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What's Racial Justice Training Got to Do With It?

How things look after 25 years of anti-racism work

By Erika Thorne, with input from Naomi Long

As a white TfC trainer who has concentrated on racial justice work for 25 years, where I started is not where I am today. As I've grown, learning what it means to do effective social change work, I've shifted my focus from doing anti-racism work with other white activists to supporting mutually-developed goals in active cross-race and cross-class coalitions.

Behind this shift is a changing answer to the question, What is the point of doing anti-racism and racial justice training?

I see the need for many more effective coalitions within movements like environmental and economic justice, housing, immigration, violence against women, and LGBTQ organizing. Where I live, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, African-American, Somali and LGBTQ communities would each benefit from working more closely together. The children in each community are being harassed, bullied, held back, beaten up and, in some cases, killed. The precise means vary; the devastating results hurt equally. As a white lesbian, I'm grieved to see that the lack of cross-racial skills and awareness in the LGBTQ community is among the key factors preventing that coalition from gelling.

I saw similar lack of skills in 1986 when I first started doing this work, and I came at it like a warrior: "Hey, all us white people! I've just had a big Ah-HA moment! I 'get' how racism is everywhere, built into the structure of society. As a white woman, I'm appalled, tee'd off, and ashamed of my own racism and everything that's been done in my name.

"So, I've made a commitment to fight racism for the rest of my life, and I'm starting with US! NOW! It's my job to get us white folks into shape so we stop screwing over people of color. Listen up and shape up!"

I had heard from people of color that white people need to take responsibility for our racism, and teach each other about the dynamics of racism, so that was an obvious area to focus on. I also, from the beginning, worked to build cross-racial coalitions, making partnerships and friendships around issues that mattered to everyone involved—like immigration, police brutality, domestic violence—and also in artistic expression.

At first anger and shame edged my anti-racism work, especially as a trainer. When it turned out that "getting white people into shape" brought resistance instead of wake-up from the many—and new learning and behavior from only a few—my frustration built. My shame often re-activated.

Once I co-facilitated a weekend retreat for a state agency focused on the needs of children with my colleague Lisa Hinson Hunter. In true warrior fashion I interrupted an increasing spiral of scrutiny that was tightening around one of the African American staff people due to her outspoken analysis of where the agency was failing black kids. Once I named what I saw going on, the white participants felt attacked

and the angry energy was immediately focused on me. It stayed there for the next one and a half days. I felt it deeply, though I wasn't conscious enough to name it. While during the rest of the retreat the group worked together much more successfully, I carried the anger and indignation the white people felt at being interrupted inside me for years. It was frightening—and instructive—to receive a taste of the irrational fury that people of color handle often. Still, I agonized over how I could do this better.

Throughout this period my relationships with activists of color blossomed, yet I was isolated among white activists who hadn't committed to anti-racism work until I attracted more of them through my workshops and activism.

With deep inner work, along with tough, useful feedback from colleagues of color and newer white colleagues, I found that approaching all participants—and myself—with love and affirmation fosters the most change. A shame-based angle, such as regarding all of us white people as deficient and “calling us out”, was not effective.

By the early '90s, with this new approach I worked with white people on our self-education and changing our clueless behavior in the racial mainstream. My main focus, though, was supporting goals that rose directly from communities of color.

Anti-racism training as a whole, however, took a different tack. Today there are hundreds of individuals and several organizations that focus on white awareness and/or activism. There is a yearly conference on white privilege that draws thousands. There are whole fields of study in colleges on whiteness. Lots of people have taken cultural competence trainings or white privilege workshops through jobs, schools or communities.

As I've noticed the growing movement focused on supporting white anti-racism, I can't help but wonder, are we supporting social change goals or are we creating a new whiteness industry? At their best, these workshops and conferences provide a transitional step for white people to become more effective activists. There are certainly many examples of this. What I worry about is that in other instances it supports us white people to get stuck in thinking about ourselves, with little action on issues important to people of color.

For example, I facilitated a weekend retreat for a peace group in the Twin Cities where addressing racism within the organization was a goal. A number of powerful things happened, and a group of white participants formed for ongoing work. I facilitated their monthly meetings for several years, pouring all my new-found affirmative approach into carefully-designed experiences to build awareness, skills, and capacity for taking responsibility for their racism and that of other whites.

Participants evidenced personal growth and a great deal of learning, and created strong friendships that involved new levels of honesty. Yet I did not build into the process a way for them to move out of this treasured atmosphere into conscious, concerted work in cross-race situations. So their anti-racism work outside the group depended upon their life circumstances. Some took significant action; some did not.

Now, that approach doesn't make sense to me. In terms of effective action on these issues, if we white people reduce our racism and increase our capacity for cross-cultural work, we are positioned to act. Yet if we keep the focus on ourselves, we might be able to support some interpersonal work on racism, but lose sight of the necessity of connecting with active movements -- the part about changing society, about

understanding in our bones that all liberation is intertwined, may seem optional.

When we shift away from a focus on ourselves, we can shift toward building vigorous, skillful coalitions across race and class, on foundational issues like economic and environmental justice, housing, health care, and nurturing all of our children.

McDonough Organization with Respect and Equality for Everyone (MORE) was a cultural and economic support organization located in a St. Paul housing development. For the five years I was involved in training and support there, I saw Hmong, African-American, Caribbean, Vietnamese, white and Chicana/o residents navigating through MFIP (a type of welfare), food stamps, Medicaid, school placement and childcare. English-language speakers helped recent immigrants fill out forms, children showed each other the ropes at school, traditional Hmong decision-making processes were adapted and used by the whole group, potluck dinners were shared, a used clothing shelf was staffed, and everyone was invited to Hmong New Year, Cinco de Mayo and Juneteenth.

Idyllic? No. McDonough residents dealt with the many challenges of poverty, PTSD, displacement and violence. And participants in MORE were in conflict often. Yet everyone had a place where their dignity and well-being was tended to. That mattered.

MORE was an alliance between white activists and activists in communities of color, facing real issues together. For everyone this involved making mistakes, showing previously-hidden vulnerability, acknowledging racism when it arises (as it will), figuring out how to resolve it within the alliance, trying out new and risky-feeling behavior, while continuing the work. That's not easy. It is necessary. We get better at it as we do it. And the rewards are huge.

I want to share a story of how I've been able to support this kind of alliance building as a trainer. The story illustrates the kinds of conversations we need to risk having in order to build cross-race alliances that support movement work. Recently Naomi Long, an African-American trainer, and I were asked to facilitate a group that included white people and people of color, who had an ongoing commitment to work together on issues impacting their local community.

In the beginning of the training, we spent time in white and people of color caucuses. As I worked with the white caucus, I was able to strengthen their capacity to dig in under politeness and the top layers of honesty and disclosure to address beliefs and assumptions that kept them from fuller participation in the coalition.

When they returned from caucusing, I watched as Naomi helped the group come back together and unpack what we had learned in the caucuses. Naomi started by saying,

“Erika and I have noticed over the course of doing interviews with many of you and listening to you work in your caucuses, that there seems to be some strong feelings in the room that are really alive and influencing the way you are interacting with each other.” I watched as many people around the circle nodded.

“And it seems these feelings are directly connected to how you perceive the other caucus group and your

potential work together.” More nods.

“And some of you have commented that you don't know and are not hearing what the other caucus is thinking or feeling... does that seem right?” Everyone nods.

Naomi continues, “So I'm wondering if I could offer up to ya'll what Erika and I have noticed and heard from all of you.... is that okay?” I saw some nods again, yet I also sensed anxiety in the room. There were some nervous-looking faces; some people slouched in their chairs, others trying to force a smile.

Naomi positioned herself squarely in front of the room and turned to one side, “So, from one side we're hearing, ‘I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing.’” There were nods of agreement from around the circle.

Naomi turns to her other side, “And we're also hearing, ‘I'm afraid they'll say the wrong thing.’” Others in the room giggled and smiled.

“We're also hearing ‘I'm afraid we haven't made as much progress as we could... I'm nervous they won't see all the hard work we've done. I don't want them to have to do all the work. Again.’”

Naomi turns back, dramatically, continuing the conversation between these two voices, “I'm afraid they haven't made as much progress as we need them to... I don't want to have to do all the heavy lifting.”

Naomi turns to her other side once again, “I'm afraid I'll hurt someone. I'm really, really, really afraid I'll hurt someone.” There is a little laughter.

Back to the other side, “I'm afraid I'mma have to hurt someone!” Lots of laughter fills the room. Naomi laughs too, “No, no, I'm just kidding. I added that piece.” There is more laughter but nods too from the people of color.

Naomi waits for the laughter to die down before continuing, “No, what we heard was, ‘I'm afraid I'll leave feeling hurt.... again.’” Many nods from both groups.

She turns for the last time. By this point the white caucus members show clear recognition in what she is saying, “You know what I'm really afraid of? I'm afraid I'll be judged and the work we started won't move forward.”

And finally, “You know what I'm really afraid of? I'm afraid I'll be judged and they still won't see how much we need them to really get this right.” I watched as the people of color giggled and nodded back in agreement.

Naomi finishes, “That's what we've been hearing from both the different caucuses,” winking. Some people clap and others continue to laugh and make eye contact with others around the circle. I can see that the tension in the room has shifted. There is a new openness, a release.

During the remainder of the retreat, this group began to name the things that strengthen trust between them, and name the things that do not. That was a big step. The caucuses continue to meet, and the group self-facilitated a follow-up retreat in which more progress was made. They have continued moving, at a

pace they can sustain, toward the goal of community organizing within low-income neighborhoods in their town. Naomi and I provide support and feedback long-distance.

This group is doing the challenging work needed to succeed at cross-race and cross-class organizing. Stay tuned...the next 25 years will be powerful!