

Dear SAYMA Friends,

My recent clerk's letter was composed in a time of a developing crisis. I was in protective mode, which was folded into the position I've taken with respect to our tradition of worship and process. I need to acknowledge that I was being paternalistic, and at the same time inadvertently protecting the yearly meeting's place of privilege in a colonialist polity built on all the arrogant assumptions implicit in the old term, Manifest Destiny.

I would like to move from the more general terms I have consistently used to some specific examples. However, the more specific I become, the more I expose individuals and meetings who need to speak for themselves. Each situation is complex and nuanced, and whereas generalities cannot express these complex truths, specific examples can harm people. So I proceed with caution.

Let it suffice to say that white people often cause unintended harm, due to their inability to see that they are acting from a position of power within a system that privileges them. As one of you said during the initial part of these sessions, we are like fish swimming in a sea that we cannot see. And when we are surprised, hurt and defensive when shown this, we are demonstrating what has been duly named "white fragility."

In our first plenary, Hal Weaver repeatedly emphasized the importance of centering the narratives of people of color. We need a much more inclusive set of narratives as a basis for our empathy, so that we do not just respond routinely like fish in the White Sea. A few years ago, we were blessed with one of these narratives by a Friend of Color who gave a plenary talk about his dual heritage, African-American and Native American, against the backdrop of structural racism and systemic brutality. There are other such narratives within SAYMA that we badly need to hear, and some are emerging right now.

Not long ago, I attended a small gathering where a white woman shared a story of continuing brutality towards Black people. She was trying to reach out from a place of deep empathy to a Black woman in the group, and broke into tears as she shared the story. Attending those tears, I did not speak, though I was uncomfortable, for I noticed that the Black woman quietly left the circle. Afterwards, I reached out to her, admitting that I had joined the inadvertent white centering (those tears!) and apologized. The response from the Friend of Color was that we inevitably make mistakes as we try to disentangle our racist heritage, and that we have to accept our mistakes and move on. She closed with, "*the LOVE behind our intentions will win out.*" This is a crucial point, out of line with critical race theory, which points to the importance of actions, not intentions. But it is firmly within our Friends tradition, growing out of the ministry of Jesus.

There are many more stories large and small, and they need to be told by the people themselves, not second-hand. But it is imperative as we move towards our goal of becoming an anti-racist community, that we do not allow one Friend of Color to abrogate the right of other Friends of Color to tell their stories and have their own points of view. As Friends, we are an inclusive community, and each person in the Meeting is honored, because underneath our diversity we are a unity. If we weren't, we couldn't search for a sense of the meeting. As Paul of Tarsus said, we are all parts of the body of Christ, each with a gift that makes up the whole. Even as universalists, I think we each understand this essential truth.

Racism and our responses to it make for a complex tapestry, with a pattern that is difficult to discern, especially when we only study one or two of the threads in the pattern. We need to acknowledge this complexity, recognizing our brokenness. It is important to recognize that childhood and generational trauma exist among white and black, but because the majority has been part of the colonialist and supremacist American culture, we have a particular moral responsibility to look beyond our moments of

feeling wronged by those who would point out our complicity, moving ever more deeply into self-criticism over that complicity. But there needs to be forbearance as well on the side of those, white and black, who are wielding the tools of justice.

A visiting Friend, who was part of a deep period of prayer in one of our workshops, said to me afterwards, "Your yearly meeting still prays, whatever the context of your struggles may be." The ability to center down and pray, which I have witnessed frequently this week, is a treasure we must remember and relay upon, especially in the most vexed moments. But it must not be a retreat into the comfort of the dominant party in a society that thrives on control of resources, material and human. Think of those good Quaker slavers, some of whom met in a sense of unity long into John Woolman's campaign to open their eyes and hearts. For others, one by one, a seed was laid to mend their ways. But this took time, and of course Woolman's work is unfinished. We must pray together in a place of deep listening while leaving the conflict in the room, asking for healing of the Society, those of us who are in conflict, and of ourselves.

Friends, we need to accept the pain of being confronted with our structural complicity and often, of new racist sins in the moment, sometimes of being falsely accused. But we cannot tolerate abusive behavior. If you take these two statements together, you have the crux of our painful dilemma. Some of us are so wounded that reopening those wounds is too much to bear. Others need to toughen their skins, look inward, and get on with the work.

Friends, SAYMA needs a new beginning. We need to genuinely forgive one another for past misunderstandings, slights, and outright abuse. It will not be easy, but if we approach our struggle with an attitude of mutual respect, with forbearance, and speak and act from a place of deep reflection, we may yet open the door where Spirit waits to lead us .

Robert McGahey

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