

## For Your Consideration – and Action

By Michael Boucher



6/16/20

*I'm offering you a reflection from Michael Boucher, a white man who is highly respected in both the white activist community in Rochester, and among many Black leaders. He grapples with the challenges to us as white people, the cry to step up, to spend ourselves and our privileges in the service of dismantling systemic racism. [Frank Staropoli](#)*

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*\*This is a longer post and aimed at my white friends:*

Two things really caught my attention this past week:

One was a repost from Protest Therapist @ihategender (posted by **Nanette D. Massey**) that said: 'Too many aspiring white allies think racial justice is about diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism. No, no, no sweetie. This is about overthrowing power that benefits you, disproportionately often exclusively. Are you ready to sacrifice access, entitlement, innocence?'

The other was Tre Johnson's article in the Washington Post "When black people are in pain, white people just join book clubs". In the article I read, "This isn't the time to circle up with other white people and discuss black pain in the abstract; it's the time to acknowledge and examine the pain they've personally caused. Black people live and die every day under the burdens of a racism more insidious than the current virus that's also disproportionately killing us. And yet white people tend to take a slow route to meaningful activism, locked in familiar patterns, seemingly uninterested in really advancing progress.... They've shared the preordained "amplifying" social media post that just reads "This," followed by a link to something profound from a black voice."

The chaos we see now stems in part from the chaos foisted upon us for generations. The injustice we protest isn't rooted in just police killings; it lives also within housing and school choices; social and professional networks; the defunding of nonwhite organizations; the demotion and firing of black employees; the microaggressions and slights that happen at dinner parties, restaurants, cafes and concerts.

I'd like to think that well-meaning, invested white people are really gathering to talk about books to instruct themselves on how they can do more and do better, but it's hard to believe that that's really what most of them are working toward. You've had access to instruction about black humanity, freedom, mobility, happiness and health since we were brought here. It stretches as far back as slave songs and Phillis Wheatley poems and carries through Black Lives Matter activism. You've had your chance to say "This," over and over again. Now act."

As I have watched large masses of white people get more interested in the work of racial equity/activism in the past few weeks, I am haunted by the words above because of how much they ring true. I DO think that more white people are waking up to the racial realities that have existed for hundreds of years in new ways and I do not want to discourage a process that works to draw them in more deeply. I know that my own journey has been one of gradual awakening, and I am not trying to shame anyone for waking up when they do...

Yet I think many white people – myself included- keep trying to do the work in a way that preserves our position. White supremacy and privilege have told us as white people that we can "have it all." We can have a racially just world and still maintain our position, privilege and status. Yes, we're willing to "share" it. But we're not willing to fundamentally give it up (as a collective).

Frederick Douglass might as well be talking to us (as he said to his listeners in 1857 – right here in Canandaigua, NY) about those who "profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation." Most white people I know want change without significant waves. We want it to come in a way that maintains a status that keeps us comfortable

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and do all the things we're used to doing. Yes, we may favor some changes, but we like the system the way it works because it works for us. And even if we may not favor the system, most of us seem to want a slightly more benign version of it that does "less damage" and yet operates under the same basic rules (that we know work for us as white folks).

Week after week at the protests that I have attended in downtown Rochester, I have heard amazing organizers like **Iman Abid, Ashley Wanderlust Heart Gantt, Stanley Martin** and **Stevie Vargas** and powerful teach-in speakers like **Adrian Elim, Danielle Dee Ponder** keep stressing the fact that something radically different is required – especially from white people. The black community in particular has been in PAIN for centuries (as have been native communities for even longer), and the white power structures have conceded almost nothing because of it. Nothing. In fact white people even developed systems to show how black people did not even feel pain like white people do!

It has only been through agitation and interruption – at the micro or macro level – that change has come and it has always been those most affected by the pain who led the charge. Agitation and interruption.

I know that those words do not land easily on me, in part, because of how I was raised (to be nice and respectful). But I also know down deep that they do not land easily on me because almost nothing in my experience as a white person wishes to have the system that directly benefits me get agitated or interrupted because it is a system that centers our skin, our ideas, our bodies, our interests, our knowledge base, our ancestors, our way of communicating, our children, our music, our property, our way of loving, our way of organizing ourselves – and the list goes on.

And so when we're confronted with the idea that we may need to sacrifice access, privilege and entitlement, I think most white people recoil. We want others to have it too, but we don't want to lose any of ours. We'll go to protests, even call out family members, but reorganize our neighborhoods? Fundamentally change our schools? Alter policing and justice systems? Change economic systems that by and large benefit us (or already have so we're a little more open now that we've made our money)? Give up private property?

I think we're deeply conflicted because we want to be good people and yet we also want what we have become accustomed to (which we know requires us not to be good people) and have invested ourselves in. White supremacy lied to us and we bought the lie and built a world around it. White people all knew and have known that people were left out in that system, but we kind of accepted that there would be "collateral damage" I guess and figured it was OK as long as it didn't impact us that much...but it did and it has.

And so here we are, with a greater number of white people mobilizing and awakening. That's a good thing. I do think we are seeing more clearly – as white people – that racism has been tearing this nation apart since the days of genocide – and tears something deeply in us if we do not address it. Yet if we're not doing the spiritual work to make us ready and willing to actually change the power systems that benefit us, we'll lose steam quickly, retreat into privilege and lament how little changes.

I don't even know who I am writing this to. Maybe just myself. I know that I need a reminder every day and that's why I keep going to protests lately – to remember. Yes, we need to study. Yes, we need to learn. Yes, we need to reflect. Those are all actions, and we need other kinds of action as well. Some that will require much more from us. We need to strengthen each other as a collective to take bold moves, keep the heat on and go further than we have gone. It will require us, as Alcoholics Anonymous says, to change "people, places and things," ask tough questions of each other, hold elected officials accountable and hold ourselves accountable for shifting power.

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And I have found that the ideas emerging from the communities and leaders that have been historically left out of the power systems that benefit me as a white person are the ones that seem to hold the most promise for something different. But these will cost me more in every sense of the word...Or so I think. Maybe white people are finally starting to count the costs of leaving things as they are. And that is too high a price to pay.”

*(Full disclosure: Mike is our son-in-law, married to Lynne Staropoli Boucher.)*

*Please join us responding, and by defining how specifically you will work to eliminate racism and racist systems in your spheres of influence. You can “Reply” below*