

White Shame Isn't Helpful

Self-denigration won't produce justice. Solidarity requires love — of the other and oneself.



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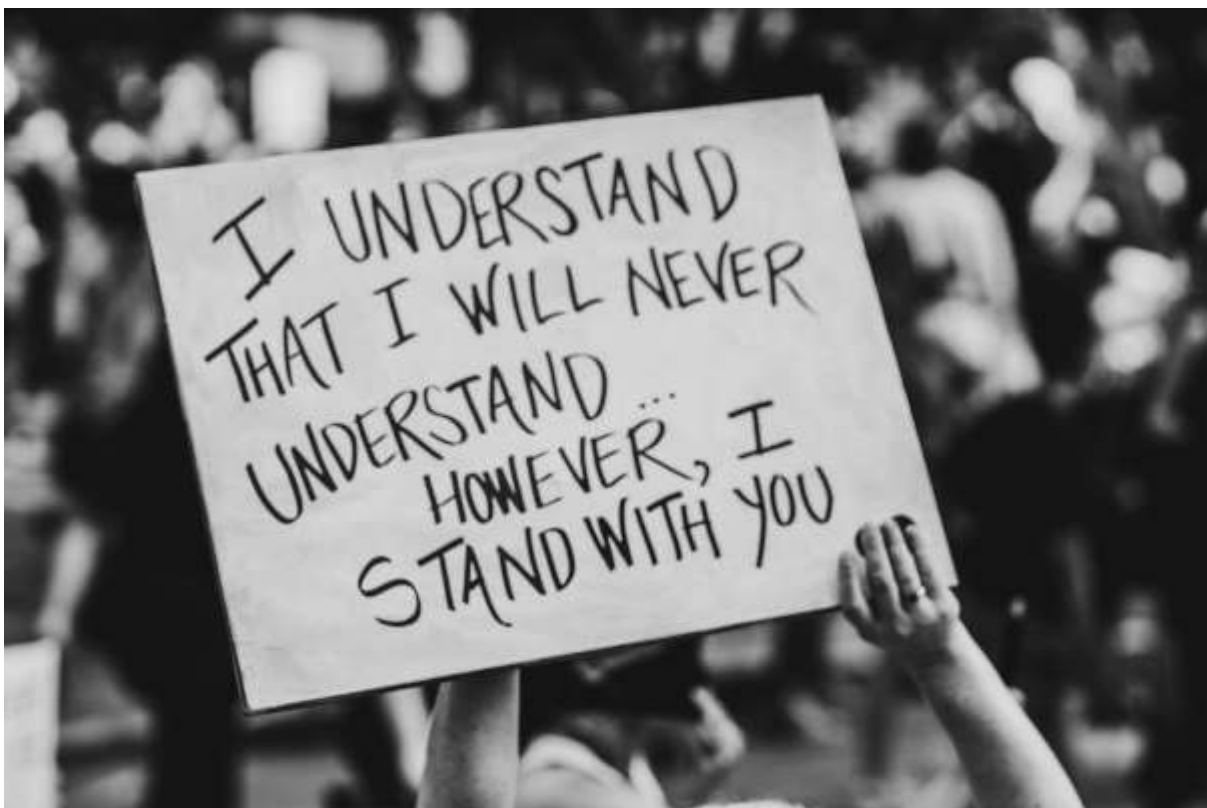


Photo by [Zoe VandeWater](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Consider, for a second, the picture above. Think about the sign held by the protester in this photo — taken at a Black Lives Matter rally last year — and ask yourself: what is its purpose? For whom is it being displayed?

Is it aimed at the law enforcement officials whose racially-disproportionate use of force this person is ostensibly there to protest? Clearly not.

Is it aimed at the lawmakers to whom its carrier might direct their petition for redress of Black grievance, as they fight to shift funding from policing to more preventative public safety mechanisms? Again, no.

There is only one audience for whom these acts of self-deprecation are intended. Those who made signs like this and carried them — and they were commonplace at last year's demonstrations — did

so for the eyes of Black people. And they did so because, for some reason, they have decided that opening a confessional vein and acknowledging their ignorance is “doing the work,” or at least displaying the humility necessary to begin the doing of it.

So we get signs like this, or folks who publicly announce their desire to be quiet and just listen to Black people for a while, even though broadcasting your plan to be quiet is sort of a violation of said plan. And even though it somewhat complicates the whole “White Silence is Violence” thing. But hey, at least it’s deferential or something to that effect.

I’m going to say some things now — I suspect I already have — which might get me in trouble with certain corners of the anti-racist community. But as someone immersed in this movement for more than 30 years, and having searched high and low while yet failing to locate even a solitary fuck I might manage to give before saying it, here goes:

This self-flagellating bullshit has to stop.

Seriously, this cowering, let-me-apologize-for-taking-up-space-on-the-planet silliness isn’t what Black folks have told us anti-racist allyship looks like. Just like it isn’t Black folks—at least not any significant number of them — who demand we raise our fists at some outdoor cafe to show how down we are as they pass by in protest or who encourage berating those who don’t do as instructed. It’s primarily white wanna-be-radicals who do that kind of thing, caught up in a never-ending spiral of racial misanthropy, from which they seek deliverance in as much performative rage as is humanly possible.

Enough.

Perhaps it will come as a shock to some, but most Black people have little interest in hearing us apologize for our ignorance or run down a checklist of our privileges and whine about how that list makes us feel. Black people know this shit isn’t personal, it’s business, by which I mean, they know the difference between white *people* and whiteness as a social concept — and which of these is the real problem. It’s what Dick Gregory was getting at when he used to say white is not a kind of person, but a state of mind.

White people might think the big problems are our own fragility, our unwillingness to check our privilege, and our implicit biases. Black folks tend to know better. They realize that however real these things are, the primary issue is an edifice of inequity built on a crooked foundation of unjust history. That structure is then upheld by a scaffolding of everyday institutional practices that perpetuate racial unfairness irrespective of the godness of white individuals within those institutions. From old boy’s networks that exclude them from job opportunities to standardized tests absent standardized resources to a law enforcement structure rooted in protecting the haves and controlling the have-nots, it is these systems that injure. Yes, people run systems, but systems shape people — and *misshape* them.

On one level, I get it. When you first discover the injustices of the world and come to see that those have, in various ways, elevated you and others like you, it is nothing if not human to experience guilt. That we go to that place, at least initially, is a sign of our conscience working as it should. But while guilt may be a decent vacation destination on the road to real allyship, it’s a pretty lousy place to construct one’s permanent home.

After all, the goal of shame, as any therapist can tell you, is to be released. And what better way to excise it than by simply running from the thing causing its presence? In which case, a push for allyship that rests its hopes on white people fighting for justice because injustice makes us feel shitty

about ourselves is destined to fail. After a while, whites whose anti-racism has been marinated in shame will seek release from that emotion. And there are only two ways to obtain it: either by falling away quietly from the fight or by turning decisively against those we decide to blame for making us feel that way — namely, persons who are still in the struggle.

If we remain stuck in guilt and self-deprecation, we will withdraw from engaging with our people about the issue of racism. Our hostility to white supremacy and the oppressive logic of whiteness will bleed over into contempt for persons *called* white, in a way that will weaken our ability and even desire to build with them. You cannot organize people you despise. And the work of white anti-racists is to organize our people, not with woke-scolding lectures borrowed from some grad school seminar, but with heartfelt explorations of the cost of injustice to us all and the society we share.

We need less guilt and shame and more indignation; indignation at a society that promised us liberty and justice for all as a national birthright and yet defaulted on that promise from day one, thereby diminishing the lives we *all* could have by marginalizing some while elevating others.

And this calls forth an additional problem with the sign in the photo above: by suggesting whites are standing “with” Black people, we signal that racism is *their* problem, but one that we are willing to help them with anyway. It is a sentiment dripping with the language of charity as much as genuine solidarity. If whites saw racial inequity and injustice as evils that damage the entire society (including us), we would think of this matter differently, and no doubt more productively. We would be standing not simply to save others or for *their* benefit but also on our own behalf.

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Those white anti-racists in history who made meaningful contributions to the struggle against enslavement and segregation did not ask permission to engage their consciences. They did not lose sleep worrying about whether sharing their thoughts on racial injustice with colleagues, friends, and family might “re-center” their white voices. And they certainly didn’t waste valuable time debating whether to call themselves allies or co-conspirators or accomplices or whatever the hell someone thinks is a better, “less problematic” term. They just *did the work*. Because they understood their lives, or at least their souls, depended on it. And because labels are nouns, of which we have plenty, while what we lack are verbs.

John Brown didn’t apologize for being white or even for what whiteness had come to mean in America. He and his comrades fought to abolish its most sinister iteration because they felt a responsibility to do so, not guilt for enslavement’s existence. Bob and Dottie Zellner, Virginia Foster Durr, Anne and Carl Braden, and Joan Trumpauer Mulholland, among others, neither wallowed in shame for the reality of anti-Black oppression nor felt the need to discuss how stupid they were for not having recognized it from the time they emerged from the womb. They simply fought to change it as moral equals, unwilling to be defined by the strictures of their society.

Yes, these folks took direction from Black people — those leading the movement and organizing its strategies. But today, in a movement that seeks to be largely leaderless, waiting for directions can become an excuse for inaction. To whom are you looking? Which author? Which influencer? Which

voices? It is one thing to say “listen to Black people,” but quite another to specify which Black people you’re speaking of, and why, since there are 42 million of them in this country, they don’t all agree, and they are most definitely not all on Twitter.

Sometimes you just have to take a risk and do something, even if it hasn’t been pre-approved by whatever local leaders of color you look to for guidance. Accountability is important, but when it becomes a recipe for paralysis, it is useless — a term of radical art with no artists around to apply it to the canvas of real life. So, struggle with your people — with our people — not out of shame or guilt but out of a sincere belief that persons called white can do better and be better because deep down, we *are better* than what this society has wrought from us.

Folks of color need us to love ourselves enough to believe that we, too, deserve a better society and that we have something meaningful to gain from a more just nation. Because they know how impossible justice will be until that love is present in our lives. As James Baldwin tried to explain over a half-century ago:

White people...have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this...the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.

As for that sign carrier above and others like them, please remember that our ignorance is not something about which we should beat ourselves up. It is the society that structured our obliviousness, after all. It was the schools that subsidized it and rewarded it. That’s a *system* problem. Treat it as such.

I know it’s hard, and I have struggled with it too. But it is becoming increasingly obvious to me that we must strive to be soft on people (including ourselves) and hard on systems. The system deserves to be battered. But people need to be *bettered*. And we won’t be unless we care enough about ourselves to find a new way of living in this skin; and unless we believe that we are worthy of that new and better way of life.