

The F word: On feminism, being an ally & social justice

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December 3, 2009

I am an African-American man. I am a heterosexual man. I am a middle-class man. These three statements are the basis for my social justice work and advocacy, but each carries its own hazard for working on social justice. While many will assume my position as a Black man in America makes me sensitive to “minority statuses”, in reality, over the past 10 years I’ve learned nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, in many ways, my status as Black man in America has the potential to undercut my work of engaging the pursuit of equality of opportunity, equality of outcome and the right to self-determination for all people. I am both privileged and disadvantaged. I have identities that I celebrate, identities I conceal, and all these decisions matter for my view on the world and what I **choose** to fight for and against.



[Sorry, this image was hilarious to me.]

I didn't really begin to grapple with my privilege as a Black man until I was a student in Beverly Guy-Sheftall's class on Black Feminism at Spelman College. I can remember rebutting each point she made about the Million Man March (MMM) as an extension of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and an attempt to further embed misogyny. Besides being a slew of words I didn't fully understand, I could not understand why she fixated on all the “negatives” of the March. In the class, she essentially argued the MMM because of the patriarchy, etc. she could not support it and thus thought it held little value. By the time I landed in her class I was a senior at Morehouse and certainly had come to believe the MMM was one of the most transformative events I'd ever personally experienced and I refused to have the event mischaracterized.

I paraphrase, but I told her, “Yes, it does ask men to come back into the family, but it doesn't always mean that have to be at the head. I know some talked about being at the head of the household, but not everyone believed that. We didn't invite sisters because it was our time as Black men to redefine our commitment to the Black family and Black community.” I wanted to her to see the value of the event **beyond her points**. She let me finish and sagely replied, “It must be a nice privilege to tell someone to overlook the oppressive elements of a program,

because it was helpful to you." My face fell, my mouth shut, and I sat sheepishly quiet. My head spun between realization, frustration, and confusion. For the next few classes, I sat quietly and tried to figure out how I had not "seen it coming." I realized that the lesson I had learned on the athletic field so many times applied to social justice work, "sometimes you got to get the wind knocked out of you to bring you back to earth." Guy-Sheftall had pointed out what I'd seen done so many times but by those who came from outside of a community to do social justice work in my community. Someone(s) coming from the outside, declaring themselves an ally and expert and overlooking the view of those who were subject to the oppression in favor of their own perspective.

The blind spots I exhibited in my conversation with Dr. Guy-Sheftall were not limited to the Million Man March and helped me to begin to grapple with other blind spots in areas of class, gender, race, sexuality, ability, and the list goes on. While I often stand with my brothers and sisters in justice struggles, I have to equally recognize when I'm standing **in front of them** rather than by their side or behind them. Unfortunately too few of us who are committed to social justice do this. Over the past few months I've had a number of conversations on my standpoint around social justice on twitter, but 140 characters of social media is too short to begin to do it justice (pun intended). About a year and half ago, I was speaking with a friend who identifies as a Black feminist and we were discussing Black feminism and the role of men. I told her I did not identify as a feminist for a number of reasons: first, I respected that many feminists had argued men could not be feminist because of our inability to completely overcome our gender privilege and stop our contribution to oppression. Second, many of the men that I've known who publicly identified as feminist behind closed doors used it to their advantage to carry out the same practices we critiqued as patriarchal and misogynist. Third, men who identify as feminist tended to treat it as an ascribed and static status, which meant that brothers often suggested because they could quote bell hooks or had participated in enough campaigns, circles, or conversations they had arrived at plateau, to which others must ascend. The third reason is the most crucial, we spend far too much time labeling our ideologies and activism and treating them as perfected statuses. In reality, a commitment to social justice work is constantly tested, re-evaluated, and iterative. Too often we stand on and assign labels (e.g. conscious, feminist, anti-racist, etc.) rather than doing the work that these labels imply and expanding these from labels to ideologies and actions which effectively expands their reach.

I tend to prefer to be known as an ally when working against oppression but still oppressing. To me, being an ally is about much more than advocacy on behalf of a group or interests that may not, on their face, appear to be your own. Being an ally is about a commitment to social justice grounded in an understanding of one's self. To me, the most important element to allyhood is the ability requirement of reflexivity. First, we must interrogate our own privilege and power. Second, an ally must listen carefully to the conditions and needs of the group or individuals they are attempting to align with and define his or her work from there. Third, we must become comfortable with outsider status. It's perfectly fine to not have full ownership of a struggle, in fact no one expects you to be a perfect proxy, but you are expected to hold your own. Fourth, we must be comfortable with being wrong and getting pushed to rethink our beliefs. Being committed to a thing does not mean you see all sides of it. We must be open to being challenged for the better. From this point, an ally can **begin** the work of advocating and **more importantly supporting** the efforts of others and themselves. If you believe in social justice work, you realize that being an ally to a cause that you don't see "directly" affecting your life is still intimately tied to other interlocking forms of oppression. As bell hooks eloquently said:

"Feminism is not simple a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women have equal rights with men; It is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of

domination that permeates Western culture on various levels- sex, race, class, to name a few – and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self- development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion and material desires.”

The reality is that the forms of oppression are related so working on them simultaneously is necessary. Of course there are issues that I have a greater commitment to, as do all of us, but through mutual support our power grows exponentially. There is no perfect formula for being an ally but those are things that I think of when engaging social justice work.