

THE BLOG

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The Real Reason White People Say ‘All Lives Matter’

By John Halstead



Why “Black” Makes Us Uncomfortable

Dear fellow white people, let’s have an honest talk about why we say “All Lives Matter.” First of all, notice that no one was saying “All Lives Matter” before people started saying “Black Lives Matter.” So “All Lives Matter” is *a response to* “Black Lives Matter.” Apparently, something about the statement “Black Lives Matter” makes us uncomfortable. Why is that?

Now some white people might say that singling out Black people’s lives as mattering somehow means that white lives don’t matter. Of course, that’s silly. If you went to a Breast Cancer Awareness event, you wouldn’t think that they were saying that other types of cancer don’t matter. And you’d be shocked if someone showed up with a sign saying “Colon Cancer Matters” or chanting “All Cancer Patients Matter.” So clearly, something else is prompting people to say “All Lives Matter” in response to “Black Lives Matter.”

Many of the people saying “All Lives Matter” also are fond of saying “Blue Lives Matter.” If you find that the statement “Black Lives Matter” bothers you, but not “Blue Lives Matter,” *then the operative word is “Black”*. That should tell us something.

There's something deeply discomfiting about the word "Black." I think it's because it reminds us of our whiteness and challenges our notion that race doesn't matter.

The Problem With "Colorblindness"

If you're like me, growing up, the word "Black" was always spoken of in whispers in your family. It was like we were saying something taboo. Why was that? Because it *was* taboo. We might feel more comfortable saying "African-American," but not "Black." The reason is that we were raised to believe that "colorblindness" was the ideal for whites. We were taught that we shouldn't "see color." And saying the word "Black" was an acknowledgment of the fact that we *did* "see color."

The problem with being "colorblind" — aside from the fact that we're not really — is that it is really a white privilege to be able to ignore race. White people like me have the luxury of not paying attention to race — white or black. The reason is because whiteness is treated as the default in our society. Whiteness is not a problem for white people, because it blends into the cultural background.

Black people, on the other hand, don't have the luxury of being "colorblind." They live in a culture which constantly reminds them of their Black-ness, which tells them in a million large and small ways that they are not as important as white people, that their lives actually do not matter as much as white lives. Which is why saying "Black Lives Matter" is so important.

"Black Lives [Do Not] Matter"

"All Lives Matter" is a problem because it refocuses the issue away from systemic racism and Black lives. It distracts and diminishes the message that Black lives matter or that they should matter more than they do. "All Lives Matter" is really code for "White Lives Matter," because when white people think about "all lives," we automatically think about "all *white* lives."

We need to say "Black Lives Matter," because we're not living it. No one is questioning whether white lives matter or whether police lives matter. But the question of whether Black lives really matter is an open question in this country. Our institutions act like Black lives do not matter. The police act like Black lives do not matter when they shoot unarmed Black people with their arms in the air and when Blacks are shot at two and a half times the rate of whites, even when whites are armed. The judicial system acts like Black lives don't matter when Blacks are given more severe sentences than whites who commit the same crimes and are turned into chattel in a for-profit prison-industrial complex.

And white people act like Black lives do not matter when we fail to raise the appropriate level of outrage at unjustified killings of Blacks or when we respond with platitudes like "All Lives Matter."

But we still say it. We say it because "All Lives Matter" lets us get back to feeling comfortable. "Black Lives Matter" makes us *uncomfortable*. Why? Because it reminds us that race exists. It reminds us that our experience as white people is very different

from the experience of Black people in this country. It reminds us that racism is alive and well in the United States of America.

The New Face of Racism

Now, I just said the “R” word, so you’re probably feeling defensive at this point. You’re instinctively thinking to yourself that you are not a racist. You may be thinking that you have Black friends or that you don’t use the N-word or that you would never consciously discriminate against a Black person. But most racism today is more subtle than that. Sure, there is a lot of overt racism that still goes on. The KKK is still active and some white people do still say the N-word. But overt racism is really culturally unacceptable any more among whites today. The racism that we need to face today is much more insidious than white hoods and racial slurs. It is the racism of well-meaning people who are not consciously or intentionally racist.

The racism that we need to face is the racism of average white middle-class Americans who would never think of saying the N-word and would vociferously condemn the KKK, but nevertheless unwittingly participate in institutionalized racism. We most often participate in racism by omission, rather than commission. We participate in racism when we fail to see it where it exists. We participate in racism when we continue to act like race is a problem that only Black people have. We participate in racism when we seek comfortable responses like “All Lives Matter.”

What We Can Do: Embrace the Discomfort

We white people need to embrace our discomfort. Here are some things we can do:

1. Recognize that we are not “colorblind.”

We can start by recognizing that we all have an “implicit bias” toward Blacks. Think you don’t have it? Consider how we mentally congratulate ourselves when we treat the random Black person the same way we treat white people. Here’s a tip, if you give yourself brownie points for treating Black people like you do white people, you’re not *really* treating Black people like white people.

Still don’t think you have unconscious bias, go to the Harvard implicit bias testing website and take the tests on race and skin-tone. Even white anti-racism activists like me have these biases. And they come out in all kinds of subtle ways, as well as not so subtle ways.

2. Work against unconscious bias by spending time with Black people in Black spaces.

Next, go out of your way to spend time with Black people in Black community settings. Many of us live segregated lives in which we have little to no interaction with Black people. Let’s face it, Black people make us white people uncomfortable. It’s because we’ve been socialized by a racist system to fear Black people.

Even if you feel comfortable around individual Black people, you most likely do not feel comfortable in a room full of Black people. You might have Black friends, but you

probably socialize with them in white spaces. Have you ever been to a Black space and felt uncomfortable? Maybe you felt like no one wanted you there. Welcome to the everyday experience of Black people in white culture.

And when you go to a Black space, go to listen rather than lead. Learn to follow. Leading is a white privilege. Let go of it for a while and learn from those whose experience you will never have. Listen to Black people, and if what they are saying or how they are saying it makes you uncomfortable, so much the better.

3. Talk to white people about institutional racism and say “Black Lives Matter.”

It’s no good sitting around feeling guilty about white privilege. We need to *do* something about it. One thing we can do is to *use* our white privilege to dismantle it.

One white privilege we have is that other white people listen to us. We can go into white spaces and talk to white people about implicit bias and institutional racism. We can unapologetically proclaim that “Black Lives Matter.”

After the Orlando shooting, I went to an interfaith vigil in my small conservative town. Almost no one among the speakers said the words “queer,” “gay,” or “lesbian.” This was probably unconscious, but it revealed a lingering, but deepseated discomfort among heterosexuals with gayness and queerness, a discomfort that the popular use of the acronym “LGBT” obscures. Similarly, we whites are uncomfortable with Blackness. We don’t even like to say the word. It feels wrong in our mouths. We hide it by using code words like “inner city” or “urban,” terms which allow us to hide from our unconscious racism. We need to say “Black Lives Matter” because we need to overcome our discomfort with Blacks and face up to our unconscious bias.

Join the Second Civil Rights Movement

Dear fellow white people, we are in the middle of a second Civil Rights Movement. Most of us white people idealize Martin Luther King, Jr. and we like to think that we would have been on his side of things during the Civil Rights era. But the fact is that the majority of the American public did *not* support the Civil Rights movement while it was happening and only came to see King as a hero after he was killed.

The Civil Rights movement was unpopular among most whites when it was happening. It was unpopular because it made white people deeply uncomfortable. Today, the Black Lives Matter movement makes us uncomfortable, too. In forty years we will look back on this second Civil Rights movement and have to ask ourselves whether we were on the right side of history. If we want to be on the right side of history this time, we have to make ourselves uncomfortable. There is no comfortable way to change. And the change can start with saying this simple but powerful phrase: **Black Lives Matter.**