

Preface to the Second Edition

The first edition of *Becoming an Ally* was published in 1994. Some things have changed since then; some have stayed just the same. Neo-liberalism has visibly spread, making progress on free trade, privatization, and the cutting of social programs. As a result, there is a greater gap between rich and poor, all over the world, than there was seven years ago. In response, there is now an anti-globalization movement that is larger, better coordinated, and more international than ever before. For me, this is a great source of hope.

Unfortunately, seven years later, oppression based on gender, race, ability, sexual orientation, and many other differences among people is still alive and well. It still results from the growing inequalities in our class structure and still plays a role in causing them. Competition is still there as well, between and among those who suffer different forms of oppression.

Since *Becoming an Ally* first appeared, I have received many responses—from people I know and complete strangers, from people who are working only on their own liberation and see *Ally* as something they want their oppressors to read, and from people who are on their own journey of becoming allies. I have taken part in many interesting discussions. Three topics stand out: the distinction between being an ally and taking abuse for your good intentions, the emerging field of diversity education, and above all, conflict in social justice groups. The section of the book on the latter topic stimulated more response than any other.

For this new edition, I have made many small changes and some larger ones. I have tried my best to update the resources in the notes. I have also included several exciting works from authors discovered too late to be incorporated into the original edition or written since, some discovered because people who read *Becoming an Ally* pointed me in the right direction. These include Maude Barlow (1998; and Heather-jane Robertson 1994; and Bruce Campbell 1996; and Tony Clarke 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2001), Ben Carniol 2000, Susan George (1999; and Fabrizio Sabelli 1994;

and articles posted on her website [<http://www.tni.org/george/index.htm>]), Margaret Green (1987), Kate Kirkham (1988/89), Jerry Mander (1991, 1996), Linda McQuaig (1995, 1998), and Vandana Shiva (1993, 1997, 1999, 2001).

I have expanded the case study on the Enclosure Movement in Chapter Two. Chapter Three, about the structures that hold oppression in place, has been updated to include a brief summary of recent changes in global corporate capitalism and the resistance to it. Chapter Nine, on educating allies, has been expanded to take into account seven years of reading and experimentation.

I began writing *Ally* because I was concerned about how many people, deeply engaged in the liberation of their own group, seemed not to be able to see their role in oppressing others, and how that comes full circle and perpetuates their own oppression. Like Margaret Green (1987), I don't believe anyone would choose to be an oppressor, but we do so unconsciously out of our scars. I was intrigued by how we reproduce oppression in spite of our best intentions. I was also anxious to communicate my own experience of becoming aware of my oppression, then becoming aware of my role as an oppressor of others. I wanted more people to know how complementary the two processes are. Above all I wanted to create a guidebook for would-be allies.

For a few months after the publication of *Ally*, I felt a great sense of accomplishment. I had said all that I wanted to say. I had summed up about fifteen years of learning and given it to the world. I wondered if I would ever feel that pressing a need to say something again.

However, within a few months, I found myself acting as an ally in a situation where everything I knew about the role was not enough. I had an analysis of the individual journey to becoming an ally, but I was caught in a situation of institutional oppression. I learned quickly that institutions are more than the sum of their parts; their patterns go beyond those of the individuals who participate in them. Understanding something about how oppression becomes encoded into our individual psychological makeup was not enough. I began a new piece of the journey, trying to understand how oppression becomes encoded into our institutions.

As a result, this new edition of *Ally* is intended as the first half of a larger work. I hope to follow it with a new work about institutions. The subtitle of the original edition of *Ally* was *Breaking the Cycle of Oppression*. The subtitle of this second edition is *Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People*. The subtitle of the sequel will be *Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in Institutions*. They will be intended as a pair.

I hope this new edition of *Becoming an Ally*, soon to be accompanied by a sister-work on oppression in institutions, goes out around the world as the first edition did, bringing back new contacts, colleagues, ideas, and learning. As a first time reader or an old friend from the first edition, may this book stimulate your thinking, move you to action, and give you pleasure.

Anne Bishop

Preface to the First Edition

For several years, I co-led a workshop called “Unlearning Racism.”¹ Early on in the process, my Black colleague and I drew a line down the middle of the floor and participants moved back and forth between the “privileged” side and the “exploited” side. First men went to one side, women to the other. Then white people went to one side, people of colour to the other, and so on. Each time, participants were asked to remember an experience which reflected that particular part of their identity. The purpose of the exercise was to help people understand that some groups in society are oppressed and others benefit from that oppression; but, as individuals, we all have experienced both at some point.

As a woman and a lesbian, I am oppressed by the structures and attitudes of the dominant culture in Nova Scotia, where I live. I am also white, anglophone, employed, able-bodied, hearing, born a Canadian citizen, “normal” looking, and not over-weight. These attributes place me on the privileged side of the line. Being middle-aged and “middle class” put me sometimes on one side of the power line, sometimes on the other.

I consider myself amazingly blessed. First, I grew up in a family that was able to give me encouragement, support, and enough to eat. Throughout my life, I have had the loving and challenging friendship of many who were not as protected as I was, who grew up with poverty, racism, deprivation, abuse, and war. They saved me from the *näiveté* and privilege-blindness which otherwise might have remained my outlook. I was also saved by being a lesbian and a woman who came of age in the 1960s.

This book is my attempt to answer some of the big questions of my life: Where does oppression come from? Has it always been with us, just “human nature”? What can we do to change it? What does individual healing have to do with struggles for social justice? What does social justice have to do with individual healing? Why do members of the same oppressed group fight each other, sometimes more viciously than they fight

their oppressor? Why do some who experience oppression develop a life-long commitment to fighting oppression, while others turn around and oppress others?

This work is a reflection on my experience. It comes out of my social identity in this place and time. It also grows out of my world-view as a feminist.

I am a community development worker and popular educator.² For a time I also worked in the field of international development. Over the past twenty years I have been part of, and worked with, many groups struggling to achieve social justice. My observations on these experiences are the main source of material for this book. Along the way, my thoughts have intermingled with those of many other people—sometimes through reading, other times through personal conversations. It would be impossible to trace the origin of every idea contained in these pages. When I have taken material directly from others' work and ideas, recently enough to be able to follow the trail back to the source, I have put a reference in the notes. I have also used the notes to give some starting points for those who would like to explore an idea further through reading, experiential education, or group reflection. I have not made any attempt to back up everything I say with anything beyond my own experience.

This book is intended to be part of a conversation. I look forward to readers' responses. I have so much to learn.

Notes

1. Bishop and Carvery (1994). For ordering information, see Chapter Eight, note #1.
2. See the definition of "Popular Education" in the glossary near the end of this book.

Images: Competitive Oppressions

I am watching a video of the Gay Pride March in New York. On the sidewalk a young Black woman screams at the top of her lungs, over and over again: “The wages of sin is death!”¹

A feminist friend sighs about her gay boss: “We can’t get him to listen to the problems facing women in this organization. All he says is we’re not as oppressed as he is.”

During a march commemorating victims of the holocaust, a group of gay men came in memory of those who died for their sexual orientation. They are forced to leave the march (Emecheta 1989).

I am sitting at lunch with several friends listening to one member of our party, who is Black, talk at length about how white women are reaping incredible benefits from pay and employment equity and are ignoring the Black people they are leaving behind. I will never deny that racism is often part of white feminism, but I wonder how the many verbal attacks I have witnessed against white women by Black women will ever move either group forward.

During the summer of 1990, we hold a series of rallies in support of the Mohawks who are facing the Canadian army at Oka. The Mohawks are trying to protect their ancient sacred place from becoming a golf course. During his speech, a local First Nation leader attacks all Québécois, calling them “those Frenchmen.”

We have an international visitor. A group of low-income single mothers is telling her about some of their organizing work. “Poverty?” she says. “What do you know about poverty? This is nothing.”

Note

1. This video clip, only a few seconds long, was included in the introduction to a program on issues facing gay and lesbian people. The program was part of the series, *Out in America*, U.S. Public Broadcasting System, September 1990.

Why Write a Book About Becoming an Ally?

My first reason for writing this book is a dream. This dream is a deep, driving force in me, and I know many others share it. The dream is a vision of the world I would like to live in, a world based on cooperation, negotiation, and universal respect for the innate value of every creature on earth and the Earth herself. This is a world where no one doubts that to hurt anyone or anything is to hurt yourself and those you love most, a world where everyone works to understand how everything we do will affect future generations.

I am what is called an “activist.” I like to live my commitment to my dream. I often distrust language, because I am tired of hearing the same words I use—“respect,” “cooperation,” “justice,” “equality,” “the people”—with their meaning co-opted by exploiters. However, it is time for me to converse with a wider network than those I can know face to face. I have something I want to say.

I have a vision of how my dream can come about. It is not detailed, because it is not for one person to predict the path of consensus. In general, though, I long to see all of us who are giving our work, ideas, energy, and lives to a society which benefits the rich and powerful rise up together and say: “No more. We can develop social, political, and economic structures that benefit everyone, and we will. We want to take on the challenge of moving towards equality, and we will. We are by far the majority; we can change things.”

Between me and my dream stands a high wall. Its name is “Divide and Conquer.” We have learned all too well to despise and distrust those who are different from us. Ironically, we have also been taught to despise and distrust people like us. This is because we have been divided even from ourselves. We distrust ourselves. Rather than looking within, to our own thoughts and experience, we accept the word of “the experts.”

The second reason for writing this book is anger. Again and again I see examples of division among oppressed people, as in the images at the

beginning of this chapter. Incidents like these rob me of hope. How can we take back our world and reorganize it to benefit everyone if we cannot even talk about our different forms of oppression without getting tangled up in the net of competition?

When I see people competing, claiming their own oppression as the “worst,” or attacking the gains made by other oppressed groups, I see us all running on a treadmill. As long as we try to end our oppression by rising above others, we are reinforcing each other’s oppression, and eventually our own. We are fighting over who has more value, who has less, instead of asking why we must be valued as more or less. We are investing energy in the source of all our oppressions, which is competition itself.¹

The truth is that each form of oppression is part of a single complex, interrelated, self-perpetuating system. The whole thing rests on a world-view that says we must constantly strive to be better than someone else. Competition assumes that we are separate beings—separate from each other, from other species, from the earth. If we believe we are separate, then we are able to believe we can hurt another being and not suffer ourselves.

Competition also assumes that there is a hierarchy of beings. Those who “win” can take a “higher” position, one with more power and value than those who “lose.” It is a short step from accepting hierarchy as natural to assuming that exploitation is just. It becomes right, even admirable, for those who have more power and value to help themselves to the labour, land, resources, culture, possessions, even the bodies, of those who have less power and value. The result is a class system, where power and privilege increase as you go up the ladder, and those standing on each rung take for granted their right to benefit from the labour and resources of those below them. Class will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

As long as we who are fighting oppression continue to play the game of competition with one another, all forms of oppression will continue to exist. No one oppression can be ended without all ending, and this can only happen when we succeed in replacing the assumptions of competition, hierarchy, and separation with cooperation, an understanding that each being has value beyond measure, and the knowledge that we cannot harm anyone or anything without harming ourselves.

The connection between different forms of oppression is often seen in the liberal² sense which denies differences, ignores the continuing presence of history, and blames individuals—“We’re all the same, all equal, everyone has problems, let’s just decide to get along.” I have found it difficult, when speaking in public, to say that all oppressions have one

root, without my audience hearing me say that all oppressions are the same, or equal. People often feel that their oppression has been belittled. But I am not saying that all oppressions are the same or equal; equality means nothing in this context, for how would you measure? I certainly am not saying that we all have problems and should just learn to get along; this denies a long, complicated history and all the terrible scars that need healing, collectively, before we can live together in peace. What I am saying is that all oppressions are interdependent, they all come from the same world-view, and none can be solved in isolation. We can either perpetuate a society based on competition, where some win and some lose, or we can work toward a society based on cooperation, where winning and losing become irrelevant. In the first scenario, oppression will continue to exist for almost everyone. In the second, it will fade away, because it serves no purpose.

The idea that one form of oppression, or even one person's oppression, can be solved independently is of great benefit to the rich and powerful. This belief is enough to keep oppressed people fighting and jostling in competition with each other, never reaching a point of unity where we can successfully challenge those with more than their share.

Reverend Martin Niemöller, a Nazi prison survivor, recognized this:

First they arrested the communists—but I was not a Communist, so I did nothing. Then they came for the Social Democrats—but I was not a Social Democrat, so I did nothing. Then they arrested the Trade Unionists—and I did nothing, because I was not one. And then they came for the Jews, and then the Catholics, but I was neither a Jew nor a Catholic, and I did nothing. At last they came and arrested me—and there was no one left to do anything about it. (Bartlett 1980:824)

I regain hope every time I see someone reach out past the boundaries of their own oppression to understand and support someone else's struggle. Hope is my third reason for writing this book.

I have a fourth reason for writing about becoming an ally. Through my own journey of recognizing first my oppression, then my role as an oppressor, I found written work that helped me understand my own oppressions and the process of liberation from each one.³ I found excellent literature on unlearning racism,⁴ and good workshop materials for unlearning heterosexism.⁵ I also found a few writers who are working to understand and communicate the complex interrelationship of racism,

sexism, heterosexism, and class,⁶ and a growing literature of personal accounts by individuals coming to grips with their role as oppressors.⁷

What I have not found is a critical analysis of the relationships among all forms of oppression or of the journey from fighting one's own oppression to forming an alliance with others. Not everyone who is active against his or her own oppression breaks out of the competitiveness and learns to support others. For those who do, what is the process?

In *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks asks for more discussion of the roots of racism in white people and the process of becoming anti-racist:

One change in direction that would be real cool would be the production of a discourse on race that interrogates whiteness. It would just be so interesting for all those white folks who are giving blacks their take on blackness to let them know what's going on with whiteness. In far too much contemporary writing—though there are some outstanding exceptions—race is always an issue of Otherness that is not white; it is black, brown, yellow, red, purple even. Yet only a persistent, rigorous, and informed critique of whiteness could really determine what forces of denial, fear, and competition are responsible for creating fundamental gaps between professed political commitment to eradicating racism and the participation in the construction of a discourse on race that perpetuates racial domination. Many scholars, critics and writers preface their work by stating that they are white, as though mere acknowledgment of this fact were sufficient, as though it conveyed all we need to know of standpoint, motivation, direction. I think back to my graduate years when many of the feminist professors fiercely resisted the insistence that it was important to examine race and racism. Now many of these very same women are producing scholarship focusing on race and gender. What process enabled their perspectives to shift? Understanding that process is important for the development of solidarity; it can enhance awareness of the epistemological shifts that enable all of us to move in new and oppositional directions. Yet none of these women write articles reflecting on their critical process, showing how their attitudes have changed. (hooks 1990:54)⁸

Knowledge of this process is crucial to overcoming all types of oppression. If we understood how and why some people choose to give up

privilege and become allies, we would have an important insight into social change.

The need to understand this process is behind my effort to generalize from my own experience and that of others around me and begin to create a theory of how one becomes an ally to other oppressed people. Becoming an ally is a liberating experience, but very different from liberating your own people and, in some ways, more painful. I want to provide a resource for and open up a conversation with others who are travelling this road with me.

In my experience, there are six steps involved in becoming an ally. They are:

1. understanding oppression, how it came about, how it is held in place, and how it stamps its pattern on the individuals and institutions that continually recreate it;
2. understanding different oppressions, how they are similar, how they differ, how they reinforce one another;
3. consciousness and healing;
4. becoming a worker for your own liberation;
5. becoming an ally;
6. maintaining hope.

The remaining chapters will expand on each of these steps.

Notes

1. For an interesting discussion of competition, see Kohn (1986). Also see the glossary at the back of this book for further comments on the terms “competition” and “separation.”
2. See the glossary at the back of the book for a discussion of liberalism and how I use the term.
3. There are many, many books and articles discussing steps to liberation, in general and in relation to specific forms of oppression. I cannot begin to list them here; however, the key to my own understanding of the process was the work of Paulo Freire 1970, 1972, 1973.
4. Some resources for unlearning racism are listed in the bibliography at the end of this book, including Brown (1982), CUSO (1990), James (1989), Jensen (1998, 1999), Katz (1978), Lee (1985), McCaskell (1988), McIntosh (1990), Obedkoff (1989), Thomas and Novogrodsky (1983a, 1983b), and Thomas (1984).
5. A key resource for unlearning heterosexism is the organization, The Campaign to End Homophobia (The Campaign, Box 438316, Chicago, IL,

60643-8316, U.S.A. [<http://www.endhomophobia.org>] and their publications, Obear (1990) and Thompson (1990). Also see Blumenfeld (1992) and Pharr (1988). Other good resources on the Internet are: Assault on Gay America: The Life and Death of Billy Jack Gaither [<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/assault>] and PFLAG [<http://www.pflag.org>].

6. Writers I have found who are trying to relate racism, sexism, heterosexism and class are bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Suzanne Pharr, and the “structuralist” school of social work, including Maurice Moreau, Gisèle Legault, Pierre Racine, and Peter Leonard.
7. Excellent examples of white people coming to terms with racism are the Jensen, Katz, McCaskell and McIntosh references in note #4, above. Also see Carniol (2000), Green (1987), Pogrebin (1991) and Helms (1990).

Good examples of men writing on sexism are Frank (1987), Kaufman (1987), Lyttelton (1983/84), Snodgrass (1977), Tolson (1977). Men’s anti-sexist organizations are very active on the World Wide Web. See: European Mixed Group Against Sexism [<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/7422>], the National Organization of Men Against Sexism [<http://www.csbs.ju.edu/mm22/suite.nomas.html>], Real Men (Boston) [<http://www.cs.utk.edu/~bartley/other/realmen.html>], Men’s Net [<http://infoweb.magi.com/~mensnet>], Real Men [<http://www.ibd.ncr.ca/~mansfield/feminism/realmen/html>], Men for Change [<http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/CommunitySupport/Men4Change/index.htm>]. The Men for Change website is also a gateway into the Men Against Violence Webring, a collection of men’s anti-sexism websites.

8. Since bell hooks wrote these words in 1990 and I wrote the first edition of *Becoming an Ally* in 1994, there has been a growing interest in understanding whiteness among anti-racist white people. Katz, McCaskell, McIntosh, and Pogrebin (references in note #5, above) were all pioneers in this area. There are also active discussions on the Internet. See Race Relations.About.Com [http://racelrelations.about.com/newsissues/racelrelations/cs/white_privilege/index.htm], Recovering Racists Network [<http://>], and the Anti-Racism Network [<http://www.anti-racism.net>].