

LEARNING TO ALLY: PARTNERISM AND THE PORTLAND PROTESTS

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Abstract

While the Black Lives Matter protests in Portland, Oregon have been largely portrayed in the media as destructive, violent, chaotic, and without focus, many participants experienced something entirely different. This article shares one white person's experience in a number of racial justice gatherings and protests in Portland from June until August 2020, on the ground and on the "front lines" - in the spirit of and with a focus on social justice, community, and caring, and through a partnership studies (partnerism) lens.

Keywords: Partnership; Partnerism; Allyship; Black Lives Matter; Portland Protests; Social Change; Systems of Partnership; Systems of Domination; Federal Agents; Demonstrations; Portland OR

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DRUMMING FOR JUSTICE

It is dusk at the Willamette River waterfront in Portland, Oregon, USA, and a crowd is forming to hear speakers share their words about the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Toward the center of a circle of fellow drummers and dancers, I am holding up a "Teachers for BLM" sign, and I see a lot of other participants holding up signs indicating that they are nurses, parents, or teachers, too. This movement has drawn so much attention from people of everyday walks of life that I've been thinking a lot about

what finally spurred the support for BLM that it has today, directly following the murder of George Floyd. Perhaps we can credit the recent COVID-19 pandemic for part of it - a global disaster that Riane Eisler says has “laid bare” the inadequacies of the domination system and the need for a society based in partnerism, or partnership Studies (2020). Increased actions of what is called “allyship,” have sprung forth in this time, demonstrating creative, practical, and vocal means toward equity (The Anti- Oppression Network, 2015).

Around me, the drums are getting louder, and my heart is brimming with the excitement of positive noise, the crowd, the dancers. The picture surrounding me is lightyears from the images of destruction and chaos that I’ve been seeing of the protests on the news. Here, people are colorfully dressed. The speeches are poignant. The energy is high. A flag dancer artfully spins an enormous purple and pink banner in the center of the gathering. Getting to play my drum alongside fellow percussionists gives me the courage I need to march with the group away from the waterfront and toward the Justice Center where federal law enforcement officers are stationed, deployed by the Trump administration and Department of Homeland Security secretary Chad Wolf.

The Black Lives Matter movement represents the cry to dismantle the institutionalized racism preventing equity and racial justice in our country. But while the president seems to see this dismantling as a segue into anarchy and destruction, his administration itself enacts a violent, domination-based model of authoritarianism and violence, and fails to see the vision of us participants. As we deconstruct, we also reconstruct (Eisler, 2020). The mainstream media portrayal of the Portland protests emphasizes graffiti, vandalism, fires, and explosions, but what I have witnessed in these protests is a very different picture - one of community spirit, effort, and care.

We now gather at a park several blocks from the Multnomah County Justice Center and Mark O. Hatfield U.S. Courthouse, which have been fenced off by the authorities. I am here with my partner and a friend, and when we step away from the drummers for

water breaks, we marvel at the organization downtown. I wonder if caring economics that uplift more community work (Eisler, 2008) could look like what I'm seeing. Volunteers with supplies amassed reach out with mutual regard and true care - all partnership-oriented actions which have long been devalued in our current domination-model economy.

Volunteers at tables ask us if we need goggles or a mask. Riot Ribs, a mutual aid group that has been feeding protestors for free, is busy with its usual line. I overhear that houseless folks have been well fed every night of the protests. Within a partnership-based system, allyship and care work will become more normalized, racial injustices must be made more visible, and systems that value human life and social justice will be invested in (Saltee, 2020). In the weeks following, the friend with us is so inspired that she births a grassroots organization to assist in feeding that same population. A new partnership-based program is born. I am reminded that the current domination model feeds cycles of poverty and devalues efforts of care toward populations most in need.

As it darkens, people start to put on their gear in preparation for what may come next, and yet the crowd surrounding the drums is still in high spirits. I spot people from my community - people I've heard "talk the talk" about social justice, now showing active support. Participants turn on their phone flashes and wave them in the air like torches, raising the light to the cause we are all here for. The main drummers seem tireless; I am in awe of their stamina. Eventually I have to put in my earplugs and goggles. I'll admit that I start shaking when the explosions start, and yet everyone keeps on drumming, each person stopping to put on more gear at their own rate. Only when the eye stinging and coughing gets to be too much, I grab my partner's hand and clumsily walk away from the frontlines. It's hard to see through my goggles, hard to breathe.

LEANING INTO ALLYSHIP

Until a few weeks ago, I had never been tear-gassed by the police.

Portland is the whitest major city in the country, in the only U.S. state with historic Black exclusion laws. I am a white woman. Learning how to show allyship in movements of social justice takes commitment, and taking allyship further by demonstrating the actions of a “co-conspirator” takes more; it means doing a lot of showing up, making mistakes, correcting the mistakes, staying humble, standing up, holding back, and listening. I will never know what it is like to have a Black body, or to come up against the police with a Black body. I have, in one incident, been pushed down with a police officer’s riot shield after I put my body in between the cop and a Brown-bodied protestor. I understand that this can be an important thing for white allies to do. To this day, I wonder if that gesture was the right one, or whether it made that woman feel a loss of agency. I will never know, but I am listening. That was during a protest directly following the 2016 election, when my students of color were arriving at our high school with more fear than ever due to the rhetoric of hatred espoused by the newly-elected president.

This is one of the challenges of showing up in this movement - the not knowing. How do I know if my actions are the right actions? If much of it requires stepping aside and listening, to whom do I listen when there are multiple voices telling me multiple things? Because it is so complex, without one sure and straight route, I remember feeling unsure at first about how to participate in the Black Lives Matter movement. I’ve taught English in the same school for nearly my entire 14-year career in education: a public, Title 1 international school where white students are not the majority. And as hard as I’ve worked to learn about equity and cultural responsiveness, I know that my learning as a white educator has still been painfully slow and inadequate against the inequities within our de facto still-segregated school system (Joffe-Walt, 2020).

During my second year at the Northwest Conference on Teaching for Social Justice, I got a Black Lives Matter sticker that required courage to put on my classroom door next to my rainbow flags, even though my curriculum was increasingly a formidable bullhorn for social justice. I thought, *Will this look weird for a white teacher to do?* I wondered this even though major components of my English curriculum focus on race, social justice, and cultural studies. So I put the sticker up. A few days later, a student who wasn't mine popped her head in the door while I was teaching and simply shouted, "Black lives matter...hell yeah!" I figured I had made the right decision. Someone later covered the sticker with a message of white supremacy. I figured I had made the wrong decision because the message had provoked a harmful response. But what I realized was that our current domination model upholds injustice and inequality as "normal," whereas partnership studies emphasize giving more focused attention to racial justice (<https://centerforpartnership.org/what-can-i-do/racial-justice/>). I again changed my mind - our school desperately needed to have more conversations about race. This was at a time when our white principal had recently excused a student's drawing a swastika with the comment, "It's probably just a phase." I knew we could do better.

Pushing back against the existing paradigm toward a more partnership-based outlook has not been a smooth process for me. I have fumbled around a lot when it comes to learning how to demonstrate actions towards allyship. When I started a book study on Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (2018), I received feedback, mostly from white people but also from People of Color, that book clubs are a very white thing to do. A couple of people linked me to Tre Johnson's *Washington Post* article, "When Black People Are in Pain, White People Just Join Book Clubs" (Johnson, 2020). My internal monologue defended myself with predictable excuses, but instead I garnered spiritual courage. Momentum won over feedback, and the book study continued.

Studying *White Fragility* ultimately brought depth and awareness to my education on racial justice, and supported others in their own education. I swallowed and digested

the feedback about choices of books for future ally work. Ann Russo, author of *Feminist Accountability*, emphasizes that “mistakes are integral” to the process of allyship (2019, p. 28). Rather, it is important to engage in work that is inherently messy, to willingly embrace and learn from our mistakes, as a part of this ever-evolving practice.

ANSWERING THE CALL FOR COMMUNITY

My first step into the Portland protests following the murder of George Floyd starts when a friend forwards me a flyer for a gathering at Portland’s Revolution Hall, the seemingly psychically-named former Eastside High School that shut down in the 1980s and was reopened recently as a live music venue. The gathering will be hosted by Black leaders and speakers; I’ve been listening to People of Color (POCs) emphasizing how important this is. My partner and I show up at Revolution Hall wearing face masks, and as we enter the sea of people on the grassy front lawn, my anxiety mounts. Because of the quarantine, it’s been months since I’ve been in a crowd - and now, suddenly, there is this. Although we’ve been strict about quarantine, I’ve heard health-care professionals cite how structural racism leads pandemics to impact marginalized communities at a higher rate; therefore, taking a stand against it is vital. I find our masked friends - a few are fellow educators - and we comment on how strange it is to finally see one another in person.

When the march begins, we manage to stick together in a sudden sea of masked individuals calling unified chants. I reach over and grasp my partner’s hand. He is an immigrant to the United States, and is taking his initial steps in his first protest as an official U.S. citizen. He recently voted for the first time. I am so proud of him.

The leaders center the chants around the names of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, holding up their fists as they chant. I hold up my fist, too. I later read in a flyer with suggested guidelines for the demonstration that this is not a gesture to be used by white people. I don’t know who has authored the flyer, but I feel embarrassed, swallow my

pride, and remember not to do it again. The mass of people stops a few times, listening to the leaders speak. The sound equipment is not nearly loud enough, but I can still hear them. As a high school teacher, I'm shocked that a crowd so large can quiet down so swiftly and easily. The speakers emphasize that this movement is to be one of peace.

It is impressive to see how, in just a few days, so many groups have organized to pass out supplies. Volunteers flood the sidelines, offering water bottles, snacks, and signs printed on quality cardstock paper. Large trucks outfitted by volunteers have these necessities stacked in their beds; small vehicles distribute these offerings from their trunks. These partnership-based actions show the true capacity of community. I later read that the Portland police slash these same bulk water bottles at large, because a few have been thrown at officers. It seems all too relevant that authorities would destroy these emblems of partnership, care, and community.

Eventually, we find ourselves stepping onto the Burnside Bridge, into downtown. It is from this vantage point that the iconic Portland, Oregon neon sign can be spotted. My heart always swells when I glimpse this city from its many bridge viewpoints, and it is no different today - except that my heart is also swelling with grief for the injustices for which we are gathered. The leaders ask the crowd to pause again. It is so silent, we could hear a pin drop. Instead, we hear drones whirring - I later find out that these capture photos of the moment that comes next. The leaders announce that we will be participating in a "die-in," where we will lie down for nearly 9 minutes - the same amount of time that George Floyd was pressed to the pavement by the knee of a Minneapolis police officer. The pictures the drones take are later broadcast on the evening television news - the scale of the demonstration is deeply moving.

Halfway through the 9 minutes, I note how much my body aches on that dirty pavement. I think of what it might have been like for George Floyd. I think of why everyone is out here next to me, lying on a bridge face down. I feel as though I want to cry, but I don't. I've become well versed in how a white woman's tears in public can take away from

the message at the center of moments such as these. I focus my energy on staying silently strong.

Once we cross the bridge into downtown, I am struck by how different things look. I've largely stayed away from downtown since quarantine, limiting my movement in order to limit the virus. New murals have begun or are finished. Shops are boarded up. Spray-painted messages of the BLM movement are ubiquitous. Instead of seeing these actions as destructive, I see them as reminders of transition, symbols of a shift in the narrative. The march ends at Pioneer Square so participants can gather in a larger group to hear more speakers. We can't quite tuck ourselves into the main circle and we don't want to overcrowd, so we stay on the outskirts. Someone passes out chalk, and people start writing messages on the bricks. A group next to us decorates a beautiful "Black Lives Matter" logo, replete with flowers. A woman from our group starts to write the names of Black lives lost to police brutality. The list is long. Longer. She still hasn't finished when the speeches are finished.

A SHOW OF COMMUNITY SPIRIT

I spend a lot of time in the coming weeks attending smaller events, such as family-friendly rallies at elementary schools that a friend and her one-year-old can attend with me. I realize that larger gatherings can overwhelm me due to anxiety. I choose to practice self-care and be a good partner to myself, so I limit the amount of times I march downtown. I do other things instead - letter writing, donating, facilitating the book study. When the federal agents arrive, I continue to take time away from the downtown protests. Like others, I also bristle at the idea that pushback against the agents' presence may take away from the messages of racial justice at the center of the movement.

A friend texts me a social media post about a Frontline Drumline. Like other protests I've attended, it will be led by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), this time

by local musician Mad Composers Lab and talented videographer Faith Faucet, with a dance-off by Christian Burke, a.k.a. Creme Brulee. I contact my partner and our friend. We pack our safety gear and first aid supplies. I open my shed and fish out my bicycle helmet, along with the noise-reduction earmuffs and protective eye goggles I usually use for chain-sawing and leaf-blowing. I get out my drum, made in the style of my Norwegian ancestors. I feel shy about carrying it because it could be mistaken for a Native American drum, and I am very conscientious about avoiding cultural appropriation. I forget my self-consciousness about it once I join the circle of energetic musicians and dancers at the waterfront. Although I am excited by the scene, I am careful that my photos and video are centered on others rather than myself - “performative allyship” can be problematic when it means we are more focused on showcasing allyship for accolades rather than applying it to meaningful actions (Phillips, 2020).

After we make our way with the drummers over to the Justice Center where the federal agents are stationed, my head swirls with questions. One thing on my mind is the fireworks being shot toward the building by protestors. These mighty explosions are interspersed between the drummers’ cadences rolling through the street. My first reaction is that the explosives are a foolish provocation. A colleague whose husband, a military veteran, shakes every Fourth of July has been active in the protests; I worry that the sounds that make me shudder might cause an even more adverse reaction in others, or that they may incite further violence.

Partnerism advocates for non-violent actions in which participants do not take part in the same tactics that have been used by the dominant system for so long - after all, we can’t build a new world using the tactics of an old one (Saltee, 2020). And yet, I also hear the words of people in my community admonishing white people for their aversion to the tactics being used, saying that the fight for racial justice historically has depended on, and will continue to depend on, such an approach (Sebastian, 2015). I see narratives that critique the largely white outcry when Portland’s elk statue is torn

down amid the chaos. Still, I wonder if white folks filled with angst throwing explosives over a fence is helping the movement. I listen to arguments on both sides - an important tenet of effective allyship is stepping back from speaking to take up active listening (Russo, 2019, p. 43).

I hear interviews with Portland City Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty, a Black woman and Navy veteran, underlining that the presence of the federal agents serves only to “intimidate and silence” our largely peaceful protests (Menza, 2020). The hierarchical power held by law enforcement officers juxtaposed against community-oriented partnership actions seems salient. I also hear Hardesty suggest that some of the more violent protesters may be saboteurs sent in by the police. And yet, I don’t see other protestors stopping them, even when I’ve just heard the Black leaders at the front speak about the intent of these gatherings to be non-violent. I keep listening, allowing people at the forefront of the movement to guide allies in the approach they feel is best.

I also see non-violent actions critiqued. “Naked Athena,” for example, is a story that makes my heart soar - a sex worker who stands naked in front of the federal agents. Her foot bleeding from being shot with pepper balls, she balances on one leg with her arms raised in defiance, and then sits down on the pavement with legs spread. In an interview later, she describes having been moved to do so from a “very deep feminine place” (Minutaglio, 2020). This is a story that excites my feminist, liberal heart. And yet, as a biracial woman, her white-passing skin also draws some criticism from people of all colors before it invites nuanced conversation. I try to listen to the voices of People of Color before I make any more judgments about her actions, positive or negative. I read a *New York Times* article by Mitchell S. Jackson, who shows appreciation for her courage while also pointing out that she “might’ve upstaged the movement, and not in a way that [he] could discern as connected to its stated objectives” (Jackson, 2020).

Despite my many questions, when I get home that night, I am also filled with excitement. Adrenaline. As we decompress and chat about the evening, I keep repeating, “That drumline, though!” The beat still pulses in my eardrums. I look back at one of my Live Feed videos and feel a sense of pride for the message it sings of our city - solidarity, positivity, and racial justice. I remember a South African guest speaker I invited to my classroom a few years back. He shared something that I now have displayed in big, block letters on my classroom wall: “I could not vote, but I could make noise.” Music and dancing played a huge role in the fight against apartheid. So did armed resistance. I hope our drumming likewise furthers the cause.

The next night, I’m so engrossed in the drumming that as we march closer to the front, my fear is submerged in the pulsing rhythm around me. A volunteer medic catches my eye and makes a gesture reminding me that it’s time to put my goggles on. I suddenly feel a physical understanding of the role of drums in war. Although they can be used to communicate messages across distances, they are also utilized to strengthen soldiers’ mettle. I feel the drumbeat fortifying my spiritual courage as I brace myself. This time, the teargas hits me harder. I am grateful for my mask, and I am reminded in this surprising way about how effective masks probably must be against COVID-19. The trumpeter next to me makes brassy sounds along with the beat. I see a video of him a few nights later, bleeding, having been shot in the face by pepper balls that shattered his goggles - and still trumpeting. He is an image of participants’ joy, peace, and camaraderie amid the violent actions of the federal troops. He has become known simply as Trumpet Man.

Eventually, the drumline retreats a bit. Protestors follow the “walk, don’t run” rule by clamoring slowly to make their way out of choking gas. People hold one another up, some doubled over in coughing fits. I rejoin my two buddies for the night. One of them is struggling with the teargas; his snowboarding goggles have a bit of ventilation on the sides and he keeps pausing to squeeze his eyes and take silent breaths. We walk him out of the crowd to where dozens of volunteers are dousing people’s eyes with squirt-

cap water bottles. Amid the chaos, I see two people holding tall poles on either side of the crowd - between them is stretched an arched banner of “prayer flags,” each one depicting a photo of a Black person murdered by police. They’ve created a gateway reminding us why we are here, and drawing attention to the spirit of community, care, and vision intrinsic to partnerism. I marvel at the artistry, and later realize the two individuals holding the poles are friends of mine - it is so difficult to recognize people in their protective masks and heavy gear.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a lot I am still learning about how to show actions of allyship as a white person. I even wrestled with writing this piece, as I worry that it centers a white voice in a movement that needs to center Black voices. I have as many questions as there are answers, but I hold a firm resolve to continue in the work of allyship - a role that plays an important part within partnerism, as social and racial justice work can help us move toward a more peaceful and better world. I wonder what role the police have in working toward a partnership model.

I have come to conclude that we as a society are in the “awkward teenage years” of learning how to have conversations around, and take action in, meaningful equity work. Partnerism will empower us to re-envision what comes in the aftermath of the domination system that has been - and we can use this powerful model to reconstruct after deconstructing. Even as I complete the writing of this article, a shooting has just occurred during a Portland rally. While the details are still unfolding, I know already that the divisions that are mounting in our world are in desperate need of healing. A quote from Eisler’s *The Power of Partnership* applies to any social justice work: “None of us can change everything. But we can all change something” (Eisler, 2002, p. 1). We can start with ourselves, committing to evolve as we learn how best to combine our sense of justice with our sense of care, taking these into our communities to help bring about real change, systemic change - change for a more just and equitable world.

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