

Are you a white ally who hates racism but doesn't know what to do about it?

A close friend asked me to write about what a “lazy liberal”, whose heart aches for the marginalized in our St. Louis community, can do to show support for racial equality. She wanted to know whether the only way to get involved was to demonstrate in the streets. She acknowledged the reticence of many privileged people to take to the streets, whether that stemmed from fear, confusion, apathy, discomfort or something else. My response is that joining the protest movement is not the only way to show support but it is the only way I know to actually be supportive. First, ask yourself, do I want to SHOW support or do I want to BE SUPPORTIVE?

How to be a good white ally: a short anecdote illustrating my point

At the funeral of my first husband the people closest to me were there for me in every way possible. You expect people who love you to be by your side. When you really feel part of the human race is when an acquaintance or stranger goes out of their way to support you. The support from people I didn't expect was the most impactful during that time of grief. OU Law Professor Peter Kutner hadn't seen my first husband for twenty years. When the Professor heard of David's death, he showed up at the funeral. That's all. He didn't have anything particularly poignant to say, he just showed up. That simple gesture reinforced the worth of David's life and buoyed me. Of course I gravitate towards the cynically depressive when forgetting to be grateful, but I need only remember the kindness of strangers to pull me out of the abyss.

This is a pivotal moment in history. It is not the time for polite fundraising or bake sales. While those activities can help short-term needs, they don't address the fundamental problem that too many people in our society are undervalued as human beings. Those things don't contribute to different sectors of society understanding each other. What is happening in our community cannot be meaningfully addressed through hands-off philanthropy that propagates separateness and serves to assuage white guilt. Now is the time. Now is when we show our children that we don't want them to enjoy things other children don't because of their skin color. Now is the time to build our community by being out in our community.

“Taking to the streets” can take different forms

Stepping into their shoes: Imagine 300 privileged people walking silently through the streets of Clayton holding signs of solidarity with tape across their mouths that reads, “Silence is complicity”. Would the haters then be able to credibly call all protesters “thugs”? Would the police react in the same aggressive way they have to the mostly black protesters for the last several months? Would neighborhood vigilantes walk alongside to intimidate and discourage demonstrators from destroying property? (It didn’t occur to me to destroy property until you told me I shouldn’t!) Will paranoid motorists draw their guns and try to run mostly white protesters off the road? It’s different in the streets. You are vulnerable, and with that vulnerability comes strength.

It is not disrespectful to people in uniform to peacefully demonstrate for what we know is right. This is not about whether you believe Mike Brown’s supporters’ version of Michael’s death or Officer Darren Wilson. It is about systemic inequality and the double standard of justice that incarcerates, impoverishes and kills people based on their skin color.

With your checkbook: Imagine one night regularly orchestrated by folks in Ladue or Chesterfield to shop and/or dine in local minority-owned Ferguson businesses to help the Ferguson economy and mix with different people with backgrounds foreign to their own.

By joining in a protest in progress: Imagine if the Mall Santa on Black Friday got down on the floor in the “die-in” with protesters at the Galleria. What if that simple gesture inspired shoppers in the crowd to play dead too. Everyone, in that moment, putting themselves out there, in solidarity. I promise you it would feel unbelievable. It would be uncomfortable at first, and Santa might even lose his seasonal job, but probably not if everyone joined in. You already know there is power in numbers.

Meaningfully interact with people from different backgrounds: Imagine coming together for an evening of frank discussion where parents talk about what it’s like to raise black and brown children. What would it be like to hear people of color talk openly about their fears and for white people to acknowledge the suffering? What if you walked away from that evening with contact information of someone you met

there and continued the discussion later?

We will not change the tide for racial equality until white people get behind it. Women didn't gain suffrage until men joined the cause. Marriage equality didn't gain traction by staying within the gay community. It took the consciousness of less directly affected people speaking out about their brother, their aunt, their neighbor for those movements to take hold.

Contact me. I'm volunteering to facilitate these or any other ideas you may have. Unless you have sucky ideas. You can keep those to yourself.