

Ilsa Marie Govan



My sister and I were talking about racism the other day and she asked if constantly trying to see the world from multiple perspectives as well as take into account personal, cultural, and systemic privilege with folks wasn't exhausting. Why would anyone choose to think about these things? Perhaps, she suggested, it is because of some awkward struggles I had with my own self-esteem growing up that I cling so passionately to my current identity as an anti-racist White person.

These are the kinds of questions I hear frequently. Why would any White person choose to see the world in a way that so clearly illustrates our responsibility for ending racism? How can it be in our best interest to see ourselves as a part of a group that obviously participated(s) in the disadvantaging, even genocide of others?

I believe my sister inadvertently played a role in my becoming a social justice activist. Growing up with a sibling less than two years younger than me made me acutely aware of what is and is not fair from a very early age. My parents catered to our desire for equity by setting up rules such as those regarding splitting the rare bottle of Coke. One of us got to pour the soda into two glasses; the other got to choose the first glass.

Their concerns however, were not limited to food and drink justice. I attended my first *Take Back the Night* march when I was in first grade. In third grade, I was shocked and outraged when one of my parents' friends was killed in a hate crime because of his sexual orientation. By the time I reached college, I was familiar with racial bias in textbooks, sexism in Disney movies, and homophobia in the churches many of my peers attended. The next logical step was an awareness of the everyday manifestations of White privilege in my life. I was primed for taking on the many injustices of the world.

At first, advocating for justice was about my own rights. As a child, I complained when adults talked down to me and didn't take my opinions and values seriously. I worked hard to define myself as a woman free of the social constructions of beauty and gender roles that limited my full expression. I learned to spit. When really exploring White privilege in college, I sought out ways that I could use my privilege to benefit others. My idea of justice for all involved speaking up for others and advocating so they would not be mistreated.

Further exploration of social and environmental justice has led me to believe that advocating for equity serves all people. We have all been put into politically constructed boxes that not only limit our self-expression, but also separate us from one another. Thus my personal and professional relationships are inhibited by systematic segregation. In addition, institutional racism in our society weighs heavily on my soul. My morality depends on first acknowledging and then breaking down the walls of these boxes. How is it fair to any of us to live in a world where we are taught lies and half-truths about each other?

With the complexities of racism, there is no clear path to bridging the divisions I learned despite my parents' best intentions. But the true joy of advocating for justice lies not only in the result, but also in the process. There is a rush of energy I feel with new learning and connections to others; the "runners high" of social justice work that comes from sticking with it despite the obstacles. Living with integrity and purposefully seeking understanding of others and myself will never be exhausting. In fact, it is exhilarating.