

## Why Offer An Anti-Racism Seminar for White People?

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*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.*

– Sharon Martinas

*Doing Our Own Work* was begun by Melanie Morrison and Eleanor Morrison in 1994 out of the conviction that there are not enough contexts where white people who claim a commitment to justice can self-critically examine their own racial privilege. The seminar responds to the need for white people to "do their own work"—educating themselves, confronting white racism, holding each other accountable, and demonstrating good faith as they seek to build genuine and lasting coalitions with people of color.

Many efforts to end systemic injustice, when carried out in predominantly white movements for change, have been enacted within a white, Eurocentric framework and without a simultaneous commitment to organizing *against* racial privilege. In order to keep from replicating this unconsciousness in all its oppressive manifestations, white people must commit to doing their own work. The goal, then, is for *Doing Our Own Work* participants to call themselves and other white people to account by working to understand and own the fact that they have racial privileges, advantages, and benefits.

Understanding and acknowledging privilege is not, however, enough. *Doing Our Own Work* seeks to provide a context where white people challenge themselves and each other to ask deeply and continually: now that we see, what are we going to do about it?

### **The possibilities inherent in a seminar for white people**

One of the reasons for launching *Doing Our Own Work* was our conviction that white people must learn how to recognize, analyze, and confront white racism when people of color are not present. As is so often noted, it is not the responsibility of people of color to educate white people about the realities of racism. It is also not their responsibility to always, in every situation, name and challenge racism. Contemporary racism in the United States is the product of a long history of cruelty, injustice, and exploitation on the part of white people, beginning with genocide against Indigenous North Americans and continuing today with racist institutional policies, interpersonal behaviors, and individual attitudes. It is, therefore, incumbent on white people to name and challenge it. We are not arguing that all white people should be held responsible for the sins of their ancestors or the current actions of every other white person. Nevertheless, all white people benefit from a racist system that continues to advantage people with white skin and disadvantage people of color. Therefore, racism *is* a white issue.

Because privilege is usually invisible to those who have it, waking up to the fact that we possess privilege is usually a slow and arduous process for those of us who are white. Precisely because white privilege is a “fugitive subject” (Peggy McIntosh) that can be ignored or placed on the back

burner by white people, those of us who are white have a much harder time understanding how racism affects us. What is perfectly plain and obvious to people of color is often opaque and elusive to white people, even those who earnestly desire to understand racism.

One of the benefits of a seminar for white people is that it spares people of color the repetitious and often hurtful patterns that many white people go through as they begin to perceive racism. If the insults and injustices of racism are part of your daily experience, it can be hurtful to hear white people repeatedly protesting their innocence or expressing shock. If you have just suffered the slings of a racist comment or policy, you do not need to be met with someone who exclaims, "I can't believe that happened to you!" Such exclamations are frequently uttered by white people in the beginning phases of breaking through denial and they can be toxic and harmful to people of color. Too often, the growth in consciousness of white people occurs at the expense of people of color. It is our hope that seminars such as *Doing Our Own Work* can absorb some of that toxicity as we challenge each other to hear what we are exclaiming and how we are saying it.

Another manifestation of breaking through denial is the sense of shame and guilt that can consume white people for a time. While shame and guilt are not the same, both can surface in white people as they wake up to the horrors of racism. Neither is particularly useful to people of color because both have the effect of turning the spotlight on white people once again. White people often seek forgiveness from people of color to lessen their shame. This request can also be toxic for people of color if the focus is the feelings of white people rather than the continuing inequities of racism. It is our conviction that it is not possible for white people to go *around* shame and guilt, but it is possible to move *through* them into something deeper and more productive. There is a stage of truth-telling and confession that can be important work for white people if it is coupled with a commitment to confronting racism.

*Doing Our Own Work* provides a context for white people to express remorse, grief, and shame at what their ancestors have done and what they themselves have done or failed to do. But we do not only hear each other's pain in the seminar, we also challenge each other to find healing through collaborative strategies for transformation and change. As Nancy Richardson has said, unless white people can move beyond "a vague sense of dis-ease," they will continue to exhibit symptoms that "run the gamut from denial to guilt, from arrogance to self-pity, from defensiveness to passivity." *Doing Our Own Work* is a place where white people offer each other mutual self-criticism, challenge, and support.

*Doing Our Own Work* provides a context for white people to brainstorm and role play how they can speak up and speak out to challenge and interrupt racism. White people can act as allies to challenge racist comments and behaviors by other white people. In all-white settings, however, racism often goes unchallenged. Many of us who are white have had the experience of saying to ourselves at such moments, "I am so relieved that there is no one of color present to witness this." Racism *should* offend all of us. In the *Doing Our Own Work* seminar we encourage each other to access and feel our own rage at racism. Accessing anger at racism and developing strategies for channeling it into useful interventions are opportunities provided during the seminar.

### **The dangers inherent in a seminar for white people**

Alongside the possibilities of a seminar for white people are the dangers inherent in an all white group. Primary among these is what was said above about privilege being invisible to those who hold it. Because our Eurocentric or “white” customs and norms are not transparent to us, a seminar for only white people can implicitly “normalize” certain ways of confronting racism. Furthermore, what we as white people may prioritize as the important issues in confronting racism will likely be different from what people of color might prioritize. There are things about racism and how it affects people of color that we cannot understand or perceive as white people. Even as we listen to the voices and experiences of people of color through poetry, music, videos, and historical accounts, these experiences remain second-hand and therefore indirect. We are not encountering living people nor are we hearing about the effects of racism in the context of a relationship.

A danger inherent in a white people’s group is that graduates of the seminar may feel they have arrived at a place of awareness that sets them apart from other white people. Worse yet, by adopting an identity as an “anti-racist ally,” they may falsely assume that they are no longer racist.

As *Doing Our Own Work* participants choose a sphere of influence in which to devote their time and energy, there is always a danger that they may act in a vacuum, ignorant of the long, rich histories and current movements of resistance within communities of color. If participants act unilaterally by developing an “anti-racist” agenda or strategy without being in conversation and relationship with people of color, they can do more harm than good. This kind of misguided arrogance and unilateralism is another manifestation in the long history of white supremacy that treats people of color as if they need saving by white people.

On the other hand, an equally present danger is that an all-white seminar will reinforce racial insularity. Many white people live in predominantly white worlds. An all white seminar could suggest to white people that they can be anti-racist allies *without* having to be in real-life relationships with people of color. *Doing Our Own Work* could present the temptation of staying in predominantly white worlds, talking with other white people about racism, and not placing ourselves in multiracial settings, situations, and organizations where we are not in charge.

### **How can the dangers be mitigated?**

The limitations of an all white seminar cannot be completely eliminated. They are inherent in the nature of the seminar. Nevertheless, the dangers can be counterbalanced when we intentionally seek out relationships with people of color and other white people who help us see what we cannot see by ourselves. This kind of intentionality requires humility of spirit and active nurturing of truth-telling relationships with friends and colleagues.

The dangers can also be counteracted when we remember that *Doing Our Own Work* is at best a supplement to, and never a substitute for, contexts where people of diverse races and ethnicities discuss and strategize together how racism can be challenged. As we stated in the history and background to the seminar, nothing can take the place of face-to-face contact, dialogue, and confrontation between people of different races. Therefore, this seminar should always be viewed as a “way station;” the only way that leads toward racial justice remains the hard and exhilarating work of building multiracial, multicultural, anti-racist coalitions.

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