Becoming an Ally

Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People

Third Edition

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Chapter Eight

Step 5
Becoming an Ally

In the early 1990s, I co-led a workshop called "Unlearning Racism" with Valerie Carvery, a friend and colleague who is African-Nova Scotian.[1] When you begin to teach something, you find out what you do not know. This workshop was truly a learning adventure for me.

Leading anti-racist education is akin to tip-toeing through a mine field. Sometimes we could feel the group carefully skirting a possible blowup; at other times, we stepped on the mine. When this happened, there was an angry backlash from some white participants. We conducted the workshop five times before we made it all the way through without the process being derailed by conflict.

Following one of our most explosive workshops, we began to list the different reactions of the white participants to this process of unlearning racism. Later, the descriptions began to fit into three rough groups: 1) the "backlashers," who deny the existence of racism while making racist statements and expressing outrage that they are forced to listen to stories of racism; 2) the "guilty," who personalize the issue and become defensive and paralyzed; and 3) the "learners" or "allies," who use any opportunity to learn more and then act on what they learn.

Some of the people who took part in our workshop did so because they belonged to an organization that contracted us to lead it, but most came voluntarily as individuals, out of their own interest and concern. As a result, despite saying to myself that my sample was skewed, on some level I was under the impression that quite a large proportion of the population is willing and able to learn to be allies.

Years later, however, I was engaged to develop and teach a mandatory one-day workshop on employment equity for provincial civil servants. Teaching people who were forced to be present was a far more gruelling experience.

Going through my notes from my five years of teaching mandatory equity classes, I estimate that approximately 5000 individuals attended these courses. In roughly one out of five sessions, there was enough blatant, nasty bigotry to domi-

nate the tone for at least part, and sometimes all, of the day. Usually one group was chosen as the target, often depending on the work done by the participants. If the unit in question dealt with low-income people as part of their work, poor bashing would be the order of the day. If their work involved natural resources, Aboriginal people became the target. Responsibility for prisons and schools brought out bigotry against both Mi'qmaw and African-Nova Scotian people. Attacks on women and LGBT people could pop up anywhere. In two or three sessions each year these appalling attitudes came from a majority of participants, but more often they were expressed by a vocal minority confident that they had the right to dominate everyone's experience of the day. Sometimes it was clear that the bigotry was a game played to derail the session and test the limits of the teacher. Sometimes participants who are members of the groups under attack told me during breaks, at lunchtime or after the session how frustrated, frightened and angry they felt. Many more must have felt the same but kept it to themselves. In some cases the aggressive negativity appeared to be intended as a threat to the minority employees.

Out of the 5000 or so people I taught during that five-year contract, I can literally count on one hand the number of people — five individuals — who had an understanding of the structural nature of oppression and what it means to be an ally.

A large majority of the people I met during these courses were well-meaning but in active denial that any form of oppression still exists. If they understood that some aspects of oppression persist, they tended to think it can be dealt with quickly and easily by education and good intentions, and they certainly did not see themselves as perpetrators. I began to distinguish between this group and the outright bigots, dividing the people I formerly thought of as "backlashers" into "backlashers" and "deniers." The two groups require a different teaching approach, which I discuss in Chapter 9.

What "backlashers" do is repeat the worst stereotypes about oppressed groups. Theft, dishonesty, corruption, laziness, greed, manipulation, whining, excuses, over-sensitivity, "playing the race card," domination of the oppressor group, sexual perversion and violence are declared to be "just the truth." If contradicted, this group insist that they've experienced it personally or know someone who did.

Deniers say things like: "That all happened a long time ago," "I've never hurt anyone different from me," "It's a theoretical problem," "I feel silenced by Black/gay/etc. people; I can't say anything right," "My brother worked in Jamaica/a gay bar/the North End and said there it's the other way around," "Women/Black people/gays/etc. treat men/white people/straight people/etc. worse than the other way around" (or "Women/Black people/gays/etc. treat each other worse than men/white people/straight people/etc. treat them"), "You're talking about a few bad apples; don't blame the whole barrel," "Don't jump on me, I was just asking a question," "It's just human nature to discriminate against someone who's different," "If only they didn't ..." "Some of my best friends are Black/gay/poor/etc.," and above all, "I'm not racist/sexist/heterosexist/ableist/etc."

The two groups' statements sometimes overlap, but there is a difference in the level of anger and aggression. "Backlashers" try to commandeer the session and dominate the conversation. They are out to attack marginalized group members, present or not, the teacher, and anyone who defends either. When they discover they cannot get away with direct attacks, they try to disrupt the session. Favourite tactics are texting on their cellphone, resisting participation with surly silence, carrying on side conversations, organizing games such as tic tac toe out of the teacher's line of vision, vandalizing flipcharts and handouts, deliberately breaking the rules or cheating during simulation exercises, repeating the same point over and over again whatever the explanation or response, inserting nasty comments just quietly enough that the teacher can't hear and laughing. When the teacher asks to have the comment repeated, they will say something like, "You don't want to know," followed by another laugh. A great deal of time is wasted in boundary-setting and, even if they grudgingly respect the limits teacher sets, the atmosphere of the session becomes negative.

The deniers can become angry but not to the same degree. Often they are more confused or frustrated. Many are open enough to explore new information in a curious, or at least honest, way.

Neither group sees the collective, structural aspect of oppression or their own privilege. Both take too little personal responsibility.

The "guilty" also fail to see the collective, structural aspect of oppression but they take on too much personal responsibility. They feel crushed, powerless, unable to move. They sometimes think the person or situation that made them aware of the problem disempowered them and they react with anger. They often seek forgiveness from someone they see as a representative of the oppressed group. Privilege is often invisible to the "guilty" group, too, or if they see it, it just adds to their immobilizing guilt.

"Backlashers" and "deniers" do not understand the meaning of oppression for those who experience it; the "guilty" are all too aware of it, but they are inclined to react as if nothing can be done. "Backlashers" and "deniers" tend to think the current North American model of "democracy" is working and people could solve their problems if they "just pulled themselves up by their bootstraps." The "guilty" also believe there is democracy here and that they, as voters and citizens, have the power. If something is not working, it must be their fault.

Members of the "ally" group, on the other hand, are much more critical of the real power structures of North America and the world. They look at things from a "structural" perspective. They have an understanding of themselves as part of a people or various peoples. They understand that if something is done to another member of their own group, it could just as easily happen to them. For example, they understand that if a woman is raped, it is not because she asked for it, dressed seductively or went where she should not have; it is because she is a woman and it could happen to any woman. Likewise, "allies" understand that, as part of various

Reactions of the Privileged to the Oppressed

	Backlash	Denial	Guilty	Ally
Underlying assumption	Like the *status quo*	There's no such thing or, if there is, I'm not part of it.	We've done terrible things to other people and must make up for it.	Our society is structured around oppression.
Purpose	Preserve the *status quo*	Deny there's a problem	Comfort, friendship, forgiveness	Personal/institutional/societal transformation
Whose problem?	Oppressed	What problem?	Mine	All of us, especially those who have power and privilege
Who has power?	Whoever is strong and smart enough to get it	Democracy, therefore everyone does	Democracy, therefore I do	A small elite
Who has privilege?	No such thing, society functions on the basis of merit	No such thing, society functions on the basis of merit	I do, and I feel terrible about it. I try not to exercise it.	Those on the dominant side of any form of oppression.
Attitude to own oppression	No such thing, society functions on the basis of merit.	No such thing, society functions on the basis of merit.	I'm more/less oppressed (hierarchy of oppression)	Committed to the struggle against it, this struggle is complementary with all others.
Important question	What do these people want, anyway?	What problem?	Will they see me as . . .?	Of course we're all racist/sexist. . .; what can we do to change it?
Dominant emotions	Anger when *status quo* disrupted	Puzzlement/surprise	Anger/guilt/helplessness	Acceptance of struggle with all the emotions involved
Reaction to allegations	Action against oppressed to restore *status quo*	Denial	Guilt	Take allegations seriously, listen, learn
Typical statements	Insist on truth of negative stereotypes	"That was a long time ago." "I feel silenced." "Sometimes it's the other way around." "I'm not . . ." "Some of my best friends are . . ."	"You can trust me." "I need you to forgive me." "I'll do whatever you want me to."	"What's your experience of oppression?" "I don't expect you to trust me." "What can we do to change this?"

oppressor groups (white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle or above in the class structure) they did not individually bring the situation about and they cannot just reach out with goodwill and solve it. They understand that they must act with others to contribute to change. They believe that to do nothing is to reinforce the *status quo*; if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem. Many "allies" still drive themselves too hard and try to do too much, but they do understand that they are part of something much larger and older than they are. They take responsibility for helping to solve problems of historical injustice without taking on individual guilt. Most look for what they can do, with others, in a strategic way and try to accept their limitations beyond that.

A structural understanding of power relationships is rare in our society. The political/economic/ideological system that keeps power in a few hands has been very successful in developing methods of childrearing and education that ensure North Americans do not understand power and how it works.[2] Those who do understand have usually worked their way to their insights through their own experience, reflection and efforts to work towards social change.

"Allies" are distinguished by the following characteristics:

- their sense of connection with all other people;
- their grasp of the concept of social structures and collective responsibility;
- their lack of an individualistic stance and ego, although they have a strong sense of self, perhaps *because* they have a strong sense of self;
- their sense of process and change;
- their understanding of their own process of learning;
- their realistic sense of their own power;
- their grasp of "power-with" as an alternative to "power-over";
- their honesty, openness and lack of shame about their own limitations;
- their knowledge and sense of history;
- their acceptance of struggle;
- their understanding that good intentions do not matter if there is no action against oppression; and
- their knowledge of their own roots.

These are the characteristics of allies; they are also characteristics that mark people who are well advanced in their own liberation process.

Because of the connection I see between the experience of powerlessness and the need to find safety through controlling others, I believe that an experience of oppression is necessary for a person to learn to be an oppressor. Margaret Green's account of her anti-racism therapy groups strongly supports this connection. She tells a story about a woman working on her difficulty welcoming new immigrants who came to the advice centre where she worked:

> I suggested she try welcoming me. As a Jew and a foreigner I could never

> have enough of it, I explained, and besides, no one had ever welcomed me to England anyway. She tried. She was extremely timid and tentative. I asked if she had ever been made to feel welcome. She burst into tears; no, of course she hadn't. There was no warmth for her in her family; she had always felt unwanted. (1987: 194)

After this and several other examples, Green concludes: "One of my assumptions is that no one would ever willingly choose to take on the role of oppressor if they themselves had not been systematically oppressed" (195).

Because of my observation that people who approach other oppressed people as allies are those who are involved in their own process of liberation from oppression, I also believe that one must be in the process of liberation from one's own oppression to become an ally in another's liberation. Green's experience again supports mine. She says:

> You cannot be proud of other cultures and delight in their richness if you are not proud of your own. By "proud" I don't mean the defensiveness which hides feelings of shame and inferiority and I don't mean that one doesn't question certain aspects of one's culture. A sense of one's own rich roots is however essential if one is to meet on an equal level with a person from a different background. (196)

I don't mean to suggest that everyone who experiences oppression becomes an oppressor and everyone engaged in their own liberation becomes an ally. Far from it. What I am saying is that I don't believe it is possible to become an oppressor without experiencing oppression nor become an ally without being involved in your own experience of liberation.

Learning about Yourself as an Oppressor

The process of learning about your own oppression is different from learning about yourself as an oppressor. The former process clearly has experience as a base; it is a transition from experience to consciousness through reflection.

When learning to see yourself as an oppressor, the experience is by definition hidden from you, because part of the process of becoming a member of an oppressor group is to be cut off from the ability to identify with the experience of the oppressed. It is this lack of empathy, this denial that anyone is hurt, that makes oppression possible. When the oppression is not part of your own experience, you can only understand it through hearing others describe their experiences, along with a process of analysis, imagination and drawing parallels.

Many people resist beginning the process of becoming an ally because it is so difficult and painful. Is it more difficult and painful than your own liberation? I think so. I have found it much harder to understand and accept myself in my oppressor roles than in those where I am the oppressed.

The righteous anger of understanding one's own oppression releases a great deal of energy and propels the process forward. Facing fear often releases energy and produces a major shot, first of euphoria, then of good, solid self-confidence. The process of bonding with others dealing with the same oppression creates a deep level of sympathy and understanding, a growing pride in one's recovered identity and a shared language that is as satisfyingly secret as the "pig latin" of childhood.[3] There can be lightning fast communication among women in a room or among lesbians in a room. There is laughter or a flurry of glances, a smile, a comment with a double meaning, and you know "you" all understood and "they" did not.

Coming to understand your identities as an oppressor is often an enervating process. It means being shut out from someone else's secret language; it involves accepting your inheritance of a shameful and evil past. There is guilt, which drains energy. There is always that unsettling knowledge that you cannot see what is going on as clearly as the oppressed group can. The oppressed always know a great deal more about the oppressor than the oppressor knows about the oppressed.

Understanding one's own position as an oppressor, without being completely immobilized, also requires a balance between understanding oneself as an individual and as part of a collective reality. This balance is rare in the culture we live in. Modern Western thinking is extremely individualistic. Our ties to the land and our own history, community and culture have been severed. With so little understanding of ourselves as part of a collective entity, it becomes very difficult to figure out our own responsibility for patterns larger than ourselves.

Failure to understand collective structures leads to what Kate Kirkham calls "overpersonalization." In her article "Teaching About Diversity: Navigating the Emotional Undercurrents," she says:

> Many majority group members do not move quickly or comfortably back and forth between their individual identity and their identity as a member of a racial or gender group in this society. If they do think of themselves as a member of a group, it is often associated with negative emotions: feeling stereotyped or threatened, etc. Therefore, majority group members may enter a discussion less prepared to sort out what is being said about the behavior of numbers of whites (or men) as experienced by others and the impact of their own individual behavior.... When asked to respond to the question of who really is racist and/or sexist, many majority group individuals in my research and teaching experience, assume: "If I didn't intend something as racist or sexist then it is not racist/sexist." In other words, the general criteria they use in testing for racism/sexism is an overpersonalized one. They believe that personal motive determines the presence of racism or sexism in interactions. (1988/89: 51)

How to Become an Ally

Having written that title, I must now admit that I cannot tell anyone exactly how to become an ally. I can, however, use my growing analysis of the process and my experience to offer some guidelines. Most people in our society do not yet see the connections between different forms of oppression or even have a general sense of how oppression works. Therefore, we still find ourselves dealing in most instances with one form of oppression at a time, and in a given setting, we are either in the role of oppressed or ally. I hope these observations will be as useful to you as they have been to me when I find myself in the ally role.

1. It is important to be a worker in your own liberation struggle, whatever it is. Learn, reflect on and understand the patterns and effects of oppression, take action with others, take risks, walk towards your fear to find your power.
2. Try to help members of your own group understand oppression and make the links among different forms of oppression.
3. I cannot overstress the need to listen. Listen and reflect.
4. Remember that everyone in the oppressor group is part of the oppression. It is ridiculous to claim you are not sexist if you are a man or not racist if you are white and so on. No matter how much work you have done on that area of yourself, there is more to be done; the oppressive messages that surround us, unconsciously absorbed, constantly undo some of our efforts. All members of this society grow up surrounded by oppressive attitudes; we are marinated in it. It runs in our veins; it is as invisible to us as the air we breathe. I do not believe anyone raised in Western society can ever claim to have finished ridding themselves completely of their oppressive attitudes. It is an ongoing task, like keeping the dishes clean. In fact, the minute I hear someone claim to be free of the attitudes and actions of a certain oppression (as in "I'm not racist") I know they have barely begun the process. Humility is the mark of someone who has gone a way down the road and has caught a glimpse of just how long the road is.

   There is a parallel here with the principles of the twelve-step addiction recovery process. Just as the twelve-step programs teach that the process of healing from addiction is never finished, so it is with the process of unlearning oppression. A white person never becomes non-racist but is always a "recovering racist," more often referred to as "anti-racist."

   There is another reason members of an oppressor group are always oppressors, no matter how much individual learning we have done: until we change the politics and economics of oppression, we are still "living off the avails."[4] We would not be where we are, doing what we are doing, with the skills and access we have, if we did not have the colour, gender, sexual orientation, appearance, age, class or physical abilities we have. Resources and power continue to come to us because we are members of the dominant group in relation to the particular form of oppression where we seek to be allies.[5] So, until we succeed in making a more humane world, yes, we are racist (or ageist, or classist, or heterosexist and so forth). Understanding this is part of learning to think structurally rather than individually. It is part of avoiding overpersonalization of the issues.[6]
5. Although every member of an oppressor group is an oppressor, this does not make you a "bad" person. Self-esteem does not have to mean distancing yourself from the oppressor role; it can come instead from taking a proud part in the struggle to end oppression. This involves learning to separate guilt from responsibility. Guilt is appropriate in situations where we have personally made bad choices or done harm. In relation to oppression, this means taking on the whole weight of history as an individual. Responsibility, on the other hand, means accepting your share of the challenge of changing the situation. Members of oppressor groups spend a great deal of energy in denying responsibility for oppression. What would happen if all that energy could be put to work figuring out how to end it?
6. Remember that in the oppressor role you cannot see the oppression as clearly as the oppressed group can. When people point out your oppressive attitudes or language to you, your first response should be to believe it. Ask questions and learn more about the oppression going on in that particular situation. Try not to leap to your own defence in one of the many ways oppressors use to deny responsibility for oppression. Self-defence is an overpersonalized response.

   It is true that you will likely meet members of the oppressed group who want to claim that every little thing is oppressive and use it as a focus for their anger. You will also perhaps find members of the oppressed group who try to use your efforts to unlearn oppression to manipulate you. It is all part of the process — their process. The point is not to defend yourself; it will not work anyway. If you can deal with your own defensive feelings, you can turn the situation into a discussion in which you, and perhaps everyone else, will learn more about the oppression, and you will be less vulnerable to manipulation. The defensiveness, or guilt, is the hook for the manipulation.

   Also, if you can use your own experience of liberation to understand the anger of the oppressed, you will be able to accept it as a member of an oppressor group, not as an individual. Leave their process — working through their anger — to the oppressed group. Give your attention to your own process — becoming an ally. Then we can all participate in the process we share, ending the oppression.
7. Count your privileges; keep a list. Help others see them. Break the invisibility of privilege.[7]
8. If you hear an oppressive comment or see an example of oppression at work, try to speak up first. Do not wait for a member of the oppressed group to

point it out. Sometimes this draws a response of "Oh, I don't mind," "It was just a joke" or even anger directed at you from a member of the oppressed group. That person may be speaking out of their internalized oppression, or you may be off base. Just accept it, if you can; admit it is not your experience. More often you will find members of the oppressed group grateful that they did not have to raise the issue for a change.

9. You must be patient and leave room for the greater experience of members of the oppressed group, but there are also limits. If it becomes clear over time that you are being used or mistreated, say something and/or leave the situation. Here is an example: a group is interested in having you present as an ally for reasons of their safety or your contacts, legitimacy or resources, but is not ready to offer you any information or support. The message might be: "Just do everything we tell you and don't ask questions."

   Another common assumption is that allies will do all the work on the margins— moving chairs, cleaning up, taking minutes, childcare and making coffee. This may well be appropriate. When men began to support feminist groups in these maintenance tasks, it was an important statement of solidarity and education about gender roles. On the other hand, these symbolic expectations can go too far. I was once in the role of white ally in a group of racialized people where I was expected to do all the photocopying and secretarial work. I felt quite torn about this, since the setting was a workplace where I had the lowest job status of anyone in the group and was the only one without a secretary. Indeed, after I was laid off, the members' secretaries did take over the support tasks I had been doing. I considered raising the issue for discussion, but the group was working under pressure. I did not feel entitled to take up its time.

   It is also hardly fair for the members of the oppressed group to direct all their anger, over a long period of time, at a well-meaning would-be ally. This is not reasonable treatment for anyone. It is fair for you to ask them to decide: are they willing to reflect on how they treat you or do they want you to leave?

10. Try to avoid the trap of "knowing what is good for them." Do not take leadership. They are the only ones who can figure out what they need to do and developing their own leadership strengthens their organizations. It is fine to add thoughts or resources to the process by asking questions of the individuals with whom you have already built up some trust and reciprocal exchange, who will not take it as coming from an authority greater than themselves just because you are a member of the oppressor group. It is not all right to take time at their meeting or public gathering to present your own agenda or to suggest in any way that they do not understand or see the big picture.
11. Never take public attention or credit for an oppressed group's process of liberation. Refuse to act as a spokesperson, even when reporters gravitate to you because they are more comfortable with you or curious about you. You

should speak in public only if members of the oppressed group have asked you to speak from your point of view as an ally or to take a public role on their behalf because speaking out will be too dangerous for them.

12. Do not expect every member of the oppressed group to agree; does your group agree on everything?
13. Learn everything you can about the oppression — read, ask questions, listen. Your ignorance is part of the oppression. Find people in the oppressed group who like to teach and who see value in cultivating allies in general or you in particular. Ask them your questions. Do not expect every member of the oppressed group to be ready and willing to teach you. When you are in the ally role, you have privileges and comfort in your life that members of the oppressed group do not have because of the oppression; do not expect them to also give you their time and energy so that you can learn about them.
14. Support the process of unlearning oppression with other members of your own group. Do not usurp the role of communicating the experience of the oppression; that belongs only to members of the oppressed group. You can, however, share with other members of the oppressor group the journey of becoming an ally; you can help break through others' denial and ignorance of the oppression. Members of your own group might hear you when they cannot hear a member of the oppressed group.
15. Remember that you will probably have to go out of your way to maintain your friendships and connections with members of the oppressed group. Our society is set up to separate different groups. Without a little extra effort, you will live in different parts of town and never cross paths. On the other hand, do not fall over backwards. It is not good to ignore the friends and support base you have already established because you are spending all your time working at the barriers or becoming a "hanger on" of the oppressed community in an inappropriate way.
16. Try not to look to the oppressed group for emotional support. They will likely be ambivalent about you, happy on one hand to have your support, annoyed on the other at your remaining oppressor arrogance, your privilege and the attention you get as a member of the dominant group. Their energy is needed for their own struggle. This does not mean you will not receive support from members of the oppressed group, sometimes more than is warranted. For example, look at the praise men get for doing housework when women still do the vast majority of it. Don't expect the oppressed group to be grateful to you or trust you.
17. Be yourself. Do not try to claim the roots and sense of connection that a history of oppression can give to a community if it is not your own. Do not become what the Mi'kmaw community calls a "wannabe." Dig into your own roots. The oppressive history of the group you belong to is a burden you carry. Search out the history of allies from your group as well. Dig even deeper than

that. Every group started out as a people with roots in the earth somewhere. Find your own connection with your people's history and the earth. If it is impossible to trace, find appropriate ones and rebuild roots and connection in the present for yourself, but do not try to steal someone else's; you cannot anyway.

18. Be yourself. Be honest. Express your feelings. Do not defend your internalized oppressor attitudes; say that it hurts to discover another piece of it. Do not sit on your doubts (except in public gatherings or meetings where you are an observer); ask them of someone you trust. The key word is ask. Assume that you are a learner; good learners are open.

Margaret Green provides a brief summary of the process of becoming an ally in matters of race:

> There is usually a dawning realization that being an ally to a person of colour involves knowing a great deal about one's own background, remembering with pride one's own history of resisting injustice as well as one's participation in the history of racism. It involves being able to listen and tolerate the differences between people, expecting to make mistakes, knowing that people of colour will be angry with you to the point of what appears to be unreasonableness, and learning to take it. It involves also knowing that people who view you as an oppressor may try to mistreat you — but this you need never accept. (1987: 204)

Dr Lynn Gehl , an Algonquin-Anishinaabe-Kwe author and Indigenous rights activist, has written the following, beautifully compact "Ally Bill of Responsibilities."[8]

Responsible Allies:

1. Do not act out of guilt, but rather out of a genuine interest in challenging the larger oppressive power structures;
2. Understand that they are secondary to the Indigenous people that they are working with and that they seek to serve. They and their needs must take a back seat;
3. Are fully grounded in their own ancestral history and culture. Effective allies must sit in this knowledge with confidence and pride; otherwise the "wannabe syndrome" could merely undermine the Indigenous people's efforts;
4. Are aware of their privileges and openly discuss them. This action will also serve to challenge larger oppressive power structures;
5. Reflect on and embrace their ignorance of the group's oppression and always hold this ignorance in the forefront of their minds. Otherwise, a lack of awareness of their ignorance could merely perpetuate the Indigenous people's oppression;

6. Are aware of and understand the larger oppressive power structures that serve to hold certain groups and people down. One way to do this is to draw parallels through critically reflecting on their own experiences with oppressive power structures. Reflecting on their subjectivity in this way, they ensure critical thought or what others call objectivity. In taking this approach, these parallels will serve to ensure that non-Indigenous allies are not perpetuating the oppression;
7. Constantly listen and reflect through the medium of subjectivity and critical thought versus merely their subjectivity. This will serve to ensure that they avoid the trap that they or their personal friends know what is best. This act will also serve to avoid the trap of naively following a leader or for that matter a group of leaders;
8. Strive to remain critical thinkers and seek out the knowledge and wisdom of the critical thinkers in the group. Allies cannot assume that all people are critical thinkers and have a good understanding of the larger power structures of oppression;
9. Ensure that a community consensus, or understanding, has been established in terms of their role as allies. Otherwise, the efforts of the people will be undermined due to a lack of consultation and agreement;
10. Ensure that the needs of the most oppressed — women, children, elderly, young teenage girls and boys, and the disabled — are served in the effort or movement that they are supporting. Otherwise, they may be engaging in a process that is inadequate and thus merely serving to fortify the larger power structures of oppression. Alternatively, their good intentions may not serve those who need the effort most. Rather, they may be making the oppression worse;
11. Understand and reflect on the prevalence and dynamics of lateral oppression and horizontal violence on and within oppressed groups and components of the group, such as women, and seek to ensure that their actions do not encourage it;
12. Ensure that they are supporting a leader's, group of leaders', or a movement's efforts that serve the needs of the people. For example, do the community people find this leader's efforts useful, interesting, engaging, and thus empowering? If not, allies should consider whether the efforts are moving in a questionable or possibly an inadequate direction, or worse yet that their efforts are being manipulated and thus undermined, possibly for economic and political reasons;
13. Understand that sometimes allies are merely manipulatively chosen to further a leader's agenda versus the Indigenous Nations' communities', or organizations' concerns, and when this situation occurs act accordingly;
14. Do not take up the space and resources, physical and financial, of the oppressed group;

15. Do not take up time at community meetings and community events. This is not their place. They must listen more than speak. Allies cannot perceive all the larger oppressive power structures as clearly as members of the oppressed group can; And finally,
16. Accept the responsibility of learning and reading more about their role as effective allies.

How to Work with Allies When You Are a Member of the Oppressed Group

When the shoe is on the other foot, that is, when you find yourself in a situation where it is your oppression under consideration, the same principles are in operation, but they are applied a little differently. Here are some guidelines, from my experience, for the situations where you are a member of an oppressed group dealing with allies.

1. Make a clear decision about if, why, when and how you will work with allies. Do you want to work with allies at all? What can allies offer you that you would find useful? It is easy to know what you do not want members of the oppressor group to do; figure out what you do want them to do. Are there certain times, places, meetings, tasks and functions where allies would be useful and others where their presence would be inappropriate? Be clear and conscious about your degree of openness to allies. Make sure everyone agrees on what is appropriate or at least can live with the decision without undermining the people who come in as allies. Working with allies brings a certain kind of struggle; be sure you are ready to enter into it.
2. Allies need support and information. Decide before you begin working with them what you can offer. There needs to be someone in your group who has the patience for teaching allies more about the oppression you are dealing with. If the group is unwilling to provide support and information, you will be using your would-be allies in an unethical way; for example, asking them to speak out in public because they are more likely to be taken seriously while isolating and ignoring them in meetings.
3. Be wise and canny about who is really an ally. If you end up with members of the oppressor group who are acting out of guilt, trying to replace lost roots, taking centre stage or telling you what to do, you will have more frustration than help. Also, beware of people who have no consciousness of their status as a member of the oppressor group or who are unaware of their own oppression in other areas.
4. Do not lump members of the oppressor group together, thinking of them as all "white" or "straight" or "male." Remember that everyone is or was also a member of an oppressed group and that people identify more with the parts of themselves that have been oppressed. You may see a woman as white when she thinks of herself as Jewish, or you may think of a man as male when he identifies himself primarily as gay.
5. You must listen too.
6. Be kind. Allies are taking a risk, exposing themselves to a situation that is bound to be painful at times.
7. Try to be clear about who is the enemy. There are lots of people who hate you and want to oppress you, punish you and keep you in your place. Many deny that your oppression exists. There are the rich and powerful who are creating, sometimes deliberately, more of the oppression you suffer daily. Allies are usually well-meaning people without a great deal of power in the system. They are more vulnerable to your anger because they lack power and because of their very desire to be an ally. Do not waste resources fighting with them.
8. Be yourself, be honest, express your opinions, be open. Working with allies is all part of a learning process for you too.

Working for Liberation and Becoming an Ally: Using the Lessons Back and Forth

A person who is involved both in struggling for liberation as an oppressed person and in becoming an ally to other oppressed groups has a wonderful opportunity to learn by constantly drawing parallels back and forth. For example, when I want to figure out what I should do in a situation where I am the only white person, I begin by asking myself what I would want a man to do if he were the only one in this situation with a group of women. I do not necessarily do what I would want that hypothetical man to do, but thinking about it provides some guidelines.

Likewise, my own experience as an ally has given me a great deal of insight into the value of allies to the groups where I work on my own liberation. I observe the groups I belong to interacting creatively with allies or mistreating allies, and I can use my own experience as an ally to understand what is going on and figure out what to do about it. My own experience as an ally has also taught me how oppressed groups often overlook the information and insights allies can give them, especially when it comes to building a strategy for action.

Balance and Clarity

For each guideline I have written in this chapter, I can think of a time when the advice would be misleading. I know sometimes the guidelines almost sound contradictory. That is because the essence of the path to becoming an ally is balance and clarity. One must balance patience and confrontation, flexibility and limits, boundaries and allowances, learning and opinion, humility and self-confidence, your own oppression and others' struggles. Clarity comes from observation, reflection and analysis in a specific situation. In the light of this process, the complexities of the relationships between oppressed groups and their allies can

resolve into beautiful, clear patterns. There is even sometimes a feeling of being "crystal clear" inside, a "knowing," when you see what to do and know what will happen when you do it.

Criticism of the Ally Approach to Privilege

In the mid-1980s, when I first heard the term "ally" used to describe people with privilege taking action to end the oppression that gave them their privilege in the first place, I embarked on a long search, over several years, before I found others discussing and writing about it. Now the word is common and has, of course, its detractors as well as its promoters. This is to be expected; the process of challenging systems of oppression and privilege and creating something better is massively complex and filled with conflict. Like many other words that we use to define our struggles, "ally" is a magnet for disagreement, even among those who use the term in an anti-oppression context, let alone where it has been adopted by more liberal approaches such as diversity education.

Many of the critiques I have read are thoughtful and grounded in experience familiar to most of us who work at anti-oppression education and organizing. For example, there is this description of a workshop from an essay by Michelle O'Brien on the *Colours of Resistance* website (2003):

> It was a mostly white group. A few people of color in the room started talking. What the people of color said was fairly complex and subtle, and included a few criticisms. All the white people in the room start freaking out inside. None of us know what to say. Then a white person, clearly remembering some antiracism workshop of some sort, starts bringing up how we should focus on our white privilege, dealing with the racism in our movements. A few other white people perked up, recognizing the language involved, and launch into a lengthy discussion that seems straight out of a white-ally meeting. The statements of the people of color in the room got boxed into the narrow confines of this workshop rhetoric, and the people of color get erased completely. A dozen utterances of 'our racism' later and all the white people started actually believing the room had only white people in it. The people of color got totally ignored, now totally excluded from the discussion. Whatever challenge or threat they might have posed to white people's arrogance was thoroughly contained, managed and diffused. They were reduced to just the crude caricature of workshop rhetoric. And all the white people, clearly, were feeling great about being so on the ball about racism.

I immediately recognized the workshop she describes, not because I was there, but because it is like a play performed in different theatres by different actors, all repeating the same lines. How easily we revert to our defensiveness when we are

in the dominant role, grasping at new ideas and language to relieve ourselves of old guilt, once more blocking out the voices of the people we oppress.[9]

Besides this point — that identifying as an ally allows members of the dominant group to feel better, take back control of the conversation and avoid action, critics of the ally approach talk about two further problems: the idea of an ally is too individual and it has become a self-defined identity (Anonymous 2011; O'Brien 2003; Thompson 2003).

Some writers suggest a change of language, returning to the tried and true "solidarity," or the related but not quite parallel phrase "bearing witness." Clearly, I think the word and concept of ally is useful, or I would not be writing a third edition of this book, but how can we learn to resist bending it to serve our persistent pursuit of comfort, immediately and at all costs?

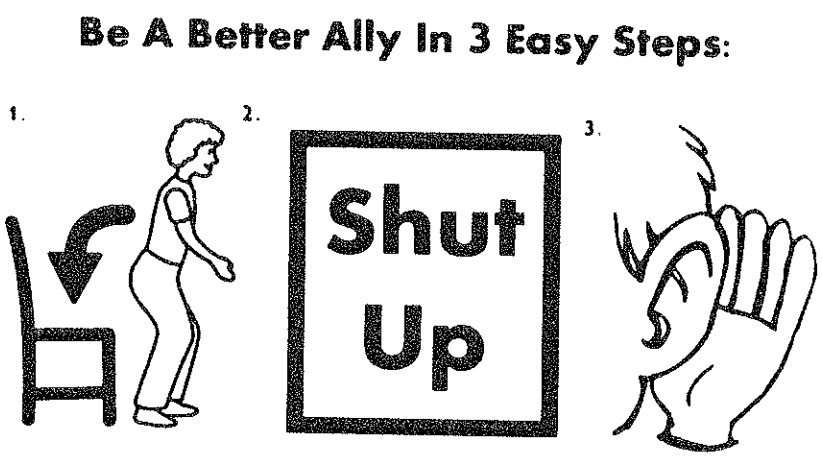
It seems to me the guidance we need lies in the very points of critique levied against the concept of ally: it is not intended to be an individual, self-defined identity designed to relieve guilt. On the contrary, it refers to a collective process of taking responsibility for privilege, guided by those who are the target of that form of oppression and firmly rooted in a structural analysis.

It is not, of course, surprising that those of us who are products of Western capitalism continually fall into seeing ourselves as individuals in a world made up of other individuals. We live in a culture that has little room for anything else. Our bodies cycle and recycle every bit of soil, air and water that exists. Our location in history makes us inheritors of the role our people have played in all the centuries that have gone before. Our consumption, employment, pension funds, taxes and investments tie us to the violence and racism of every colonial system on earth. In fact, when I consider how embedded each of us is in the world's history and structures, it is hard to believe that there is any such thing as an individual,[10] but this vast web of connections is, for the most part, invisible to us.

Likewise we have been taught to deny that our thinking, emotions and behaviour are largely unconscious. All that matters in our culture is the rational, conscious part of our mind, particularly our intentions. Becoming an ally means stepping out of this liberal individualism, recognizing that we can never be separate — physically, emotionally, historically, ideologically, politically or financially — from the complex, self-perpetuating system of oppression and privilege. This is the heart of a structural analysis.

In Western culture, an identity is an individual naming or self-naming with a tendency to be static: "I am a ..." An ally is not an identity, but an endlessly unfolding struggle for equity. Just as an alcoholic must accept that they will never not be an alcoholic, an ally never "arrives." One cannot *be* an ally, but is always *becoming* one, part of a larger process, and not anywhere near the centre of it. It is likewise not for us to name ourselves allies, because the point is to contribute to a struggle defined and named by those who are the targets of that particular form of oppression.

As for guilt, to repeat a point made earlier in this chapter, it is an appropriate



response to an action we chose, had control over or at least influenced by commission or omission. In the context of a structural analysis of oppression and privilege, responsibility is far more appropriate. We are not talking about something we did or choices we made, but rather something we've inherited and can't refuse, something that continually gives us dividends from past history. As an Aboriginal participant once said to me during a workshop: "You have a daily-interest account in the Bank of Colonialism." We look for ways to change it because, as Alice Miller says in the quote that introduces Chapter 4 , we see it and know it is wrong. Action is the only way we can be true to ourselves. If taking action makes us uncomfortable or even asks a price of us, it is never as serious as the price paid by those who are the targets of that particular form of oppression and it is not constant. Allies have the privilege of taking breaks, and I see nothing wrong with doing that from time to time, since part of becoming an effective ally is that we are also engaged in our own liberation from the forms of oppression where we are the targets and cannot take breaks — also, because we are in this for the long haul. I also see nothing wrong with responsibility feeling better than guilt, as it has for me since I first saw the difference. It is not about what allies feel but what we do.

There is a truly simple, three-point guide to resisting our tendency to twist the concept of ally into a comforting individual identity, a cartoon that has circulated around Facebook and the Tumblr blog website for several years, to the point where I have not been able to trace it back to its original creator.[11] The title is "Be a Better Ally in Three Easy Steps." It shows a chair with an arrow pointing to the seat, a sign that reads, "Shut up" and a hand cupped around an ear.

notes

1. Valerie, an outstanding educator and community worker, died on January 25, 2014, while I was working on the third edition of this book <atlanticfuneralhomeshalifax.sharingmemories.ca/siteContent/memorial.html?personId=248639&source=memlist>. She is sorely missed by her family, friends and community. Our workshop was based on exercises adapted from CUSO (1988), Katz (1978) and Obedkoff (1989). See Bishop and Carvery (1994).
2. See Miller (1981, 1983, 1986).
3. "Pig latin," the way we spoke it as children involves moving the first letter to the end of every word. "Struggle against oppression becomes "truggles gainsta ppressiono."
4. "Living off the avails" is the charge brought against pimps who live on the earnings of prostitutes they control.
5. See McIntosh (1990) and Jensen (1998, 1999).
6. Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, playwright Wendy Lill has explored how systemic racism emerges through individuals despite a positive attitude, pleasant personality and kind motives. See her powerful plays *The Occupation of Heather Rose* (1987) and *Sisters* (1991).
7. See note 5.
8. Dr Gehl offers other reflections on becoming a responsible ally and a list of resources for allies on her website <www.lynngehl.com>.
9. Robert Jensen writes about the use of ally language to defend racist behaviour in "I know I am racist but..." (2002).
10. There is a great deal of psychological, sociological and neurological research to back this up. A good starting point is Hood (2012).
11. I got as far as the website *Winnemen Wintu Voice* <http://winnememwintuvoice.tumblr.com/post/52339685343/muddypetticoats-dancing-with-diversity> where there is an attribution trail for this cartoon, but there were too many missing links to trace it back to its source. If you are the creator of this brilliant cartoon and see this book, please get in touch. I and many others would like to give you credit for your work.