwilling to open generous arms and welcome to newly arrived immigrants from central and south America. For example, the same year my father showed me my own contradictory thinking, I heard him at a meeting argue that ethnic churches in Lawrence should stay the Italian, French, Polish, Lebanese, and Irish churches that they were, and people from Spanish speaking places should start their own churches. People are complex and contradictory beings. Attitudes, beliefs, and values are sometimes based on greed and indifference and other times based on perceived threats that come out in distorted ways from our personal life history and experience. We understand the world through the unique a lens of our own lives: As the philosopher Gadamer says, "All understanding is self-understanding."

As a brilliant, prescient, compassionate leader, Dr. Martin Luther King gave us wise counsel that continues to be essential and relevant. In 1967, he holed up on a writing retreat in Jamaica and, months before he was assassinated, wrote his final book: *Where do we go from here? Chaos or community?* 50 years later this question resonates with more urgency than ever. He called for a revolution of values and wrote: "Whites, it must frankly be said, are not putting in a similar mass effort to reeducate themselves out of their racial ignorance."

And then goes on to write:

A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look at thousands of working people displaced from their jobs with reduced incomes... while the profits of the employers remain intact and say: "This is not just." It will look across the oceans and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America and say: "This is not just." The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: "This way of settling differences is not just."

Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.

Let me close with these questions:

- How can we live in a way that engages with others in a quest for a revolution of values? To educate ourselves out of racial ignorance?
- Do we start with common areas or areas of difference? Can we hold both possibilities – what is common and what is distinct in our experience as human beings?
- James Baldwin said: “The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.” How can we look again at our daily interactions and first ask the questions that have been hidden in the answers? How can we wake up and stay awake? Act and speak with as much honesty and authenticity as we can at this point in our lives?
- How do we seek to understand, commit, take responsibility for our own racism, knowing our work will be flawed, we will fail, but we will get better at it. The alternative of doing nothing out of guilt or fear of failing is not an option.

Essential, I think, is our way of being, acting, and understanding as mentors, allies, and guides, with adolescents and young adults. How can we offer alternatives to the seduction of materialism and the all-consuming compulsion of social media with its constant self- and other judgment and support their natural inclination toward altruism, justice, and search for truth?

How can we instill in *ourselves*, in each other, and in our younger comrades a sense that we are “made for these times?” Justin Zoradi, social entrepreneur and author, in *Made for these times*, wrote:

If you’ve heard the faint sound in the distance, or seen the cat scratching outside your door, now is the time to pay attention. I’m sure it will come to you in your own way, but you need to understand something: you’ve been made for these times. And you are not alone. It might be your background, your experiences, your faith, even your deepest sadness that has brought you here. I promise, God is up to something in you. And it is good.

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