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**Getting in Touch with My Ism's:
Lessons Learned in the Journey of an Aspiring Ally**

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Submitted for publication.

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The alarm had been ringing for ten minutes. It was clear that my daughter was not waking up for school. I bounded up the stairs to try and rouse her. As she smiled in her sleep I said, “Maybe one day you will have a girlfriend or boyfriend who wakes you up in the morning when you need help getting up.” She smiled again and rolled over.

I noticed the comfortableness of this remark. It didn’t matter to me if her partner was male or female, or if one day she would choose someone of a different race, religion, or ethnicity. How did this come about? My commitment to address prejudices and other forms of mistreatment has evolved as a result of specific lessons learned and reinforced over time in my personal and professional life. This narrative reviews eleven of these lessons and draws implications from them with the hope of fostering dialogue about what it means to be an “ally” among those who desire a just and equitable world that embraces and affirms all identities.

Lesson One – Acknowledge our own biases. The first and most important lesson is to perceive and acknowledge that we all engage in prejudicial assumptions, thoughts and actions – even when we may have no intention of doing so and may be unaware of their impact. In other words, we can be “unintentional perpetrators” of injustice either explicitly or implicitly: explicitly when we express misinformation and stereotypes about other groups without understanding their significance or potential to hurt; and implicitly when we make assumptions about what is right, “normal” or customary.

This understanding has allowed me to be more compassionate with myself when I express prejudices and to be more open to feedback that will help me correct

them. In this process of awareness and acknowledgment I have benefited tremendously by having friends and allies from other groups who can point my biases and mistakes out to me.

An example occurred at a recent family event when a childhood friend related that her first exposure as a young girl to derogatory language about lesbians was from me. At another gathering a family member shared an experience of her family being robbed in a large urban center. A man had opened the unlocked door of their car while they were cruising very slowly to look for a parking space. After recounting the story she said to me: "you're probably assuming that he was black, well he was white." At that moment I noticed that she was right - I was in fact picturing a man of color as the thief. These and other incidents remind me that, while I strive to be "part of the solution" I am also "part of the problem."

Overcoming defensiveness and being open to feedback creates the opportunity to learn about our mistakes and biases. It has led me to understand that I can be unintentionally racist, homophobic, sexist, Islamophobic, ableist, etc. without awareness of myself as such. A personal challenge for me has been to acknowledge my biases without becoming overly self-critical, ashamed, or feeling that I have failed myself and others. In general, I have learned to welcome these revelations as an opportunity for change and as an important part of my journey to become a more complete human being.

Lesson Two: Notice and embrace uncomfortable situations. The second lesson relates to handling potentially uncomfortable situations involving members of other groups, including situations of being in the "minority." For example, if I am the only

non-English speaker, I try to overcome my discomfort at not understanding and participating verbally and have embraced these moments as an opportunity to learn what it is like to not speak the dominant language. This has also taught me to find other ways to stay connected to the situation and to participate non-verbally.

With respect to sexual orientation there were various strategies I used when younger to manage my personal discomfort with LGB issues. For example, I love to dance and in college I sought opportunities to go out dancing. The campus "Gay and Lesbian Liberation Front" hosted the best dance parties but I was nervous about attending. I eventually found the courage to go by bringing a female date. Having a heterosexual woman with me was a form of protection that allowed me to feel safe and have fun. Participating in this new environment in turn allowed me to overcome some of my fears and incorrect assumptions about what it meant for me as a straight male to be there.

Similar experiences have occurred in situations where I was the only white person, the only male, the only non-indigenous person, or only person who couldn't speak the language of the group I was with. In these situations I try to notice any personal discomfort or assumptions that I am unconsciously making about other's and also to notice how my presence impacts the situation. As a result I have learned to seek out situations which are unfamiliar or in which I may be the only member of a particular group and to view them as growth opportunities to be embraced rather than as uncomfortable situations to be avoided.

Another example of transformed discomfort relating to homophobia came when I was visiting a friend in an area of a large city where there was a noticeable

gay population. When walking on the street I occasionally received smiles and looks from men who were checking me out. At first I was uncomfortable, but then I realized that I was being complimented. Eventually I decided that a compliment about my appearance was a compliment independent of the sex of the person making it, and as a result became comfortable accepting them.

Discomfort can also occur when someone expresses prejudices in front of others. My awareness of my own biases (lesson one) has resulted in me being more compassionate and effective when this happens. This in turn has allowed me to be more thoughtful and intentional in developing strategies that are appropriate for intervening in the behavior of others. Much of my professional work has focused on teaching people to not be “bystanders” when encountering prejudice. As a result, I have recently developed workshops and written a book to teach bystanders sensitive, respectful, and effective ways to interrupt prejudicial remarks (Berkowitz, 2009).

Lesson Three- Our liberation depends on the liberation of others. A third lesson is that personal growth and liberation in any identity is tied to the liberation and growth of others.

Once a gay friend asked me to explain my commitment to being an ally. I normally answered this question by affirming my desire for justice and fair treatment for all. But somehow his question was asked in a way that forced me to look within for a deeper answer, and I realized that I was also doing it for myself. In order to be fully human and healthy as a man I also need the opportunity to care about other men and express my feelings towards them freely. I need to feel free to

hug, be physically affectionate, and emotionally connected, without concern about my or other men's sexual orientation. His question helped me to see how the homophobia that he experienced as a gay man was also limiting for me as a straight man (although not equally) and that our liberations as men were intertwined.

I have come to a similar understanding with respect to racism, sexism, ableism and other prejudices. Anything that prevents us from fully accepting and embracing others in all of their identities (visible and invisible) directly or indirectly restricts our ability to be full and complete human beings ourselves. Thus, in a unique way, confronting prejudicial behavior towards others is a form of being an ally to oneself.

Lesson Four – Aspiring to be an ally is an active process. Many experiences have contributed to the fourth lesson – that being an ally is a process that develops and continues over time and that requires acting on values. When I first starting becoming conscious of social justice issues I saw myself as completely accepting of individuals from targeted groups and as free from problematic behavior. At that moment, I could easily have made the following comment shared by a male peer educator about his involvement in anti-violence work:

I considered myself a “passive objector.” I knew women had been oppressed throughout history, but I believed that presently things were pretty even. As far as being homophobic, I had gay friends, but rarely spoke up when I heard gay slurs. I was a non-sexist and non-homophobic male, but I did not believe that it was my place to stand up for either of these issues.” (Thayer, 2000)

An experience that helped me perceive the naivete of these assumptions took place early in my career as a Counseling Center Psychologist. One of my clients was a gay man who was struggling with the process of coming out. I thought that I was

being very tolerant and understanding of his dilemma, in the neutral and non-judgmental way I had been taught. I was thus surprised to receive feedback from a colleague that he had doubts about my support and acceptance of his sexual orientation, which in turn triggered his insecurities about being gay. With this help I was able to perceive that belief in my own tolerance and neutrality had left him confused about my feelings and had triggered his internalized homophobia. I realized that if I wanted to truly fulfill my goal of being a good therapist and provide a healing environment then I would have to be active and clear about my position and commitment to being an ally. I have learned this to be true in all areas of my life and not only professionally.

These experiences lead me to the fourth lesson – that striving to be an ally is an active and conscious process in which we must take responsibility for demonstrating and acting on our convictions – with friends and family, in public situations, in school, and in the workplace. In colloquial terms, we must “walk the walk” and translate our attitudes and values into action for them to be meaningful. Recently, various authors have identified the stages in the developmental process experienced by persons who want to be an ally (citation).

Lesson Five – Listen to and learn from the stories of others. A fifth way to be a better ally is to seek out opportunities where individuals from other groups can tell their stories. Hearing the stories and experiences of others has been important and necessary in my education about mistreatment. As an ally I believe that it is my responsibility to seek out and understand the experiences of individuals and groups

that I am not a part of. This provides me with information that allows me to further my own growth and be a better ally.

Hearing the stories of others has taught me about the complexity of identities – that we all have multiple identities with important experiences in each of them, and that being an ally requires acknowledging and embracing the complexity of each person and who or what one is trying to be an ally for.

This has affected my behavior at professional conferences. I have noticed that many participants seem to choose conference sessions according to which identity group they feel most comfortable with and avoid presentations that they perceive as intended for members of “other” groups. By making this choice a wonderful opportunity for professional and personal development is lost. Some of my most powerful professional learning has occurred at meetings where I was a “fly on the wall.” However, I have also learned that there are times when it is important for members of a group to have safe time with each other which would be disrupted by my presence, to assess this possibility in advance, and to gracefully exit when that is the case.

Lesson Six – Acknowledge and make constructive use of privilege. A sixth lesson is the importance of understanding the privileges we receive in our dominant identities. For example, when I am outspoken in meetings and at conferences colleagues from oppressed groups often made statements to me such as: “I’m glad that you said that, because when I say that no one listens.” As a result of these comments I became aware that I have a voice and privileges as a straight, white European heritage, physically able and male person that others do not have.

Similarly, my learning from others about their experiences of oppression has made it obvious that I am not subject to the same mistreatment. I have struggled with how to act on this awareness. These realizations have helped me be more conscious of my personal power (earned and unearned), how I use it, and how it protects and serves me. Knowledge of my everyday unearned privilege has enabled me to be more a more forceful and active agent of change.

I try and act on this understanding in a number of ways. First, I continually remind myself that I may not understand or be able to speak for the experiences of others and I conscientiously remember that I need to listen and learn. I have also developed the ability to use the opportunities provided by my privileges to act against them or call attention to how they may be unearned.

One way to do this is to create a forum for individuals from marginalized groups to speak-out. Thus, when I design professional development events I make sure that all “voices” are heard. When this is successful, participants may give spontaneous “speak-outs” about their experiences of oppression. In response, I am willing to adjust my agenda in order to provide time and psychological space for these experiences to be shared and heard.

A different challenge occurs when I am asked to present to a group of individuals who are different from me. In these situations, I try to acknowledge my biases and unfamiliarity with their experiences and offer what I have to share without assuming that it will be relevant.

At one point in my “aspiring ally process” I became aware of my privilege as a heterosexual and of my unconscious heterosexism. I had felt that I was actively

affirmative of LGB issues. But I noticed that I was making many assumptions that were based on unacknowledged heterosexual privilege. For example, I didn't ask LGB friends if they planned to have a family. Now that I do I have heard many beautiful stories about these friend's desire to share their lives with children. I had also taken for granted my ability to become a parent, to receive legal recognition of my relationship, and that my partner and family would have access to the health insurance and other benefits – without explicitly acknowledging that others were denied the same opportunity.

Some may see these strategies as paternalistic, but I have learned that if I cannot avoid being treated with privilege and being given access to resources, I have a responsibility to use these privileges – and the opportunities they offer – to illuminate and challenge oppression and to reshape public space so that it is more inclusive. I have also learned that I may have knowledge, experiences and skills that will be beneficial to others, as long as I don't assume that this will necessarily be the case.

Opportunities do to this occur in daily life. If a waitperson gives the check to me when I am also dining with a female, I can respectfully ask them if they are assuming that I am the one who will be paying. If a man who is Middle Eastern or of color is screened at the airport and I am not, I can gently ask how come he was selected instead of me. Sometimes the use of humor can diffuse what can otherwise be an awkward moment and still get the point across.

These experiences have generated a heightened awareness of my privileges and increased my commitment to take advantage of and create opportunities to actively interrupt and undermine mistreatment.

Lesson Seven – Accountability to Groups we want to an Ally to. How can I know if my actions on behalf of another group are actually helpful or in its interest? While I may sincerely think that what I am doing as an ally is helpful on behalf of a particular group, I cannot know for sure because I have not had the experiences of being in that group. I cannot assume that “I am an ally,” only that “I want to be an ally” and find out what would help. Thus, another characteristic of being an ally is being accountable to the members of the group we want to be an ally to. This means that we must seek out their feedback, develop collaborations and coalitions, and most importantly, not assume that we know what is best.

An example from my own career is my work in all male-groups teaching men to take responsibility for ending violence against women (Berkowitz, 19XX). Since the workshops were intentionally designed to be all-male there was no opportunity to solicit feedback from women. To address this problem we decided to offer a presentation of the workshop each year that was open to the whole campus community, and to specifically invite women who were active in anti-violence and feminist issues. This provided an opportunity for us to receive valuable feedback about our work as well as appreciations for what we were doing.

It is easy to think of examples of well-meaning individuals who want to help but who be ineffective or who may actually do harm. And it is important to acknowledge that one may be relatively successful being an ally in one area but not

in others. Thus accountability to those who we want to be an ally to is an essential component of ally behavior.

Lesson Eight – The need for acknowledgement and healing of personal hurts.

My activism on behalf of others led me to notice a contradiction. While I had been outspoken on behalf of other groups, I was closeted as a Jewish person. Rather than claiming my cultural and religious identity I left it as something that was unspoken and unacknowledged, even when it was known and obvious to others. Although I had learned to affirm and embrace the traditions of others, I not did make an effort to disclose or share my own. By learning about “internalized oppression” in combination with some powerful experiential workshop experiences, I discovered previously unconscious fears of being public as a Jewish person – including to be visible in a group that was identifiable as Jewish. I realized that I had internalized these fears from older family members who had lived in situations where any visible expression of their Judaism placed them in danger. As a child I did not understand why it was always important to my grandfather to find out if a particular friend of mine was Jewish or not, but later in life, upon learning of his experiences, I understood that for him it was an issue safety based on past experiences. These fears that were reinforced by incidents of anti-Semitism that had occurred to myself and others.

One of the personal directions that I have taken as a result is to present and affirm my Jewishness. This encounter with my own fears and internalized oppression has been crucial in allowing me to become a stronger ally and advocate around issues of oppression because it has helped me to understand the experience

of internalized oppression. Thus, the need to understand internalized oppression and to heal from the hurts we have received within our different individual identities and experiences is the eighth important lesson.

Lesson Nine: Recognize and affirm "adversity strengths." The next lesson is that the experience of oppression and mistreatment can foster psychological and spiritual strength – without in turn providing a justification for such mistreatment. This refers to what others in the multicultural field have called "adversity strengths" (citation).

For example, a lesbian colleague and her partner had adopted many difficult to place children. I perceived myself as very accepting and supportive of their family and considered them to be perfectly suitable parents. Much later, I realized that in their experience as lesbians who had learned healthy ways of coping with a marginal identity they had acquired skills that would help them be good as parents of marginalized children – skills that I do not have as a straight person with dominant identities. Another example is that many individuals who I consider to be teachers and mentors have found a deep spirituality as a result of coping with and transcending experiences of oppression.

My realization of "adversity strengths" took me beyond tolerance and acceptance to appreciate the unique gifts and wisdom that come from living on the margin. I now actively strive in my personal and professional relationships to identify, appreciate, and learn from the skills, resiliencies and wisdom that may come from living with mistreatment.

These lessons share a common theme: that being an ally is a life issue and not just a professional issue or a matter of “political correctness.” I believe that striving to be an ally is in fact a moral and spiritual necessity. The important life experiences that transform us are often life experiences outside of our personal identities and identity groups. We must therefore seek out such life-changing experiences and provide the same for others. We can create friendships, professional, and learning environments where people from other identities can give us feedback about our unconscious prejudices, where personal discomfort can be used as a growth edge, and where individuals from mistreated groups can speak about their own experiences in one or multiple identities. To be an active ally requires a commitment to using inclusive language, learning and teaching skills to interrupt prejudicial behavior, clarifying unconscious assumptions, and taking personal responsibility for contradicting privilege. Finally, we must make room in our lives to do our own work and healing in the identities where we have been hurt – in my case, growing up with less economic resources than my peers, as a Jewish person, and as a man uncomfortable with how I was taught to be male.

Lesson Ten – Difference is transcended when we can see each other as spiritual beings. All of these lessons and experiences point to the tenth realization – that while difference and identity are important and shape our experiences in profound ways, there is something within us that transcends these differences. There is something in each of us that is beyond our different individual identities and beyond form itself. As a result I like to say that “difference does and doesn’t make a difference.”

Clearly, in light of what I have written here I believe and have experienced how “difference makes a difference.” Yet on a deeper spiritual level I believe that all persons share a common humanity as souls on a journey through life. From this perspective, we are all embodied beings who share similar challenges and experiences along our spiritual journey. It is from this more universal perspective that I have learned that “difference doesn’t make a difference.”

Knowing when difference makes a difference and when it does not is all important. To say that difference does not make a difference when it does (i.e. in our everyday lives, choices and opportunities) is empirically and morally wrong and trivializes injustice. However, these differences are transcended when we consider each other from an existential or spiritual perspective. Thus to deny our fundamental sameness as humans and as spiritual beings is also wrong.

Lesson Eleven – Practice non-violence and non-harm as a way of life. My work on social justice issues has lead me to the view mistreatment as a form of violence. As my understanding of violence in all its forms has grown, I have begun to look at my life differently and expand my concerns and interests beyond the field of social justice. I have begun asking myself the question: how do my life choices affect others – including all living creatures on earth? To what extent do my eating preferences and purchases result in harm and mistreatment of other living beings? Are there ways that I can meet my needs for food, possessions, and transportation in ways that are less harmful to the planet? Expanding our commitment to social justice to include all living beings and planet earth itself requires that we ask ourselves these questions. This further re-formulation of being an ally suggests that

we can be an ally to life itself, in all its forms, and decide to live in a way that is life-affirming rather than life denying. The particular answer to these questions will be different for each person, but we must begin by asking them and acting on the answers. I view this as a natural outgrowth of a commitment to social justice and non-violence towards others.

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In summary, internalizing the commitment to be an ally is a life-long learning and healing process that must be actualized in word, thought, and deed. As individuals who are committed to human dignity and equitable treatment of all, we can accept this challenge with the understanding that our personal fate and well-being is intertwined with the fate and well-being of other living beings, and that we share a common destiny and spiritual journey to become whole and complete.

*Thank you for your efforts to be an ally,
for your commitment to personal healing,
and for your willingness to embody words and ideals in deeds.*

Authors note: An earlier version of this essay was published as “Coming Out to my Homophobia and Heterosexism: Lessons Learned in the Journey of an Ally.”

Appreciations: Special thanks to my wife Gran and my daughter Rachel, from whom I have learned much about what it means to be an ally and what it means to be a complete human being. Thanks also to Cherie Brown and all of my wonderful colleagues from the National Coalition Building Institute, where I learned many of the lessons shared here.

Table

Summary of “Lessons Learned in the Journey of An Ally”

- Lesson One: Acknowledge and understand your own biases and prejudices.
- Lesson Two: Seek out and learn from uncomfortable situations.
- Lesson Three: Recognize that your own growth and freedom is linked to the growth and freedom of others.
- Lesson Four: Being an ally is a process that unfolds developmentally and one that requires the expression of words in deeds.
- Lesson Five: Seek out opportunities to listen to individuals from other groups about their experiences.
- Lesson Six: Recognize and understand the privilege you have in your dominant identities and use this privilege constructively.
- Lesson Seven: An ally is accountable to the groups they are trying to be an ally to
- Lesson Eight: Do your personal healing work
- Lesson Nine: Appreciate the strengths that can be born out of adverse experiences.
- Lesson Ten: Difference is transcended when we can see each other as spiritual beings, but it still “makes a difference” in our daily lives
- Lesson Eleven: Practice non-harm and non-violence as a way of life

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About the author

Alan Berkowitz is an independent consultant who helps colleges, universities, public health agencies, the military, and communities design programs that address health and social justice issues. His expert opinion is frequently sought after by the federal government and professional organizations, and he is well-known for scholarship and innovative programs addressing issues of substance abuse, sexual assault, gender, social norms, bystander behavior and diversity. He has developed model rape prevention programs for men, is a founder of the Social Norms Approach and *The Report on Social Norms*, and has done pioneering work on the applications of the social norms model to social justice and violence prevention. More recently, he has offered workshops and written a book on bystander intervention techniques and on what it means to be a social justice ally. Alan earned his Ph.D. in Psychology from Cornell University in 1981 and has received five national awards for his professional contributions and activities. He can be reached at alan@fltg.net or www.alanberkowitz.com.