

Be an ally: Unlearn racism, work against it

BY PAUL BERGER

I HEARD a story once of a taxi queue at the airport. When the woman at the front said she was going to Wequedong Lodge, the taxi driver instead invited the next person in line to get in. That person stepped backwards. So did the next few people in line. They were acting as allies.

In the simplest sense, an ally is someone who actively supports others in a struggle, be it against racism, sexism, sizeism, homophobia, or other oppressions. In the taxi example, people spontaneously acted to send a message that discrimination is not OK.

Doing something as a white person to resist a racist comment or action may not be easy since most of us have been socialized to fear conflict, but it may still be the easiest way of being an ally.

In her excellent book *Becoming an Ally*, Anne Bishop addresses a bigger challenge — unlearning racism and working to change society to end privilege based on race.

That's hard. Many white people do not think



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Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

they are racist. But as Bishop points out, in a world structured to privilege white people, claiming not to be racist is meaningless. We have grown up “marinated” in oppressive attitudes and we benefit from racism whether we feel racist or not.

Many white people deny that racism is a problem. For example, they may claim that it

only happened in the past or that only a few people are racist. Others feel guilty and do nothing. Some take responsibility and work for change. They know racism is with us in many forms.

It is with us in the treaties broken by the Crown and in schools that teach little or nothing about this history and present. It is with us in the underfunding of First Nations schools, in stereotyping, in hurtful comments, and in letters to the editor. It is with us in assault with weapons — eggs or spoons thrown out of car windows. It is with us in hiring and housing, in policing and courtrooms, and in missing and murdered indigenous women.

IF you are white and you are still reading, you probably want to help change things — to not be complicit in this system of harm — to be an ally. There is much to do, but Bishop suggests starting with learning, and learning by listening. White people do not often listen to the people we oppress. That is part of the oppression.

We need to learn everything we can about

racism, and keep learning. It is our responsibility to learn, not the responsibility of those we are oppressing. And we need to act for change. There is no being an ally and no anti-racism without action.

The action could be talking to a friend, signing a petition, going to a rally, or sharing anti-racist news on social media. It could be telling your co-worker that you are uncomfortable with a joke, teaching your class about the treaties, or putting a “Status Cards Welcome” sign on your business and making sure employees honour it. It could be disabling the comments section on your online newsfeed after stories that usually draw racist responses. We need a thousand individual actions and we need to work together to understand and change systems of privilege and discrimination.

Allies know, ultimately, that racism is about us. They join in the work to stop it.

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