

History and Philosophy of Doing Our Own Work: A Seminar for Anti-Racist White People

© Melanie Morrison 2014
www.alliesforchange.org

Doing Our Own Work is an intensive seminar for white people who seek to deepen their commitment to confronting and challenging white racism and white privilege where they live and work. It is our experience and conviction that those of us who are white need to "do our own work" – educating ourselves, confronting racism, holding each other accountable, and demonstrating good faith as we seek to build genuine and lasting coalitions with people of color.

The *Doing Our Own Work* seminar is designed as a supplement to, not a substitute for, contexts where people of diverse races and ethnicities discuss and strategize together how racism can be challenged. There are important discoveries that can be made when white people gather with the intention of analyzing white racism and white privilege, and there are skills and tools that can be acquired in such a setting — especially if the experience and wisdom of people of color are conveyed by means of readings, videos, and other media. However, an all-white context has built-in limitations. Nothing can take the place of face-to-face contact, dialogue, and confrontation between people of different races. Therefore, this seminar should be viewed as a "way station;" the way that leads toward racial justice remains the hard and exhilarating work of building multiracial, multicultural, anti-racist coalitions.

Doing Our Own Work was initiated in 1994 by Eleanor S. Morrison and Melanie Morrison, then founders and co-directors of Leaven – a nonprofit organization in Mid-Michigan dedicated to nurturing the relationship between spirituality and social justice. The seminar has been offered in different parts of the country over the past 20 years. In 2007, *Doing Our Own Work* became a core program of *Allies for Change* – an organization founded by Melanie Morrison to nurture connection and collaboration between allies working for social change.

People from communities all across North America have taken part in *Doing Our Own Work*, experiencing it as a unique opportunity to engage in deep, strenuous, and soul-stretching work. Here is what some of those participants say about the experience:

“*Doing Our Own Work* is life-changing. It has affected my choice of where to live, what do with my life, where my priorities lie, everything.”

“After attending *Doing Our Own Work*, I am much more willing to take risks as a white person when working alongside of, and in solidarity with, people of color.”

“*Doing Our Own Work* gave me a broader and deeper knowledge of anti-racism, white privilege, my people’s history, and the way oppression functions.”

Action and reflection

Anti-racist action and reflection form the heart of *Doing Our Own Work*. The seminar provides more than 40 hours of "class time" and has been offered in different formats, depending on the needs of the group. Sometimes, we offer the seminar in a six-consecutive-day format that is held in a retreat center. We have offered the seminar in a non-residential format, for a total six-day long sessions spread over three months, meeting once a month on a consecutive Friday and Saturday (9:00 am – 5:00 pm each day). The seminar has also consisted of three weekends held

over the course of three or four months. The first weekend is devoted to analyzing white racism and white privilege. The second weekend explores what it means to be an anti-racist ally with people of color and other white people. The third weekend focuses on organizational change – how organizations can take specific steps toward becoming anti-racist and multicultural.

Between weekends, participants are assigned articles and book chapters and encouraged to keep a daily journal of reflections about what they are learning and doing with regard to racism and anti-racism. During the weekend sessions, participants are invited to share what they have experienced in the intervening weeks. Utilizing input from the leaders, assigned readings, videos, group discussion, and structured exercises, participants explore the following topics and issues:

- Individual racism, institutional racism, and cultural racism
- The historical roots of white racism in the United States
- White privilege and unearned advantage
- Claiming and shaping an anti-racist identity
- How to be an effective anti-racist ally
- Practicing the skills of interrupting racism
- Strategies for institutional change
- Developing relationship of support and accountability

Sphere of Influence

The action/reflection pedagogy at the heart of *Doing Our Own Work* makes this seminar unique in some people's experience. The ultimate goal of this seminar is not only the acquisition of knowledge; the goal is to equip white people to become agents of structural change where they live and work. Participants are invited to identify a "sphere of influence" in their lives that will serve as the focus of their action and reflection. This "sphere of influence" could be their work place, neighborhood, family, worshipping community, or an organization to which they belong. With the help of the group and the resources provided by the seminar, participants do an inventory of their spheres of influence, seeking to identify how and where racism is present. They then develop an action plan and timetable, identifying specific things they can do to challenge racism in that sphere of influence and how they can build alliances with others committed to change.

Each participant is assigned a "partner"– someone they can email, write letters, or call to talk about what they are experiencing, feeling, noting, and encountering between the weekends we are together. We recommend that participants communicate with their partner once a week and we suggest at least three topics about which they can check in with each other: 1) What they are noting in their journals about racism, white privilege, and anti-racism; 2) What they are experiencing in their sphere of influence; 3) Reactions they are having to the readings.

Registration for *Doing Our Own Work* is usually limited to 15-20 participants so that in-depth conversation and consultation can occur. Even though enrollment is limited, the action component of this seminar means that it impacts many more people than the 15-20 participants.

Strength and Resiliency for the Long Haul

Anti-racism work necessitates a commitment for the long-haul. To sustain that commitment requires an infusion of spirit and courage. Movements for social justice are sustained by songs, poetry, essays, speeches, and remembering those who have gone before. Their witness can

inspire new hope and courage in us. Therefore, participants in *Doing Our Own Work* are exposed to poets, authors, singers, and songwriters who speak from diverse spiritual and cultural traditions and are committed to the work of dismantling oppression.

Doing Our Own Work also provides a context where participants can explore the resources they need to sustain this work. An essential component of the seminar is the opportunity for participants to reflect upon and discuss questions such as these:

- *From where do we draw strength in this work when we face demoralization or weariness?*
- *What and where are our resources for revitalization and renewal?*
- *How can we develop our capacity for resiliency in the face of demoralization?*
- *How can we stay in this struggle for the long haul?*
- *What most deeply grounds and inspires our commitment to anti-racism work?*
- *What gives us hope when there seems to be scant evidence for hope in the world around us?*

Goals and Objectives of the seminar

1. Affecting systemic social change: As stated above, the primary goal of this seminar is to equip white people to become agents of structural change. *Doing Our Own Work* is, therefore, designed for those who want to acquire the anti-racist analysis, skills, and tools needed to help bring about systemic change in the institutions with which they are affiliated. We emphasize that systemic change requires a commitment to dismantling institutional and cultural racism, as well as personal and interpersonal manifestations of racism.

2. Nurturing personal and social transformation: *Doing Our Own Work* provides a context that nurtures both personal and social transformation. It is our conviction that genuine and lasting social change cannot occur without both kinds of transformation. Therefore, one of the goals of the seminar is to provide a context for participants to explore and articulate what most deeply motivates them to work for racial justice and how they can intentionally seek out communities of accountability that challenge and support them.

3. Building a community of accountability with people of color. The central focus of the seminar is to equip white people with the analysis, self-reflection, conceptual tools, and behavioral skills necessary to become better allies with people of color. White people cannot, however, become effective anti-racist allies unless they are in ongoing relationships with people of color. Therefore, we encourage *Doing Our Own Work* participants to become engaged in grassroots anti-racist organizations led by people of color. Listening to people of color, learning about their experience of racism, and respecting the priorities they have developed as strategies for change, is critically important work for white people who want to be allies. By showing up consistently, listening, learning, and acting when needed, white people can develop relationships with people of color to whom they are accountable.

The *Doing Our Own Work* training team is also committed to working in relation to a community of accountability with people of color. Therefore, a critical element in the ongoing design process for the seminar is consultation with people of color who are anti-racist educators and activists.

4. Building a community of accountability among white anti-racist allies: The commitment to anti-racist activism cannot be short-term or sporadic because dismantling institutional white racism requires constant vigilance and long-term strategies. Our experience is that if white people are to become life-long anti-racist allies, they need to seek out other white people with whom they can commiserate, consult, struggle, vent, be challenged, and find support. *Doing Our Own Work* is one context that provides these vitally important connections between white anti-racist allies.

Training of Facilitators Program

Participants from all across North America have taken part in *Doing Our Own Work* over the course of the past fourteen years. On-going contact with former participants testifies to the ways this program has been transforming for those who have taken part and for the institutions with which they are affiliated. It was former participants who, in 2002, requested that a "training of facilitators" program be developed to equip graduates with the skills to initiate and facilitate *Doing Our Own Work* in their local communities. These former participants spoke passionately about the need, in their communities, for the *Doing Our Own Work* model of action/reflection and they pledged to devote their time and energies to attending the training and then initiating and facilitating the seminar in their region

The first Training of Facilitators was launched in 2003. It consisted of a six-day training session in December 2003 and a two-day follow-up session held in the summer of 2005. Participants in the Training of Facilitators program received a Facilitator's Handbook with an introduction to the history and philosophy of *Doing Our Own Work*, designs for each of the three seminar weekends, suggestions for alternate activities, and copies of assigned readings. The six-day session provided training in content, process, facilitation skills, marketing, recruitment, and evaluation. The follow-up session brought facilitators together after they had led their first round of weekends and provide a context for evaluation and discussion. In the months between the initial training and the follow-up session, the training team was available for consultation by email and phone.

The Training of Facilitators Program was made possible in part through grants provided by the Michigan Women's Foundation, the Nokomis Foundation, and the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ.

Location and Dates of Upcoming *Doing Our Own Work* Seminars

For a listing of upcoming seminars, visit the Allies for Change web site:
<http://www.alliesforchange.org>.