

## **Core Pedagogical Principles and Values of the Doing Our Own Work Seminar**

© Melanie S. Morrison and Ann Flescher 2003

It is our experience that sustained growth, commitment and change are enhanced when:

### **Facilitators are learners along with participants**

Dismantling racism in ourselves and in our world is a life-long process. That process requires a willingness to be vulnerable and imperfect in front of others who will, with care and respect, help us come to see ourselves more fully. The work that white people need to do -- both in terms of coming to consciousness and in terms of acting to challenge racism -- is work that is never finished, once and for all. That means that facilitators, just as much as participants, are always needing to "do our own work." Facilitator involvement as learners is good role modeling for participants.

To the extent possible, facilitators participate in most of the Doing Our Own Work activities. There are a couple of exceptions to this. For instance, when a facilitator is leading a particular activity, she may not be able to participate because she is needing to keep time and to observe what is happening in the group. At other times, the facilitators may need to check in with each other -- while participants are in small groups or in pairs -- to see if the design needs to be altered or any additional processing needs to happen in the group.

### **Communities of accountability and support are created**

The history of racism and its continuing prevalence in our lives and society can be overwhelming. As white people, we are taught to ignore its existence and rewarded for doing so. We truly 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. If we are to become allies to people of color we need to be in relationships of accountability with people of color and with other white people.

The *Doing Our Own Work* seminar has many rituals and activities that seek to build relationships that are supportive, genuine, and mutually accountable. The work of building this kind of community begins before seminar participants arrive for the first session. Participants are asked to read an introductory article, to complete reflection questions, to bring a journal, and to fill out a payment plan. When participants arrive, they find a warm and inviting setting. There are many small steps of 'joining' the group such as: name tags, choosing a mug for the weekend, finding a room and sharing that room with one other person.

Joining the circle continues with Friday evening activities such as introducing oneself to the other participants around the circle, choosing a stone and building the stone circle around the candle, naming someone who has inspired you by their work for racial justice, singing a song, and talking in pairs. The way we do meals also helps in creating a sense of community and shared responsibility. For example, we ask participants to help with clean up after meals. Other community building activities include: small group activities, workgroups where we talk about experiences in our spheres of influence, and contact with our partners.

Another very important part of creating community has to do with nurturing communities of accountability with people of color. One of the dangers of an all-white seminar is that it can become an insular experience unless you actively work to develop and maintain relationships with people of color. Understandably, some people of color may be initially skeptical upon hearing of a seminar for and by white people. If you take care to communicate openly with people of color in your community about your intention to offer the seminar, this will be a step in the direction of building trust. It is also important that you carefully research and learn about other anti-racism programs and grassroots organizations in your community. *Doing Our Own Work* is only one of many efforts in local communities. Long before you were here or *Doing Our Own Work* was begun, there were people of color and other white people who were working to dismantle racism. By researching that history, you will have a better sense of how your seminar fits in the larger community. And the communication that you initiate in this regard can be one of many steps in the ongoing effort to build collaboration and coalition with people of color in the work of confronting racism.

### **All aspects of an individual's identity are welcomed**

Just because we all identify as white and as women does not mean we are all the same. We carry multiple identities into any group – some of them visible; some invisible. These identities have many feelings and experiences attached to them. These identities may have to do with sexual orientation, religion, class, size, abilities, employment, education, or family structure. Even though the focus of this seminar is racism – participants need to know that they may reveal all who they are in this seminar and that part of the work of becoming anti-racist allies has to do with learning more deeply who we are and who our people are.

### **Attention is paid to nurturing resources for spiritual strength, inspiration, and hope**

The scope, degree, and complexity of racism in our lives and society is so vast that it is, at times, impossible to imagine our world without it. Sustaining the conviction that we can make a difference as we work to confront racism requires a certain amount of faith because there is much evidence to the contrary. We need to be able to hold up hope to one another when hope is faint. We need to be able to buoy each other up with the stories, songs, and words of those who have gone before us and on whose shoulders we stand.

Therefore, we build into this seminar a variety of activities that encourage people to identify resources for spiritual nurture and revitalization. Examples of these activities include: the use of opening and closing rituals, songs, poetry, tapestries of quotes, lighting candles in memory of those who have worked for racial justice, journal reflections, time for walking the land, and morning silence.

### **Action and reflection are intimately intertwined**

The purpose of *Doing Our Own Work* is to equip white women to become anti-racist allies in the work of dismantling personal, interpersonal, and institutional racism. Each woman in the seminar is invited to identify a "sphere of influence" in her life that serves as a lens for the learning and the action that will take place during the seminar. The purpose of identifying a sphere of influence is not to conjure up a "class project"; it is to choose a context in which the participant is already invested in working against racism.

The seminar utilizes an action/reflection model of teaching and learning whereby participants are constantly asking themselves how the new knowledge they are learning can be translated into action against racism and how their actions against racism can be critically reflected upon, refined, sharpened, and strengthened. This action/reflection pedagogy is based on the belief that we learn by acting and reflecting all at once. New action brings with it a new level of reflection and good critical reflection can yield better, more effective action.

### **Both the head and the heart must be engaged in the learning process**

We believe that one cannot simply feel one's way through this work. There is a great deal of information that needs to be understood and absorbed intellectually. There is a level of complexity to the ways systems of oppression operate and there are new concepts that have to be grasped and critically examined. Therefore, it is important to engage our critical capacities and our intellects as we seek to deepen our understanding of racism.

Having said that, however, it must also be stressed that an intellectual understanding of racism is not sufficient to motivate and sustain change. Our emotions and our hearts must also be engaged. If we have been learning about the genocide inflicted on Native Americans and have only reacted intellectually, something is wrong. If we have not felt shame, sadness, grief, anger, and rage, we have not begun to really absorb what we are learning. Meaning is found in the pairing of intellectual understanding to emotion.

On the other hand, if all we do is emotive as white people in reaction to racism, we will also be of little use. And we will quickly burn out. Our grief and anger must be felt, but they need to find constructive avenues for contributing to change. We have not done our "work" as white people if we have only uncovered buried memories from our childhood and allowed ourselves to feel our own reactions to racism. Our feelings must be paired with a critical analysis and with strategies for effective action to dismantle racism.

The *Doing Our Own Work* seminar intentionally incorporates different modes of learning including: presentations that engage the intellect and the heart, discussions, experiential activities, individual reflection, videos, paired sharing, readings, journal writing, etc. This movement back and forth between conceptual input and experiential activities is designed to present cognitive content areas and apply them to the real life experience of participants and people of color.

### **There is freedom and love in speaking and hearing the truth**

James Baldwin wrote, "If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see." A core pedagogical principle of *Doing Our Own Work* is that there are things we cannot see as white people. The nature of privilege is that it is most often invisible to those who hold it. We will only become conscious of our white skin privilege as we intentionally open ourselves to hearing the truth spoken, written, and enacted by people of color.

We also believe that opening ourselves to the truth makes us stronger and healthier people. The lies White America has told about race and racism in the USA have caused economic, physical, emotional, intellectual and political harm to people of color. The perpetuation of these lies also causes deep spiritual, cultural and developmental harm to white people. While the intricacies

and permutations of how racism operates in the U.S. are complex, the reasons for their continuance are not. Racism exists so that white people can control the wealth, power, and resources of this country. We believe that unmasking these truths is the only way to freedom for all of us.

*Doing Our Own Work* uses a variety of activities to give voice to the truth of racism in the US. Examples include the Wall of History, Historical Moments in U.S. Oppression, and videos such *In Whose Honor*.

**We encourage individuals to pay attention to their needs**

Just as the seminar facilitators are not seen as "experts," but rather as learners and seekers, participants are not treated as children. Participants do not need permission to leave the room or get something to drink. They are in charge of what they share. We encourage participants to pay attention to what they need and take responsibility for getting those needs met in the seminar. This may include seeking out additional readings or other resources to supplement what is offered in the seminar itself.

**© 2003 Melanie S. Morrison and Ann Flescher. Used with permission. Do not reprint without the author's permission. Contact: [melaniemorrison@alliesforchange.org](mailto:melaniemorrison@alliesforchange.org)**