

What I did not expect to learn from old white activists about racial solidarity

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Black people have been complaining about being overwhelmed by newly aware white people. [Damon Young](#) wrote about neighbors buttonholing him on his evening stroll to talk about the state of race relations. “Let’s not talk about race — unless you pay me,” he was tempted to say. A friend of mine joked to her professional group of Black women that white acquaintances offering to help could perhaps pick up her groceries or do her laundry.

I get the annoyance. Now is not the time that Black people should be asked to give white people Brownie points for being sufficiently indignant. But I also get white people wanting the points, wanting the intimate connection that recognizes us as one of the good ones. Partly because, to my embarrassment, I’ve sought it myself. More important, though, I have come to understand something that white civil rights activists told me years ago about what happens when you lose your faith that, for all its flaws, the system still works.

The activists were the young men and women who joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and I interviewed them for a [book on the 1960s movements](#). SNCC was the cutting edge of black student militancy: leading lunch-counter sit-ins and freedom rides and then launching voter registration drives in the most repressive areas of the Deep South. There were always white people on staff, and they were valued members of the group until, beginning in late 1964 informally, and in 1966, formally, Black SNCC staffers asked them to leave. In the context of their embrace of Black nationalist ideas and strategies, Black staffers said that whites should organize in white communities, not Black ones.

When I interviewed white staffers thirty years later, they were still bereft. They described the pain of being rejected by people who had become dear friends. But they also described their struggle to find a place for themselves in a world they no longer recognized. This was the part that I didn’t fully understand at the time: what it is like, as a white person of privilege, to lose your confidence that injustice, once recognized, can be made right. And how, once that happens, you want connection with the people who can redeem you. White SNCC staffers had long known that racism existed, of course. That’s why they went South. But what they came to see was that the problem was not southern sheriffs and attack dogs. It was a federal government that refused to intervene in voting rights abuses. It was the FBI agents who stood by when organizers were beaten, and then asked them whether they had staged the bombing of a SNCC office. It was the liberal supporters who refused to recognize that Black people were economically disenfranchised in the North. It was realizing, as former white staffer Bob Weil told me, “that there was a Mississippi embedded in U.S. society.”

For middle-class white students like Weil, SNCC had become a refuge: a place where their relationships with Black people were intimate, deep, and truly equal, a place outside the system that, they had come to believe, was rotten to its core. And now they were being cast from that refuge because they *were* the system. Penny Patch, who worked in Southwest Georgia and Mississippi, [later described](#) struggling “to find our place...in a white world that we did not feel was ours.”

I understand their pain now, in a way I did not when I interviewed them, because of George Floyd’s murder. I am a sociologist. I know about police brutality. I teach students every year about systemic racism. And yet, when George Floyd’s cry of “I can’t breathe” echoed the same cry of Eric Garner, killed by police in a chokehold in 2014; when Floyd’s death came right after those of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others, it felt like a world I no longer recognized. And my impulse was to reach out to the Black people I knew. It was almost to remind myself that, in being there for them, they were there for me. Our intimate bond would prove that I was not part of that system.

But just recognizing the depth of American racism does not do much for those who suffer its effects. And connecting personally with people who have suffered cannot substitute for the harder work of trying to make change. Intimacy is no substitute for *solidarity*. The term has its origins in Roman law, referring to a family or group member’s obligation to repay the debt incurred by another. Solidarity requires putting your money where your mouth is.

This is the difference between the white SNCC workers and me. The intimacy they claimed was forged in struggle and sacrifice for the cause. For those of us who haven’t made that sacrifice, solidarity requires less than intimacy and more than it. Less than intimacy in the sense that we not demand emotional connection, deep understanding, and poignant stories from Black people as the price for our action. In fact, [many effective coalitions for change](#) have not required that participants become friends first. But solidarity requires more than intimacy in the sense that it is white people who must do the work of changing white people. So, if you are white and are anguished about Black men and women being killed with impunity, share your pain and anger with your white friends. Fight the fight to change laws, policies, and practices. Make the struggle your own without letting it be about you. And if you have a white cousin who believes that the police are the ones who are victimized or a sister who wonders why the protesters have to be so *angry*, use every tool in your persuasive arsenal to help them to see things differently.



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