

BECOMING

trustworthy

WHITE ALLIES

MELANIE S. MORRISON

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# BECOMING **TRUSTWORTHY** WHITE ALLIES

Melanie S. Morrison

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For April Allison,  
with gratitude for your wisdom,  
and your anchoring love.

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## Foreword

JENNIFER HARVEY

*Jennifer Harvey is author of Antiracism as Daily Practice: Refuse Shame, Change White Communities, and Help Create a Just World and Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America.*

Whenever I have the chance to talk about Melanie Morrison, I usually begin by saying, “Melanie was my mentor—years before she even knew who I was.” The truth is that countless others—and I mean *countless*—could give a similar testimony.

I have heard people say, “I didn’t know ‘doing our own work’ was something white people could do—and then I saw her antiracism seminar with that exact name.” “I’d never seen someone speak so boldly and publicly about white responsibility, while moving so deeply and accountably in interracial relationships—and I wanted to become able to do the same.” “You know what? I participated in one of the cohorts Melanie designed and facilitated through Allies for Change and my life was never the same. Thank god.”

And now this book.

*Becoming Trustworthy White Allies* is not just another book about white people and racism—though we do need more good books and meaningful work in that realm. This book is an offering. It is an offering by one of the elders of white antiracist activism who has finally made time to put her experiences, knowledge, and wisdom to the page and has pulled together several of her essays, lectures, and stories into one place for all of us to read.

For decades Melanie has made visible the path for white antiracism. She has done it as a teacher and activist-practitioner. Following the wisdom and guidance of her own antiracism elders, Melanie became acutely aware that white

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people have deep inner work to do as they seek to engage more consistently and effectively in the collaborative work of racial justice.

This book is a gift because it engages and explores concepts and questions that are important in white antiracism spaces. For example, Melanie gives us insight into the ways she has wrestled, as a white person, with questions of ethnicity and genealogy and then takes us through a powerful narrative of how those questions have led her to the work of repair and reparations. She also stresses how crucial it is for white people to develop and nurture relationships of support and accountability with Black, Indigenous, and other people of color as we work for racial justice.

This book is a gift because those of us who are white and longing for a more racially just world and seeking to play a meaningful role in bringing that world into fruition need to hear, learn, and remember the stories of our elders. We need to learn from the wisdom of elders who have been engaged in this long-haul journey; people whose legacies made a way for us to locate ourselves and find one another in the journey.

Melanie is precisely one of those humans. She is one of the most authentic and powerful sages when it comes to whiteness and racial justice, and this book gives us the chance to learn from and with her.

And yet, like everything else Melanie Morrison creates, *Becoming Trustworthy White Allies* is not self-referential. This book is far more than a collection of reflections on Melanie's own life and the various stages of growth and creativity she's journeyed through as she walks this path.

Melanie is a white lesbian feminist. She describes her own positionality with critical self-reflection and then roots it deeply in broader and larger landscapes such as ancestral investigations, theories of racial development, legacies of lynching, contemporary legal crises, and more. She makes it possible for her readers to see how each of our own unique, distinct, and particular stories are also part of this larger landscape—and, by so doing, compels us to ask, “What is thus necessary in this journey, now, *for me?*”

Let me just give you one example that gripped me. As Melanie writes about coming to terms with the legacies of her enslaving ancestors, she teaches us about the ways that slavery has personal effects in our collective lives. She challenges us to understand that the work of creating a different kind of now and tomorrow requires that we first grasp how our lives are embedded in the legacies of white supremacist violence.

I'm gripped because I, for one, am serious about being part of creating a different kind of now and a radically different tomorrow. And I know many of us share that longing.

The final section in this book is titled “Staying Power.” Whatever unfolds among us in the coming years in this land, we will need staying power. *Becoming Trustworthy White Allies* provides nourishment and connection for that lifelong journey. It makes visible and transparent the kind of extended work we must undertake in order to move beyond guilt and shame and work toward becoming trustworthy white allies.

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## Introduction

Thirty women filled the meeting room the first night of the Women's Theological Center (WTC) Anti-Racism Training Program. As we introduced ourselves one by one around the circle, I was grateful, awestruck, and intimidated to be entering this new learning community. The WTC had brought together a racially diverse group of women with years of engagement as activists, educators, and leaders of local and national movements for racial justice.

With three colleagues, I had flown from Michigan to Boston to attend this intensive four-day workshop in June 1994. I was a forty-five-year-old United Church of Christ minister who had served three churches before cofounding Leaven, a nonprofit organization, with my mentor and mother, Eleanor Morrison. Launched in 1987, Leaven provided education, resources, and training in the areas of feminism, spiritual development, and sexual justice. In the 1970s, my mother designed the first sexuality courses taught at Michigan State University and wrote three books about teaching human sexuality to undergraduates, before being ordained in the United Church of Christ at age fifty-five. She

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was a skilled and brilliant designer of experiential group process, and I wanted to work as her apprentice, learning those skills firsthand.

In Lansing, Michigan, we created a space for grassroots feminist reflection, study, and dialogue that explored the wisdom and vitality of spiritualities rooted in a passion for justice. We also traveled the country speaking to and consulting with nonprofit, educational, and religious organizations as a mother-daughter team, one of us an out lesbian and the other a fierce heterosexual ally.

It was good and needed work in a time when women and LGBTQ people faced unrelenting violence and discrimination, but our work had gaping holes because the resources and training we provided as two white women often failed to center the lives of Black, Indigenous, and other women of color. Having been confronted by women of color about those dangerous and harmful omissions, we enrolled in antiracism trainings they recommended, including the one that brought us to Boston in the summer of 1994.

On the second day of the WTC antiracism workshop, the lead facilitators, Donna Bivens and Nancy Richardson, introduced a guest speaker who had worked for years as a coach and consultant with historically white organizations that sought to become racially equitable. She presented a graphic tool that displayed the characteristics of organizations on a continuum from monocultural segregated institutions to antiracist multicultural institutions, and she described the challenges organizations faced as they worked to uproot patterns of unearned privilege and grow equity.

When the guest speaker paused to welcome questions, I raised my hand and asked if she could please share examples of organizations that had attained the goal of becoming a “transformed organization.”

She shook her head and said, “No, I can’t do that.”

“Oh, you don’t have to provide the name of the organization,” I explained. “I understand that would be a violation of professional ethics. I’d just love to hear some stories about organizations that have reached that stage of development.”

Shaking her head from side to side more emphatically, she replied, “No, I’m sorry I cannot provide those stories because I have never witnessed them. I can tell you about meetings I have experienced when all the voices at the table were heard and honored, and people dared to invite conflicting perspectives and do the hard work of acknowledging harmful behaviors. But too many organizations stop short of the long-haul process required to institute substantive and sustainable change.”

I imagine I was frowning and squinting with bewilderment as she responded, thinking to myself, *She’s got no examples to show us? That is so disheartening.*

Unable to accept what the speaker was revealing, I raised my hand again and exclaimed, “But, if there aren’t examples or models, how can we have hope about this work?”

Sitting near me, Donna Bivens turned to face me head on and paused before speaking. Later I wondered if she had been questioning whether I was worth the patience and energy required to make herself heard. I was immensely grateful she decided to take the risk.

“This is the work, Melanie,” she said, leaning toward me. “You will encounter resistance and roadblocks. This work is not easy. It’s a constant struggle. That has been the experience of people of color for centuries in this country. We work for justice, experience victories, and are inevitably met with white backlash and resistance. But we have forged communities of love and care that nurture the spiritual strength to keep hope alive, and we carry on. That is the work, Melanie.”

I thanked Donna. Later that evening, I scrupulously recorded in my journal every word Donna had spoken, not wanting sleep to steal even a portion of what she had given me. Thirty years later, her words still live in me, having taken deeper root through my own experience of facilitating with other skilled and tenacious colleagues of color.

I now understand that investment and commitment are required from everyone in organizations if they are to undergo significant change. Leaders who embrace equity work eventually leave, retire, or die. Boards of directors change personnel and alter their vision. New generations of employees are hired and need additional training. Most disturbing of all is to witness what can happen when the equity work is forsaken: how it took years of concerted effort to move the organization forward, but sometimes only months for organizations to backslide and devolve.

As I have reflected on the way Donna spoke to me that night, there is another part of her message that has taken root in me. I believe she wanted me to reckon with the deep work I and other white people need to do if we are going to develop the stubborn tenacity, relentless commitment, and spiritual strength to carry on.

It was the WTC workshop and subsequent conversations with colleagues of color that led my mother and me to launch an antiracism seminar for white people in the fall of 1994. We chose the name *Doing Our Own Work* because we had heard these colleagues say there is work that you, as white people, must do with and for each other. They encouraged us to start an intensive antiracism program that would help move white people through the places we so often get stuck, including obliviousness, denial, fear, guilt, and shame.

Doing Our Own Work was designed as a supplement to, not a substitute for, contexts in which people of different races strategize together about the ways racism must be confronted and dismantled. The seminar was envisioned as a way station that would help build the capacity and knowledge that white people needed to work in solidarity with people of color.

The first Doing Our Own Work seminars were held in Eleanor Morrison's living room, an inviting space large enough for the circle of ten participants and two facilitators who gathered weekly for eight evening sessions. As word spread about this new seminar, a larger meeting space was needed to accommodate the growing number of registrants and the ever-changing curriculum. We rented meeting and lodging space at a nearby retreat center so that participants from other towns and cities could attend, and the Doing Our Own Work curriculum continued to deepen and expand to six full days of seminar held over a three-month period.

Utilizing documentaries, assigned readings, small and large group discussion, structured exercises, and guest presentations by colleagues of color, Doing Our Own Work was a highly interactive experience. A number of the topics addressed in this book are inspired by the questions we wrestled with during this six-day seminar:

- What daily practices do I need to develop that will help me acknowledge and confront the unearned privileges I am granted as a white person?
- What can I do to interrupt and dismantle the habits, practices, and policies that protect those unearned privileges?
- What are creative and constructive approaches to interrupting racist comments and behaviors in my encounters with white coworkers, neighbors, friends, and family members?
- What can I do to develop and nurture authentic and mutually enhancing relationships with people of color?
- What does it mean to be in accountable relationships with people of color when working to interrupt and dismantle systemic racism?
- When is it okay, and when is it inappropriate, for me to express my grief and tears about racism?
- What would pride in, or love of, my culture look like, and feel like, as a white person who strives to be antiracist?
- What would it mean to love my white self, my white body, in ways that do not reek of superiority?
- What have I received from my ancestors (related to race or racism) that needs healing?

- What can I do to assist in that healing?
- From what or from whom do I draw inspiration, strength, and courage in my antiracism work?

My experience in this seminar repeatedly confirmed that when white people find a learning community like Doing Our Own Work, they experience a profound sense of relief, recognizing that they are not alone. We often heard Doing Our Own Work participants declare, “I didn’t know how or where to voice these questions. I feared being misunderstood or judged. It gives me heart and hope to find others with whom I can commiserate, struggle, vent, be challenged, and find support.”

In March 2000, Leaven celebrated the opening of its own retreat and study center, and Doing Our Own Work was one of the programs we offered. Located on forty acres of land near Lyons, Michigan, the Leaven Center was forty-five minutes from both Lansing and Grand Rapids, two hours west of Detroit, and four hours east of Chicago. The meadows, woods, riverbanks, and facilities at the center offered a beautiful, hospitable, and restorative environment. We intentionally chose not to call it the Leaven Retreat Center because the word *retreat* implied escape from the world. The Leaven Center was designed for people engaged in the fray—for social justice activists, artists, and educators who needed a place that offered rest, nourishment, and revitalization for their bodies and spirits. For those committed to working for social change, the struggle is long, the danger of burnout great, and the temptation to despair frequent.

The Leaven Center offered a wide array of workshops, retreats, and seminars facilitated by outstanding leaders from different communities in the United States and Canada. We were committed to making the center physically and financially accessible to all who wanted to come. We purposely kept registration costs low, provided ample scholarships, and rented space for a modest fee to social justice organizations. The Leaven Center gained a national reputation as a place that brought social justice activists together for difficult but crucial conversations, popular education, community building, cross-fertilization, and the strengthening of alliances and coalitions.

In every aspect of the organization, from staffing and board membership to the selection of workshop topics and presenters, we sought to make the center a welcoming space for people of different races, ages, abilities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and spiritual traditions. It wasn’t a perfect start. We made mistakes that were cringeworthy and called for correction. More than once, we had to pause the planning for a specific program until all voices and perspectives were justly represented.

As director of the Leaven Center, I experienced firsthand the challenges organizations face as they seek to uproot patterns of unearned privilege and grow equity. My innate desire to accomplish tasks efficiently and speedily was frequently upended by a staff person, board member, or volunteer who summoned us to slow down and invite more people into the conversation and decision-making when we were on the brink of violating a cardinal rule of equitable practice: Nothing about us without us. For example, until disabled people were involved in the design and implementation of accessible practices, Leaven could not announce that its events were compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The expressed intention to do the right thing is never enough. People who have the lived experience of marginalization and exclusion are the ones who will determine what is just accommodation and inclusion.

I loved the work of helping to found, develop, and administer the Leaven Center. I learned invaluable lessons about the long-haul work of implementing and sustaining equitable practices and programs. And yet I also loved to collaborate with colleagues envisioning, designing, and facilitating antioppression workshops and seminars. After giving ample notice of my intention to step down, a new Leaven Center director was hired in December 2007, and I launched Allies for Change, a national network of social justice educators who led workshops and trainings for organizations seeking to deepen their commitment to social change.

The Allies for Change network was diverse not only racially, but also in terms of gender, age, disability/ability, sexual orientation, and class background. We designed programs and workshops that addressed the intersections of racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, and other systems of privilege and oppression. We referred to ourselves as Ally Training Partners because all of us were committed to the lifelong work of understanding where we stand in relation to systems of privilege and oppression, and to building authentic and accountable relationships across difference.

Depending on the focus and audience of the training, we worked together in different constellations of team members. Most of our workshops were led by a racially diverse facilitation team for groups of racially diverse participants. As Ally Training Partners, we held these core beliefs and principles in common:

- Genuine and lasting change involves both personal and institutional transformation. One without the other is an insufficient and truncated form of change.
- Understanding where we stand in relation to systems of privilege and oppression, and unlearning the habits and practices that protect those systems, is lifelong work for all of us, without exception.



- We can become as passionate about dismantling the systems from which we benefit as we are about eradicating the systems that oppress us.
- Allies are not solo acts; their social change work is always rooted in collaboration, humility, and accountability.
- The interior journey into silence, meditation, inner wisdom, and deep joy is inextricably linked to the outer work of social change.
- Truth telling, confrontation, and anger can be paired with compassion, humility, and forgiveness.

Action and reflection formed the heart of every Allies for Change program with the goal of equipping participants to become knowledgeable and compassionate agents of structural change. We invited participants to engage in rigorous social and historical analysis, and to practice strategies for interrupting oppression. Recognizing that we need spiritual resources to sustain this work, Allies for Change programs utilized a creative array of teaching models and media. Through storytelling, poetry, music, and deep listening, we sought to cultivate a loving and truth-telling community that allowed us to explore the complexities of our own experience and open our hearts to others.

As I approached my seventieth birthday in 2019, I decided to step back from the work of facilitating social justice workshops and seminars in order to make ancestral research and writing a full-time priority. The yearning to investigate my ethnic and cultural origins was awakened by the ancestral questions we explored in *Doing Our Own Work* and further intensified when my Aunt Harriet (my father's only sibling) shared a startling revelation in 2008, two years after my father's death and just months before I launched Allies for Change. I was visiting Aunt Harriet in Raleigh, North Carolina, when she informed me that I am a direct descendant of enslaving ancestors who lived in Montevallo, Alabama, a small town thirty-five miles south of Birmingham. She also mentioned that the former home of those ancestors, now known as King House, is centrally located on the University of Montevallo campus. According to local legends, it is a haunted house.

Since that day, I have been haunted by Aunt Harriet's revelation. Just shy of my seventieth birthday, I decided to acknowledge my sense of being pursued by Montevallo by embarking on a journey into ever deeper involvement with people in Montevallo, both living and dead, constantly asking myself: *Why do I feel compelled to take this journey? What does this reckoning with my ancestral past require of me?*

I have made numerous trips to Montevallo to search for archival records, meet with local historians, and deepen relationships with Montevallo residents

committed to unearthing suppressed stories about the Indigenous removal and enslavement that occurred in that region.

At the University of Montevallo, that work is being undertaken by the Peace and Justice Studies program in partnership with the Montevallo Legacy Project—a community action group devoted to giving voice and visibility to people of African descent in Montevallo. It has been a privilege to work collaboratively with the Montevallo Legacy Project and the students and faculty in the Peace and Justice Studies courses as we seek to forge deeper, truer narratives about King House history and the legacies of slavery. I have been invited to deliver lectures on campus and to mentor students who are seeking to break the relative silence surrounding King House history. They have created written, audio, digital, and video resources that tell a different King House story.

This process has reaffirmed my belief that, despite well-funded efforts to restrict the teaching of slavery and systemic racism, there is a deep yearning in this nation for truth telling. I have heard that yearning expressed repeatedly by University of Montevallo students. In online and class discussions, students are engaging in self-reflection and dialogue about the pain, distress, and anger they feel as they examine more deeply the exploitation, dehumanization, and brutality of slavery. They are vulnerably giving voice to their shock and embarrassment to have walked past King House innumerable times oblivious to the violence that was meted out within those walls. They are grappling with the social, economic, and political legacies of slavery that continue to create systemic inequities and disparities.

This book is a collection of articles, speeches, essays, and stories written during the past twelve years while serving as executive director of Allies for Change, helping to mentor a new generation of Doing Our Own Work facilitators, and working with antiracist colleagues in Montevallo. Some of the pieces reflect on encounters, workshops, and events that occurred decades ago, including my experience attending the 1963 March on Washington as a fourteen-year-old.

In pulling the pieces of this book together, I had two primary groups of readers in mind. I am writing for white people who are deeply troubled by the corrosive persistence of systemic racism and who long to develop the capacity and resiliency to be agents of change where they live, work, study, and volunteer. I am also writing for white people who seek to move through places where they often get stuck so that they can step up with humility, courage, and consistency to participate in movements led by people of color and help move other white people to greater antiracist awareness and action.

The title of this book—*Becoming Trustworthy White Allies*—needs to be placed in its intended context lest it should sound like I am offering white people a

step-by-step blueprint or template. As I state in chapter 3, “Qualities and Commitments of White Allies,” I believe the word *ally* should be regarded as a verb rather than a noun because it represents the commitment to show up, take action, and be in right relationship. Being an ally is not a static reality, once and for all achieved. Neither *trustworthy* nor *ally* are words that white people can claim for themselves. Black, Indigenous, and other people of color determine who their allies are and when trust has been earned.

I also believe that learning what it means to be trustworthy white allies is a lifelong journey, rife with risks, regrets, growth, and joy. In the essays, stories, and speeches included in this book, I reflect on the work we can and must undertake if we seek to become trustworthy. For example, I discuss working through shame and guilt, nurturing truth-telling relationships, challenging practices and policies that protect white privilege, moving out of social segregation, doing the work from a place of self-love, and staying on the journey.

Many of the pieces in this book are story based, and some are autobiographical, in the hope that my experiences will intersect and resonate with your own. I share with you the mistakes I have made, the wisdom that colleagues and mentors have shared with me, the repair I have sought to enact, and the strength and hope I have found working with others to nurture antiracist communities of love, support, and accountability. Through it all, I have found solace and encouragement from the words Donna Bivens so generously spoke thirty years ago:

This is the work, Melanie. You will encounter resistance and roadblocks. This work is not easy. It’s a constant struggle. That has been the experience of people of color for centuries in this country. We work for justice, experience victories, and are inevitably met with white backlash and resistance. But we have forged communities of love and care that nurture the spiritual strength to keep hope alive, and we carry on.

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