

Breaking Old Patterns, Weaving New Ties: Building Alliances Across Cultural Differences

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PEOPLE SOMETIMES REGARD CREATING a more diverse membership as taking energy and time away from the urgency of their issues or the efficiency of their work. It does not occur to them that their understanding is limited and that the perspectives of others is vital for success. Many people ... do not see that creating alliances based on mutual respect reshapes how issues are framed.

Power is the ability to do things. Privilege, protected by power, is access to resources and benefits based on who people are, not what they do. Privilege requires the exploitation of others. Because of this, people talk about the power they don't have, but seldom about the power they do have. No one wants to acknowledge that their comforts are made possible by the suffering of others. As a consequence, a cultural amnesia takes over. Mainstream culture portrays history through images that protect the virtues of the "American Dream." Genocide of Native peoples is reduced to cowboy and Indian movies. Slavery is heroically resolved by the Civil War. The stealing of Northern Mexico is called "settling the West." Abuse of Chinese and Japanese laborers and legal restrictions on their citizenship are never mentioned.

Most citizens would rather forget all of this. When they are reminded, they tell themselves that each episode is an exception. But when all of these atrocities are taken together, people are forced to acknowledge that the wealth of our country was built on the backs of all those whom mainstream culture disrespects: all women, men of color, the sweat of working people. This denial continues today.

The privileged control access to resources. They define social and economic reality. Their position is maintained through the creation of assumptions that provide the basis for what our society considers "normal and natural." Privilege defines mainstream culture; all others are considered "subcultures." Privilege claims "majority" status, while all others are minorities. ... Privilege sets the boundaries for what is seen as acceptable and unacceptable, what is valued and what is ignored. To dismantle privilege then, requires more than a redistribution of resources. It necessitates unraveling the cultural climate that perpetuates it.

Privilege is invisible to those who have it. [The privileged] regard their material comforts as the result of their own accomplishments. They are oblivious to the social relationships which make these comforts possible. Privilege operates like the spikes that stick up from the driveway exit or a parking lot. You can't miss them when you are driving the wrong way, but if you are driving the right way, they are hardly noticeable.

Further, those with privilege fail to recognize that not only are there spikes in the road, *they* are the ones who have placed the spikes there and control them. *They* decide who can pass. Part of designing a system to work successfully in one's own interests is to obscure how it works against the interests of others.

Our society's norms protect privilege. The more privilege a person has the more they inherit a self-image of competence, authority, and legitimacy. They are socialized to feel entitled to what they have.

Those of us who were socialized with privilege tend to take our own ideas more seriously: we are the first to speak; we interrupt others; we are comfortable talking for long periods of time; we confuse technical skills with leadership abilities. These patterns keep others locked out, invisible, and feeling inappropriate. Women, men of color, working-class, and poor people are forced to accommodate their perspectives and actions in order to gain any measure of acceptance. They know that if they are to be taken seriously, they too must be cool, calm, and collected, and confine their concerns to what those with privilege think is important. Their full experience and contributions are never brought out. The white, male, heterosexual, middle-class monoculture remains untouched and unchanged. To be "let in," they must become mere tokens, tolerated only as long as they leave their feelings, perspectives, and heritage behind.

When those with privilege begin to look at what is taken for granted and who pays the price, often their first reaction is to feel guilty. Guilt gives rise both to self-hatred on the one hand, and to romanticizing the oppressed on the other. In this dynamic, the oppressed are always right--they can do no wrong--and conversely, the privileged are always wrong and can do no right. Thus, the initial recognition of injustice often moves people from the place of denying the humanity of others to denying their own humanity.

Guilt creates an atmosphere in which people with a heritage of oppression are reluctant to reveal their experience. They do not want to have to deal with the defensiveness that invariably emerges. This perpetuates a state of ignorance among those with privilege, maintaining the narrow norm. In this atmosphere, relationships based on principle, mutual respect, support, and accountability are impossible.

Guilt and self-hatred are automatic reactions in people who have been stripped of any sense of connection to their heritage. To justify and protect privilege, categories are created for those who qualify for it and those who don't. "White" has been made the great melting pot for people of European descent. People from distinct and separate cultures have all been poured into the pot, rising to the top of society through the process of having their heritage boiled away. All that is left to identify with is how far up one has risen. ... *"White" is solely an identity of privilege.* ... Principled people of European descent are faced with feelings of isolation and illegitimacy. The heritage from which they can take pride is gone, replaced only with privileges they know have been made possible through genocide and exploitation. The reduction of history to the victimization of the oppressed and the vilification of the privileged makes it impossible to draw upon the past as a source of pride, inspiration, and sustenance.

Effective alliances required genuine and sustained support for [oppressed] people working on issues as *they* define them. By engaging with people on their own terms in contexts and practices *they* have created, people of conscience can learn new ways of looking at their own work and new understandings of the world. *Instead of asking, "How do we get 'them' to join us?" we should ask, "What do we need to do to join 'them'?"*

Genuine and sustained support isn't as easy as it sounds. The guilt endemic to the middle-class have often lead to a twisted form of support characterized by unthinking and mindless following. What is needed for middle-class people, especially those of European descent, to enter these relationships with a clear sense of respect for themselves and their own heritage. For most people, this involves reclaiming what has been stripped away from them in the process of becoming middle-class, as well as rediscovering the democratic traditions in which they can take pride. Self-respect and trust go hand in hand.

Alliances, like all relationships, begin with self-respect and an appreciation of what we offer one another. They cannot be built by anyone who thinks they are helping others solve their problems, an attitude which is destructive to everyone's humanity. Guilt prevents us from seeing

our own strengths and it clouds judgment. It comes from a shallow understanding of oppression, which assumes that only the oppressed are dehumanized. Oppression hurts everyone, for it also distorts the humanity of those who maintain control and power.

In any setting where members of different groups try to work together, uncomfortable feelings, anger, mistakes, and great difficulty are bound to arise in sorting out what is at the root of any particular problem. It's important to learn about one another so that we become sensitive to the many realities in which people live, avoiding the dynamics that hold domination in place despite our best intentions.

People in dominated groups have always known about their dominators. Survival often depends upon not making a mistake that would upset those who control the resources needed to survive. As a result, those on the outside have a much clearer understanding of those in the inside than those on the inside have about the experiences and sensitivities of outsiders. The more privileged people are, the more ignorant they are likely to be of the experience of others. In whatever ways we each have privilege, we need to educate ourselves about the history, culture, struggle, and everyday obstacles that must be contended with by people different from ourselves. Otherwise, those experiences remain invisible.

All of us need to become aware of our assumptions that support our own power and privilege, and how these distort our view of the contributions, capabilities, and options of others. These assumptions are cultivated in countless ways by the dominant culture. By understanding the particularity of the many different oppressions in this society, we begin to see how much our day-to-day interactions are fraught with divisiveness and the perpetuation of domination. For example, it is not uncommon to hear people talk about Native Americans in the past tense, refer to their clothing as costumes, or call their religions primitive. Whenever people speak of the family, they assume heterosexuality. A person with a physical disability is treated as if she/he is an object of pity, incapable in areas totally unrelated to the particular disability. Needless to say, each of these instances distorts the experiences of whole groups of people. If any members of these groups are present, chances are they won't stick around for long.

As people become aware of the multiple realities hidden by the dominant culture, it becomes increasingly impossible to remain silent. They begin to point out to others perspectives which have been made invisible. When these undercurrents are named--from interpretations of history, to ways of doing everyday things, to access to resources--what has previously been left unsaid becomes a part of the reality with which everyone grapples. ...

When naming of ignored realities is done by someone with privilege, it helps avoid provoking the dynamics of guilt and blame. For example, when the content of what has been silent is *named*, more often than not, people begin to share thoughts which they have previously censored.

When going against the tide and naming the invisible currents, one tends to feel disruptive, out of order, and inappropriate--not "nice." The power of naming breaks the taboo. Differences are explored, not denied. Choices can be made collectively based on a vastly expanded understanding of what is taking place. Naming opens reality and makes room for our varied experiences. We are all forced to deal with the impact of our actions. ...

If we are to create a life-affirming society, we need to take a stand against domination and accommodation wherever we are. The silence that eats away at our humanity grips us while standing in lines, or while overhearing casual remarks by strangers and friends. We will restore our integrity only when we break the tyranny of silence and speak up in these situations which our culture teaches us to endure or ignore. When we refuse to remain silent in all public, family, and community settings, we transform the dehumanizing climate on which institutional abuse depends. ...

We can create a new culture in which we care for one another and are accountable to each other, if we focus on principles of social and ecological justice as the basis for our choices. As people of conscience we need to develop strategies and tactics that enable us to make judgments about ideas and actions based upon their *impact*. The standards of evaluating decisions we should use are those that address whose interests are served, who benefits, what is gained and what is lost. ...

We suggest the following framework for looking critically at consequences. Ask:

* What resources are used--whose labor and what raw materials make the situation possible? Are the exchanges fair--does everyone equally benefit? What is the impact on the Earth? * Who has the power? Ownership, decision-making, information, influence ...? * Who establishes policy? Who is accountable to it?

Life-affirming communities and organizations can only be sustained when we trust and support one another. This is only possible when we are mutually accountable, so we recommend that people consciously adopt the following principles as the foundation for all shared activity. As we make these principles an integral part of our relationships, we break old patterns and weave new ties.

* We have all been wounded by a society that continues to be dependent on relations of exploitation and domination. Collectively, we support one another to transform attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate patterns of domination and compliance. * The humanity and integrity of all peoples and individuals are to be respected. * All humans are social beings. Individual well-being depends on collective well-being. * Everyone gains fulfillment through harmonizing with nature. * Everyone has intelligence and sensitivity and is in a continual process of learning. * Everyone is fulfilled through creative activity. * Everyone has something to contribute. * Everyone wants to create relations of mutual care and respect. * Our collective well-being depends on honoring nature.

If any of these principles are violated, whatever has been built will be vulnerable. So when antagonisms emerge, we need to find where things have gone awry and then to restore and reaffirm these basic ways of being together. For these principles to thrive we have to overcome the patterns of competition and domination.

Margo Adair and Sharon Howell offer organizational consulting and development for intentional communities and other organizations focusing on healing issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Their pamphlets Breaking Old Patterns, Weaving New Ties: Alliance Building (30 pp., \$6); From Leadership to Empowerment (Adair); The Subjective Side of Politics (Adair & Howell); Facilitation Skills to Draw Out Diversity (Adair and Howell), and the book Working Inside Out: Tools for Change (Adair) (Wingbow, 1984) are available from Tools for Change, PO Box 1414-C1, San Francisco, CA 94114. Phone and FAX: 800-99TOOLS or 415-861-6347. Both women are of European descent: Margo is from an upper-middle-class academic family; Sharon is from a working-class mining town.