

The End of Safety
Reflections on Being an Anti-Racist Ally
Address given by Melanie Morrison at a gathering of representatives
from progressive United Methodist organizations
October 15, 2004 ~ Chicago, Illinois
© 2004 Melanie S. Morrison

the question for you is
what have you ever traveled toward
more than your own safety?
– Lucille Clifton

As I pondered what I wanted to say this morning, to my surprise there was a verse from the gospels that kept surfacing and staying with me: *What God hath joined together, let no one put asunder*. Aware that I am plucking that phrase from its original context, I want to use it as one of the lenses for our conversation this morning. Because it is my experience that we are contending with centrifugal forces at work in our world, in our churches, in our movements for social change, and in our very bodies – forces that are threatening to pull us asunder; forces demanding that we give allegiance to this group and not that; to this identity and not that. Forces that urge us to rank oppressions and causes, declaring some more important than others.

I experienced these forces at work recently when I visited a predominantly white, local United Church of Christ congregation as part of the steering committee for an organization called Word & World – a school for faith-based activists that is designed as a national-local collaboration in different regions of the country that seeks to bridge the sanctuary, the seminary, and the streets. There are plans underway for a week-long Word & World school in Memphis next August that will focus on the labor movement and issues of economic and racial justice. Memphis has been chosen as the site of this school because of its historic significance as the place where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated as he lived out his solidarity with the poor by joining the labor struggle of the Memphis sanitation workers. And because the city is one of the poorest in the nation.

The pastor was initially enthusiastic about my visit. We have a friend in common and the pastor has known of my work within the UCC in the area of human sexuality. However, as I described the work of Word & World and the focus of the Memphis school in particular, I could tell that the pastor's enthusiasm was waning. He suggested I come ahead and participate in worship, but he indicated he was having some second thoughts about my making an announcement about the Memphis school. "It is so far in the future. People in our church don't plan that far into the future."

When I arrived at the church, the pastor saw me, greeted me enthusiastically, and said he wanted me to meet one of the leaders of the church who is a gay man. "The LGBT study group here at the congregation has been reading your book. He will be thrilled to meet you!" Then the pastor went on to say, "I don't think it makes much sense for you to talk about Word & World. Today is the anniversary of Matthew Shepherd's death. Tomorrow is National Coming Out Day. I would like to introduce you as a leader for sexual justice within the UCC and it would be so nice if you could congratulate this congregation for being open and affirming. Why don't we just leave it at that?" I responded that I would be happy to greet the congregation, expressing gratitude for their explicit welcome of LGBT people, but that I also intended to talk about the Memphis school and invite them

to participate in it.

I don't know for sure why the pastor had decided it was ill-advised for me to talk about Word & World and the Memphis school. It may be that he didn't want me to "muddy the waters" by naming issues of racial justice on a day when the focus was supposed to be sexual justice. After the service, I told the pastor that I could not adequately represent Word & World or myself without addressing *both* racism and homophobia. I told him that if he and I, as white people, are outspoken about sexual justice and silent about racism, we reinforce the illusion that racism is a "people of color issue" and sexual justice is a "white issue" and in both cases we render LGBT people of color invisible.

During worship that day, I remembered a conversation earlier that week with an activist friend from Detroit who had told me how demoralized she had become in her efforts to enlist support in the African American church community for the defeat of Proposition 2 – a proposition that would amend the Michigan constitution to define marriage as strictly between a man and a woman and would cut off all funds to organizations or universities that have domestic partner benefits. My friend, who has lived and worked for years in Detroit, said that many of the African American pastors she so deeply respects for their unceasing commitment to confronting racial and economic justice had been unwilling to step forward in public opposition to Proposition 2. Some of these pastors had told her that they believed LGBT issues are "white issues" and that speaking out against Proposition 2 might "muddy the waters" and detract from more important issues within the black community. Another splitting; another gesture that pulls us asunder, another way of rendering LGBT people of color invisible.

Both of these incidents in turned caused me to ruminate on an experience that occurred a couple years ago in my then home-town of Lansing, Michigan. The city council was considering adding sexual orientation to the city's civil rights ordinance and I had gone to a public hearing to testify in support of the ordinance. I identified myself as a Christian and an ordained minister; something I felt called to do when I discovered that, without exception, every person who spoke in opposition to the ordinance that evening was invoking God and the Bible in their condemnation of homosexuality.

When I gathered with some friends at a local restaurant after the hearing, I was struck by the vehemence and selectivity of their anger at the opposition. My friends were white, the majority of people who spoke out at the hearing in opposition to the ordinance were white, but my friends' anger was focused on the black clergy: "How could they do that? They, of all people, should know about discrimination! There is so much homophobia in the black church!" I remember being struck by the selectivity of this anger and by the fact that the only people who were being marked racially in our conversation were African Americans. My friends were not speaking of the other clergy opponents as *white* clergy. They were not raging against the homophobia rampant in *white* churches nor asking how white racism and homophobia reinforce each other. The white clergy were generically lumped together as "clergy" or "the opposition." And, by default, they were being held to a different standard. This, too, is an all too common splitting; a racialization of the issue, and a means of tearing us asunder.

I am deeply grateful to be in the company of all of you who have signed the Common Witness statement issued at General Conference 2004 because I hear in the words and the spirit of this document your intention to resist this splitting and false naming of the issues, the responses, and our very lives. I hear you boldly declaring, "What God hath joined together, let no one put asunder." I am heartened by Common Witness because it is not a sentimental or superficial call for Christian unity that seeks to submerge our unique and diverse histories and identities. Rather it affirms that we

can be different and not divided.

Most of all, I am inspired by the fact that you are not satisfied with simply issuing another statement – eloquent as it is. That you have called this gathering today as a first step in asking: how does this statement convict those of us who have signed it? How will we walk the walk and not just talk the talk? It is tempting to issue statements that we hope will shine a bright light on the *other* side’s moral failings and expose their inherent contradictions. It is quite another thing to shine that light on ourselves and to ask: How are we found wanting in light of the words we speak and the faith we espouse? What are the contradictions inherent in our own organizations? What is our work?

When Joe and Kathryn invited me to lead this morning’s session, I heard them say, in so many words: we want to shine the light of the first “we believe” upon our lives and our organizations in such a way that it both convicts us and emboldens us: *We believe in a church that passionately works for racial justice*. With that declaration of faith ringing in our ears, we are invited to engage in an honest and searching self-inventory – in which these questions are central: How do we hold ourselves accountable to the covenant we have made? How do we enact our passionate work for racial justice over time in a largely white church and in predominantly white organizations? What does it mean – tangibly and concretely – to passionately work for racial justice where we live, work, and worship?

I believe we have the rare and awesome opportunity to do some strenuous, hard, and exhilarating work together in the next few hours and in the time to come. If we will. That will only happen if we are strong and vulnerable enough to bring our whole selves to this sacred task. In doing so, we always take the risk of having what is precious to us bruised or misunderstood. But we enter this time remembering the pledge to listen to one another with open minds and open hearts and to speak respectfully to one another with love, especially when we disagree.

We will need to be strong and vulnerable enough to share what we know from our particular places on the margins as women in a sexist world, or as gay men, lesbians, and bisexual people in a heterosexist world, or as people of color in a racist world, or as transgender people in a transphobic world. We will also need to be strong and vulnerable enough to acknowledge that many of us are on the margins of some communities and at the center of others because most of us are, in one way or another, recipients of unearned privilege as well as targets of oppression.

For example, I stand before you as a lesbian and a woman who is, by reason of my gender and my sexual orientation, often relegated to the margins of church and society. I also stand here as a white able-bodied person. Those identities accord me privilege and a proximity to centers of power within church and society that people of color and people with disabilities do not enjoy. Part of my work as a white person in this racist world is to be asking, in every situation, every encounter: how is my white skin privilege keeping me from seeing what I need to see, understanding what I need to understand, and doing what I need to do?

As a white person, part of my work in this world and in my church is to take great care with the assumptions I make and with the words I use and especially to work at not presuming to speak for all lesbians or all women. Because that is what people with privilege do again and again. We talk in universals as though we represent the norm and we thereby render invisible the lives, cultures, and experiences of people different from us.

So, let’s take care with our language this morning and instead of referring to *the* LGBT community, for example, let’s pause and ask ourselves and each other: *which* LGBT community? Contrary to popular opinion, we who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are not part of *a* culture. There is no such thing as *the* LGBT community. What gets mistaken for *the* LGBT community is a white, financially secure, more-able-to-be-out-and-visible group of LGBT people. In

reality, we are many races, many classes, many cultures, many communities. We are, indeed, everywhere but we are often separated from each other by racism, ableism, and classism.

As a white woman who identifies as a feminist, I need to bring the same kinds of self-critical questions and the same spirit of humility and deep listening, acknowledging that racism and classism profoundly divide women in this country, and within our churches, from each other. I believe this Common Witness document calls us to do some incredible work together. If we will. If we dare to be strong and vulnerable enough to examine the complexities and contradictions that we bear in our own bodies and in our movements for social justice. If we dare to be strong and vulnerable enough not to use our privilege to protect ourselves against deeper knowing or use our particular experience of oppression as a defense against examining the ways we may be oppressing others. In the early eighties, Audre Lorde addressed a largely white feminist women's conference and she posed these searing questions that we here may also take to heart:

What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heel print upon another woman's face? What woman's terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?

To become an anti-racist, inclusive church, we need to be prepared for the cold winds of self-scrutiny to blow into every corner of our lives – those corners where we seek release from our oppressors and those corners where we may discover our oppressive heel print upon the face of others.

It is deeply troubling to me when I honestly reflect on my own history of activism over the past thirty-five years. In the late sixties and early seventies, anti-racism work was a priority in my life. Then, in my mid-twenties, I became involved in feminist organizations, in my mid-thirties in peace and anti-nuclear organizations, and, later yet, lesbian and gay organizations. These organizations had predominantly white leadership and constituency. It is troubling for me to acknowledge that my involvement in those movements and organizations led me away from, rather than deeper into, anti-racism work and activism. I am not placing blame on others; I take responsibility for my own part in this history. Nevertheless, it is something I need to examine more deeply. This personal history helps me understand why some people of color feel skeptical about the gay and lesbian movement and why some of them see it as a diversion or a "white agenda." We can protest vehemently and angrily insist that this is not true. But unless our personal lives and our organizational priorities reflect a sustained commitment to anti-racism work, our defense does not hold water.

Sharon Martinas, a white anti-racist activist, said something that has haunted me ever since I read it: "When [white people] organize against our own oppression, but not against our privilege – that is, against the oppression of people of color, we become oppressors of people of color."⁽²⁾ What does it mean to organize – in the MFSA, the Reconciling Movement Network, or On Fire – against white skin privilege, against the oppression of people of color? What would these organizations look like if we who are white cared as passionately about eliminating white racism as we do about eliminating homophobia and sexism?

To organize against white skin privilege means, first of all, a willingness to have the world as we have known it altered. As James Baldwin put it: "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it...the end of safety." For white people to wake up to how we have unconsciously benefitted from racism is painful work. It requires that we develop an elasticity of

spirit so that when we suddenly see what we had not seen before, we do not retreat into a defensive posture or feel undone by shame and embarrassment, but find the grace to say: "I see now why that remark or that behavior or that program was racist. I see now...and seeing, I want to do it differently."

I don't know about you, but admitting I'm wrong and feeling exposed are two things I don't do very gracefully! However, I am learning that the world does not end when I am challenged by people of color or other white people to confront my acts of racist commission or omission; when I am called to account for thoughtless gestures or the presumption that I can speak for everyone. I am also learning more about my own humanity and the grace of forgiving myself and others when we make mistakes and fail.

Many of the social justice organizations I have been affiliated with are predominantly white and most have a stated desire to *become* multiracial and multicultural. Unfortunately, that desire usually gets arrested at the stage of asking: "why aren't there more people of color in our organization? What can we do to reach out to people of color?" Or the efforts at becoming multiracial/multicultural get stuck at the level of recruiting a couple board members of color or hiring a staff person of color to "represent" their constituencies. It is not often that I have known a predominantly white organization to have, as part of its core mission and purpose, the dismantling of white racism. Too rarely have I experienced predominantly white organizations asking themselves: what would this organization look like if the needs, concerns, insights, and gifts of people of color were central rather than marginal? Too rarely have I known predominantly white organizations to engage in the regular practice of sending representatives to the meetings or conferences of people of color organizations so that they might learn about the issues and concerns and agendas of those communities.

None of our organizations can become truly inclusive organizations without a long-term, (actually *never-ending*) commitment to acknowledging, analyzing, and confronting white racism. If the needs, concerns, insights, and gifts of people of color are to move from the margins to the center of our organizational life, those of us who are white may need to get out of the way, step back, relinquish control, learn how to share power, listen more, and talk less. It will mean shifting the questions from: Where are *they*? Why aren't they *here*? **to**: Where are *we*? Why aren't we *there*? Why aren't we actively making connections with communities of color and finding out what the political, social, theological, and economic priorities are in those communities? It will mean working collaboratively with organizations that are led by and for people of color. And that kind of collaborative work is hard. It has to be learned through trial and error. Many of us are novices at working collaboratively with anyone, much less with people of other cultures, ethnicities, and races where there are centuries of mistrust and misunderstanding between us.

Let me share a personal story. Those who work with me know that I can be driven at times, rather perfectionistic, with strong convictions about how and when things ought to be done. I tend to think the shortest and best route to getting a project accomplished well is to do it myself. The commitment that I have made in the last few years to become an anti-racist ally directly challenges every one of these personal and cultural characteristics of mine. This became abundantly clear to me a few years ago when an African American United Methodist colleague, Rev. Lynnette Stallworth, and I decided to co-facilitate a seminar for African American and white women called *Difficult Conversations*. I was used to doing seminars in my work and had a particular format and style for designing programs and facilitating groups. I had also written many flyers and brochures for seminars over the years. I, therefore, presumed I would whip one off for *Difficult Conversations*. I sent my draft to Lynnette and was surprised and irritated that she returned it to me with words crossed out, question marks in the margins, phrases substituted, and a note attached that said: "This

flyer may speak to white women but if you want black women to attend, it has to be completely rewritten." Together we rewrote the flyer. It was hard, time consuming work to negotiate the wording and I thought to myself: "What have I gotten myself into? This is only the flyer!" Indeed, our full collaboration took an enormous amount of time. We met together regularly for a whole year before we launched the seminar and the processing we had to do once the seminar got started was strenuous. I have never felt so stretched and I have seldom learned so much. Both Lynnette and I had deep waters stirred which put us in an authentic sisterly relationship.

The history of racism and its continuing prevalence in our lives and society can be overwhelming. Those of us who are white are taught to ignore its existence and rewarded for doing so. We cannot overcome racism alone. Each of us needs to belong to communities which will both care for us *and* hold us accountable for our actions or failure to act. White people cannot become effective anti-racist allies unless we are in authentic, truth-telling, ongoing relationships with people of color. Therefore, it is critically important that those of us who are white become engaged in grassroots anti-racist organizations led by people of color. Listening to people of color, learning about their experience of racism, and respecting the priorities they have developed as strategies for change, is critically important work for white people who want to be allies. By showing up consistently, listening, learning, and acting when needed, white people can develop relationships with people of color to whom they are accountable.

If those of us who are white are serious about becoming anti-racist allies, we will need to commit ourselves to doing our own work, not waiting for people of color to confront or educate us, but holding each other accountable, educating ourselves about institutional racism, learning about the cultures and histories of people of color, doing a fearless inventory of how we maintain or challenge racism where we live and work and study. It means a willingness to have our ideas changed, our lives disrupted, and, yes, our feelings hurt from time to time. It will mean engaging in work that can help heal the church, the nation, and our very selves.

Before we break into small groups, I want to bring these reflections to a close by quoting Tess Browne who reminds us:

We are all the Creator's children.
We did not come out of the past unhurt,
but together, individually and through our cultures,
we can heal our world and bring each other home...
And remember, we want to make sure
that we all come home together.

© 2004 Melanie S. Morrison. Used with permission. Do not reprint without the author's permission. Contact: melaniemorrison@alliesforchange.org.