

BEING AN ALLY VERSUS BEING A NICE PERSON

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I recently had a conversation where a friend asked whether or not it was important for people to speak up when they witness someone saying something ignorant or derogatory about a group of which they (the witness) are not a member. I stated that I believe that it is very important because when we are speaking on our own behalf, we also have to contend with possible feelings of hurt and anger and pain at the burden of the entire issue. Another woman participating in that conversation took exception with a statement I made in that response, namely that I believe it is up to white people to educate other white people about racism (as in, it is *not* the responsibility of People of Color). She was further offended by my response to her offense (which was, basically, that I was not interested in explaining myself to her) and, after making sure to let me know that she is raising her children to see people for who they are and not what they look like, she quit the conversation.

The entire exchange had me thinking and ruminating and I decided to write this article as a way of exploring my perceptions of the difference between being an ally and being a “nice person.” Because, I realized with crystaline clarity, that there is a *very* big difference between the two. I suspect a lot of conflict and disappointment happens because of people thinking they are being or dealing with one (the ally) when they are, in fact, faced with (or being) someone who is, actually just nice. I will put this in context and say that I do not know that woman and this is not in response to her. Our exchange was merely a catalyst for an alternate exploration and an opportunity to reexamine myself, my beliefs, and my responses. I will also say that it was an opportunity to act as an ally on my own behalf and that is never a bad thing.

I also realized, as I was thinking more on this topic, that there is something that I believe to be true, and, I think most of my communities understand to be true as well. But everyone who enters (or stumbles) into a conversation about oppression has not necessarily agreed to this same truth. It is this: *We live in a world, where racism, sexism, homophobia, class/economic divisions and other -isms are part of the structures. They are built into the foundation, the walls, and the roof of our society. They are in the air we breath and the waters we drink.*

These *-isms* are so much a part of our norm that, unless we start to look for them, we might not even realize they are there.

For those who may not know, this is the definition of an ally from Anne Bishop, author of *Becoming an Ally*, on her website www.becominganally.ca:

Allies are people who recognize the unearned privilege they receive from society's patterns of injustice and take responsibility for changing these patterns. Allies include men who work to end sexism, white people who work to end racism, heterosexual people who work to end heterosexism, able-bodied people who work to end ableism, and so on. Part of becoming an ally is also recognizing one's own experience of oppression. For example, a white woman can learn from her experience of sexism and apply it in becoming an ally to people of colour, or a person who grew up in poverty can learn from that experience how to respect others' feelings of helplessness because of a disability.

I, personally, think of allies as people who do the work to examine and question their own privilege. To understand who they are internally, but also how their external appearance or membership in certain groups impacts their societal powers. Being an ally means willing to be uncomfortable, being willing to be wrong (and, unfortunately, doing *that* ish frequently) and trying again, over and over. It's not so much about being right as it is about being unwilling to allow wrongs to persist unchallenged.

In contrast, being a nice person means being someone who doesn't want to make others feel badly. It's about the personal choices one makes regarding friendships and relationships. A nice person likes to see diversity at gatherings, but may not understand that "diversity" is not just people of different complexions or lifestyles (but who all have similar assumed world views and behavior patterns). True diversity is, at times, grinding and intense and messy and loud and awkward. I have seen, on more than one occasion, people who say that they really don't want this or that injustice to persist, but they then check out when they are confronted with it's existence in their own unconscious behaviors. Nice people don't want you to feel bad, but if someone has to, they'd much rather it not be them.

I have my own "nice" patterns that I have to confront pretty regularly. I prefer for people to be kind and to get along and for things to work out in the end and I sometimes find myself wanting to push aside or rush through tense moments to get back to "nice" or easeful feelings. But I also have to be brutally honest with myself and recognize that *my personal choices do not negate the reality of racism, sexism, homophobia or any other -ism*. And if I willfully choose to ignore my own privilege because my personal relationships or beliefs contradict the ugliness of one of those isms, I negatively impact my ability to be an ally. I render myself ineffective as an ally.

Here are a couple examples: (and I am listing these because I have heard them more than once from different sources. I'm sure you can think of a few of your own.)

"Why are those (insert group here) so angry? I didn't do anything to them."

"My (friend/lover/relative/second cousin on my father's side) is (African American/Asian/Latino), so I understand." (the implication being "so I *can't* be racist")

"I don't see color." (Please take a moment and imagine white people standing around in a room full of only other white people and saying this- Does that even happen? When I hear people say this, the subtext, to me, is always, they actually *do* see color, they see *your* color, and they just want you to know that they like you anyway. You know, in spite of it.)

Racism- Dealing with racism in spiritual communities is how I entered the field of diversity work (I speak a little more on that in my article "Shedding in Creation" in the anthology *Shades of Faith: Minority Voices in Paganism*, edited by Crystal Blanton). I don't much go into the specifics of my personal stories because one of the things I have learned as a result of my work in diversity is that, as a Person of Color, I have the choice of whether or not I share my personal experiences of racism with white people as an offering toward their comprehension of the existence of racism in the world and the harm that it does. It can be a very powerful thing, to reveal our own wounds as a way to shed light on a situation. It can also be a rewounding experience (especially when the response is along the lines of those all too common platitudes, "Well, maybe you just heard wrong." or "Well, I'm sorry you feel that way, but I don't think that was what they meant." or their own pushback stories of facing "prejudice" that they managed to overcome.) The choice of whether to share or not to share is not one to make lightly. I choose, now, to be selective about where I share specifics of these experiences because they are some of the more tender and scary ones. Allies are those who understand that that can be the case and, at their best, do not allow their own discomfort at their unearned privilege (or even at ways they have been complicit in the maintenance of the status quo in the past) to justify someone else's rewounding.

Sexism- When I was in the Women's Spirituality program at the California Institute of Integral Studies, there were a few occasions when I saw men who identified as feminists who would join a class, and then be surprised by the intensity of the comments that came their way from some of the women. These were usually white men, used to a certain amount of privilege afforded them in our society. One man explained to me, somewhat frustratedly, after his own experience, that the women hadn't even taken the time to get to know *him*, that they were just coming at him because he was a man. My response to him was, "Every day, I leave my house and I am a part of a group. People see me and I am a black woman. They do not know me. Your assumption that you get to be seen for

who you are as an individual is, actually, part of your privilege as a white male. You are a man and men have done harm, why do you think you have a right not to hear about it?"

(A pause to note that while I'm very aware that, when it comes to matters of racism and sexism, I fall into the categories of lesser power or privilege, I would like to clearly state that my awareness of my position of general societal disadvantage does not, in any way, equate to my feeling powerless as an individual. There is a difference.)

Homophobia- Here is the arena in which my privilege flaps in the wind, where I roar my ignorance to the world in my (sometimes fumbling) attempts to be an ally. The hard thing about being an ally is that you have to get it really really wrong a lot of times before you can genuinely start to (sometimes) get it right. I am a heterosexual woman. I have been an ally, to the best of my ability, since I was in high school and joined the GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) or maybe since the summer I was 10 and witnessed someone coming out for the first time. I have been fortunate to witness more than one of my friends coming out to their communities, saying "I am a gay man." or "I am a lesbian." I have had opportunities to participate in numerous spiritual communities and activist communities and performance communities which have often been largely populated by people who identify as gay, queer, lesbian, bisexual, trans, or placing (or finding) themselves in a variety of ways on the spectrum of sexuality and identity. Despite that, I *still* often feel as though I have no idea if what I am saying or doing is the "right thing." I read, I learn from conversations, I speak up when and where I can (and not always skillfully) and have felt the need, on many occasions, to check in with friends and ask, "Is it appropriate for me to say this? Is it offensive if I say or do that? Is it okay if I ask you a question as my "gay" friend? And let me know if you don't feel like being the voice of LGBT America today."

There are no definitive answers to any of these. No clear rules about "always say and do this" or "never say and do that." I haven't even touched on things like pretty privilege, educational privilege, ableism, and a whole host of other forms of oppression. (I'm thinking there might be some benefit in going on my own research mission to root out the -isms in our world. That may or may not result in another article if I do it.) These are complex issues and it can take years to begin to understand the depth of impact any one of these has on an individual life. To go from there to looking at ways they overlap and intersect and then expanding out to a globe full of people who are all being impacted by injustice in a variety of ways . . . it's overwhelming to consider. We all know that activists burn themselves out on a regular basis, trying to conquer Oppression Mountain, and no one person can do the exact right thing every single day. But we do lighten the burden when we each take on *something*.

I have a feeling that I will be revisiting this idea many more times in the future, but for right now, I'm sitting with this final sense I had of the difference between being an ally and being nice. I started this exploration with the thought that I was trying to

acknowledge and accept the reality that some people will never be allies, that simply being “nice” is enough of an accomplishment. I understand that that is the truth we live within. But this final element tipped the scale for me and actually makes me wish for more people to abandon niceness and claim their roles as allies (in whatever ways they can.) Here it is: “Nice” people do not remain nice for long in conversations about the - isms and their own privilege. This is because looking at and addressing these uncomfortable realities actually challenges one’s self image as a “nice” person and an attack in response is, unfortunately, often the result (and the cycle of wounding takes another turn). If we can simply have the courage to strip away the veneer of niceness, show up authentically and with compassion (for ourselves and others), we have the chance to begin to be extraordinary (if imperfect) champions for one another.

One last note: I am completing this article as we transition from February to March, from Black History Month to Women’s History Month. I feel very aware that there is a lot of shared triumph and conflict in the history of the efforts for African Americans and women to gain access to certain rights and privileges in this nation. That feels significant somehow, and I complete this article with a prayer, as one who straddles these two lived experiences, that each day I strive to do my best not to add to the burdens of others who are trying to get through the day as authentic beings in a world that can, at times, be distressingly cruel. And I go beyond that to pray that I do my part to serve our collective awakening to our own radiance as a species and our return to harmony with the Divine (in its many thousand names), the Earth, and the fellow beings that exist here with us.

Nadirah Adeye is an able bodied (privileged) pagan (non-privileged) heterosexual (privileged) woman (non-privileged) of color (non-privileged) who has been fortunate to have many wonderful educational opportunities (privileged) which have resulted in entirely too many student loans (mixed privilege and non). You can learn more about her and her methods for dealing with privilege and oppression at [Sacred Sensual Living](#).