

CHAPTER 17

Not in Our Name

Fierce Allyship for White Women

Eleonora Bartoli

As a psychologist specializing in multicultural counseling and trauma, I often attend workshops or conferences about diversity issues. Over the years, I have noticed a pattern in conversations about race, which has become a signpost of sort: If a person of color makes a statement that triggers a white woman, I have come to assume the person of color is correct even before fully understanding what they mean. Recently, I attended a diversity workshop where a woman of color (we'll call her Teresa) was describing an experience of being let down by a white female colleague (we'll call her Karen). Karen didn't speak up when a racist comment was made at a faculty meeting they both attended, where Teresa was the only person of color. Since Karen had been consistently vocal about her antiracist views, Teresa was disappointed by Karen's silence and confronted her after the meeting. Initially, Karen did not welcome Teresa's challenge and was adamant that the racist comment was not "bad enough" to warrant making the rest of the faculty uncomfortable, and that pointing it out would have "inappropriately derailed" the focus of the meeting. Because of their friendship and longstanding collaboration, they were able to process the incident again, and eventually Karen understood Teresa's perspective.

Teresa reported this experience to us in the workshop as an example of white women's tendency not to act on their antiracist beliefs when opportunities arise. Quickly, another white woman (we'll call her Sara) contradicted Teresa, saying that she was generalizing her experience without having proof of a larger trend at play. Both Teresa and other participants of color reported additional similar experiences of feeling let down by white women who had supposedly positioned themselves as antiracist allies. Despite this additional data, Sara was not persuaded and said that they could simply "agree to disagree."

As a white, cisgender woman, I often deeply resonate with the reaction of other white women; but I also experience the dissonance that comes when you know you are hearing the truth even if you can't quite fully grasp it. It took me a long time to realize why, for white women truth can be a tricky business. I was born and raised within a country (Italy), family, and time (the 1970s) that espoused deeply sexist beliefs and practices. Unfortunately, such beliefs and practices are not altogether unlike what we are seeing with the #MeToo movement in the United States. That said, while growing up, I was overtly taught that women are unintelligent and "ditzzy" in nature (with rare exceptions, carrying mostly negative connotations), and that much of women's value comes from being beautiful in the eyes of men and from their ability to cater to men's needs. These lessons came in overt and covert ways (e.g., who was praised for doing what), and I experienced them both directly and indirectly (as they were acted upon and by other women). For example, regardless of actual success, what men did or were going to do for a living was always valued and considered central to their identity. In contrast, women saw themselves and were most often talked about in terms of beauty, weight, partnership status, and skillfulness in raising children and otherwise taking care of others. So even when I was not explicitly told that I was less intelligent than men (which I was, whether the proof was that women were absent from history books and public life, or whether it was deemed an "obvious" fact), I heard that message clearly both in what I heard others say *and* by the ways in which my opinions and perspectives (as a woman) were repetitively dismissed or ridiculed.

Because of this early socialization, I came to the conclusion that white men, contrary to popular belief, are not knights in shining armor. They might *choose* not to exploit your body, whether by gazing (catcalling being only its most overt form), requesting a specific behavior (female "politeness" includes quietly listening, acting interested, laughing at demeaning jokes, prioritizing men's wishes or needs, and accepting sexual advances), or being physically violent; but at any one moment the (largely unrestricted) prerogative to exploit is there. For many of us as white women, the experience of direct violence is all too real; for others it's vicarious knowledge, but we all learn the rules of engagement. Outright or direct experience of violence is not necessary for us to come to embody the attitudes and behaviors that are welcomed and rewarded both personally and professionally. In this context, white men's choices not to act on their prerogative to dominate women is implicitly considered an act of benevolence, or something to be merited, rather than an expectation, and is viewed often enough even as normative and acceptable behavior (as highlighted by the #MeToo movement).

As white women, we become pros at seeking and deserving white men's benevolence—by making ourselves smaller, less smart, accommodating, flirtatious, nurturing, and so on. This is most easily and safely done if we are able to adequately distort the truth (of our intelligence, our power, our deservedness, our humanity, and not least of all, our safety¹), because not doing so is

dangerous. No matter what, we are always intuitively navigating men, most of whom in both our personal and professional lives are white.

To be sure, white men are *not* intrinsically evil. The boys-will-just-be-boys adage teeters in that direction; it dehumanizes men and serves no one. We are all acculturated into white supremacist culture, according to which cisgender, able-bodied, white, Christian, and heterosexual males are framed as the superior “race” (Liu, 2017). As such, they have automatic access to rights and resources, without having to fight for or demand them. (This includes feeling the right to keep the bodies of others in inferior positions.) Sometimes white supremacist ideology shows up in small ways (e.g., our opinions, as white women, might be seen as less valid than the opinion of a white man), at other times in big ways (e.g., not being paid a financially viable wage, fearing for one’s physical safety). Either way, the underlying narrative is always present. Within it, we all play our roles to remain safe (white women) or live up to our potential (white men). Because of the privileges white women are still afforded by being white, we are not as conscious of the ways in which, within white supremacy, we are still second-class citizens. This is why it’s all too easy to enlist us in preserving the status quo; as long as we agree to uphold the system, we can maintain a place of relative safety and access, even if it is at the cost of our own freedom and power.

There is no doubt in my mind that my deep love for antiracism came from the balm of hearing the truth—about the manifestations and impact of racism—spoken out loud and unabashedly, *and* hearing it from a place of relative comfort. (As a white person, I resonate with that truth without directly feeling its pain.) But that truth from people of color also scares me, because to fully hear it is to want to do something about it, and that is a direct challenge to white men’s privileged social standing. That truth, then, intrinsically threatens my ability to deserve white men’s benevolence. And so I find myself putting up resistance to seeing or believing the experience of people of color. Whether consciously or not, self-preservation takes over.

How can we teach the brilliant and beautiful Black girls in our classrooms if we can’t hear the truth of their experiences, if fully seeing them feels like a personal threat? Being effective teachers of Black girls hinges on us reclaiming our power, our truths, and our innate fearlessness, traits we forget we have because of the real pressures to conform to sexist and racist beliefs. We must remember that as white women we have survived centuries of oppression and have continued to thrive and love all the while. This means that we are the lived expression of immeasurable strength and wisdom. To get back in touch with our power, our wisdom, and our ability to choose, we must face our fears, heal our wounds, and boost our resilience. These provide the most essential foundation for our teaching practices; cultivating fearlessness is our way out of white supremacy and into true allyship.

How do we do that? I will propose two exercises that will guide you in identifying old wounds and boosting your resilience to the anxiety that comes from entering spaces and conversations that our bodies have been taught to consider inappropriate or off limits. These exercises may bring up memories and feelings requiring deeper work than resilience building. I invite you to see this as an opportunity; if we had chosen a more impersonal line of work, which did not directly challenge white supremacy, we might never have to get in touch with some of our wounds or require healing. However, the work of empowering individuals directly impacted by white supremacy (Black girls), done in a body that has been asked to be a weapon of white supremacy (white women), can't help but require deeper preparation. Personal work is critical to our effectiveness, and it brings with it much lightness and freedom in the rest of our lives. That said, the following exercises should be engaged with full awareness that they may lead you to identify targets of further emotional work.

The first exercise is part of the standard eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) assessment, and is called *floatback* (Shapiro, 2018). In trauma treatment, it is used to connect current symptoms to past traumatic experiences, in order to identify a specific target for EMDR treatment. Here, I will invite you to ask yourself questions to determine how past experiences might impede your ability to fully hear the dreams and needs of the Black girls you teach. To begin, think of a few recent times when you were confronted with information that questioned your multicultural competence and to which you had a strong negative reaction (whether the information came to your attention directly from your own students' verbal or nonverbal behaviors, or indirectly from your students' caregivers, a colleague, a friend, or others). Among the scenarios you have identified, choose the one that is still (i.e., *currently, not* when it originally happened) the most distressing for you to recall. Then bring to mind the image that represents the worst moment of that experience, again considering how that moment feels right now. You might replay the memory as a video in your mind and pause it at the scene that currently creates the most distress. Then ask yourself, "What is the negative belief about myself that goes with that image?" That usually starts with "I am . . ." and ends with phrases such as "not safe, not good enough, not in control." Now, as you place your awareness on that image and the negative belief that accompanies it, pay attention to the emotions and associated physical sensations that arise from them. Once you have tapped into these, let your mind scan your past (e.g., you may hover your awareness around specific time periods, such as your 20s, your elementary school years) for images of experiences that carry the same feelings and sensations, letting go, as best you can, of any expectations of what might come up. As you float back through your past, make a list of these past experiences, and notice which ones still carry a considerable amount of sting. These are the experiences you want to find avenues for processing more deeply, whether by journaling about them, sharing them with trusted allies, seeking counseling, or doing something else. What you are looking for are avenues to reprocess and heal memories of times

when your body learned that it was not okay in some way, because when these memories are triggered by current experiences, they will fuel a defensive reaction *to the current experience*, unbeknownst to us. This is why facing and reprocessing such memories with the appropriate support not only allows you to gain ease and confidence in your daily life, but will also enable you to enter difficult conversations with greater courage and clarity.

The negative belief about yourself that you identified in the first part of this exercise (e.g., “I am not good enough”) is likely to be a core fear, learned and rehearsed through any number of past events. For our second exercise, you might choose that fear as your starting point, or a different one specifically related to teaching Black girls or being multiculturally competent (e.g., “I fear I am seen as racist”; “I fear I am callous”). When such fears are triggered, the danger-detection system located at the center of our brains will automatically initiate a defensive response, which prepares us to “fight, flight, or freeze” by temporarily shutting down our abilities to *both* think clearly and empathize—just as we need our ability to think and empathize the most! Once again, freedom from our fears comes through working through them (not by avoiding them using attack or withdrawal strategies). To work through these fears, we borrow another counseling technique, called *exposure*, here applied to an imagined worst-case scenario (Hoyer & Beesdo-Baum, 2014).

First, choose a fear that activates a fair amount of worry. Then, write a short (one- or two-paragraph) script, in the present tense, that plays out the negative outcome of the worry. You should choose a specific scenario to write about based on your fear, using partly real or fully hypothetical events. The script should describe the story of exactly what happens in this worst-case fear-based scenario, from beginning to end, including the worst possible outcome, and should include details about your thoughts, feelings, and other sensory experiences (as relevant). The task is to read the script (preferably out loud) over and over again for at least 20 minutes a day, focusing on the thoughts and feelings that arise from doing it. The idea is to do the exercise for as long as it takes (usually anywhere from a few days to a few weeks) for the script to no longer activate significant anxiety, or for your perspective on your fear to shift in ways that allow you to remain open, present, and empathetic.

Fully welcoming the beauty and brilliance of Black girls is a radical act in a society founded on white supremacist principles and practices. As white women committed to “the work,” we are always searching for answers, as new questions continuously arise because the lives of the Black girls we want to partner with are complex and in constant evolution. This is where conquering our fears matters the most. As long as we have human bodies, we have to contend with the fact that they are beautifully designed to protect us from danger. But fear confuses our perceptions, constrains our actions, and can indeed distract us from our purpose. Fearlessness (understood not as the absence of fear, but the courage to act with full awareness of the limits of our safety) opens the doors to our deep capacity for empathy, love,

connection, and wisdom; it brings with it the ability to learn as well as immense creativity. Conquering our fears allows us to question the safety granted by white men's benevolence, and to actually choose how we want to present ourselves and how we want to take action. Fierce resistance and allyship starts as an inside job; the answers we need become available to us when we are fully present and open. Your task is to get on the path of fearlessness; the road is fully open from there.

NOTE

1. It takes a fair amount of propaganda and of overriding one's perceptions for white women to believe that white men's violence towards men of color is perpetrated in service of white women's protection.

Vignette: The Culture Walk

Lauren Calig

Here is the problem. A poster with a Black scientist is no big deal to a white person. We see ourselves every day, everywhere, all the time. "White teachers are teaching white, Black, and brown students about the value of whiteness as they have cornered the identity market within educational settings. Whiteness not only shapes and informs acceptable blackness and brownness in the American educational system, but it also begets whiteness" (Hancock & Warren, p. 6).

Walking into white spaces as white people, rarely do we recognize that there is a "white culture" to adhere to. As a white teacher, I must create a place where my Black students can be celebrated, loved, accepted, cared for, welcomed, and valued for who they are and the culture they bring.

Diversity 101 tells us that this is a good place to begin. Let people be observers in their own spaces; create the space for them to lean in.

"I see myself at my school, and I know that I can do/be anything," I wrote on the board. The faculty: one African American/Black woman, one Indian American woman, and 16 white women all gathered not knowing the plan. They read the words on the board: "The Culture Walk." I explained what this meant: "We will be walking through the school observing what we see both as ourselves and as if we were African American/Black girls. We will reconvene to share observations."

Returning to our space after the walk, I asked, "What did you notice? How do you think our Black girls feel? Do you think they feel valued and seen?"

The room was silent; I spoke. "I noticed very few photographs of students. When I did see photographs, those were the few times that I saw Black girls. I saw very few posters of Black women as professionals. I saw a bulletin board in the hallway

that said *Dream, Dare, Do*, and there were five photographs—all of white girls.” Hands started to go up. They hadn’t realized what it looked like before the walk. They hadn’t looked, I mean, looked as a Black girl, a Black parent, a Black person.

“I understand this is important,” one person said, “But isn’t it important for all of our girls to see themselves?”

This statement, this truth that a white colleague was holding was what I was fighting. “When you are a Black adult, and you make the choice of bringing your Black girl to a predominantly white school, founded by white women and run mostly by white women, you need to know that you can trust the school to understand your beautiful, Black girl. You need to know that she is safe.”

Beginning the year with *The Culture Walk* prepped our school for an open dialogue about what our school looked like and should look like for those who are not white. While our schools can be progressive, liberal, and welcoming, we now are faced with the recognition that this may only be the case for white students. Once we recognize this, we must make changes.