

ACCOUNTABILITY IN A TIME OF JUSTICE

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*If you have come to help me you are wasting your time,
but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let's work together.*

Aboriginal Activist Sisters

Accountability is a well-worn word in social justice circles. The three of us, one a member of the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, one of us African-American, one of us white, have worked hard to figure out what accountability means to us as we attempt to walk our social justice talk. We have done this because we've seen too often how the concept of accountability gets (mis)used in interpersonal games of tit for tat, manipulations aimed at getting people to follow an agenda rather than reach for a shared vision. We know how challenging it is to build community-wide accountability when we are spinning in ever increasing dysfunctional circles personally.

We begin by acknowledging that accountability in the context of racial equity and justice generally refers to the ways in which white people and communities need to be accountable to people and communities of color. We understand this commitment as one attempt to redress the way in which racist oppression, all oppression, benefits those with social and institutional power at the expense of those with less.

We are not suggesting this is a one-way street, where dominant groups and people are always “wrong” while oppressed groups and people are always “right.” For one, we don't believe in these kinds of binaries, and for another, we are all damaged by the false constructs designed to deliberately divide us. At the same time, we must constantly acknowledge the longstanding institutional and structural imbalances that have created a situation where white people and communities consistently benefit at the expense of people and communities of color.

We also place accountability in the larger context of capitalism; we live in a culture that values profit above all else, constructing race, class, gender, and other categories to oil the corporate profit engine. As a result, those with resources are positioned as more capable of deciding what is in the best interests of all of us. Within this context, the social justice community struggles to negotiate a system of accountability to funders generally not located in or made up of communities being organized or served and social justice gets defined in terms of access rather than equity.

So how might we construct accountability in ways that help us live into a vision of racial equity and justice?

First we must understand how race is constructed specifically to set up a power imbalance with white at the top of the ladder and different communities of color “living” below, moving up and down based on the agenda of those in power. At this historical

moment, for example, immigrants from Central and South America are pitted against Arab communities pitted in their turn against people of African descent in a destructive dance of access to a slightly higher rung while Indigenous communities are left off altogether, once again made invisible and erased. Every oppressive construct operates like this; the category of rich constructed as superior in ways that blame the working poor who make wealth possible, the category of heterosexual elevating those who construct normal in opposition to the many ways in which people can and do express sexuality and gender.

We argue that accountability requires a lens through which we see these constructs of personal and institutional power. We need to see the bigger picture, to see that we need not fight over rungs of a ladder that by its very nature underserves us all. As Winona LaDuke so wisely says, “we don’t want a bigger piece of the pie, we want a different pie.” The bigger picture not only keeps us from fighting among ourselves, but also provides hope, the sense of another possibility.

Second, accountability is in essence a form of solidarity, one that acknowledges the deep conditioning of all of us into a race construct that places white at the top while systematically devaluing people and communities of color. Capitalism teaches us well to hoard power, win at all costs, see “other” as threat, and live in increased anxiety about losing our share of the above-mentioned pie, all while distracted by the ever illusive pursuit of more. As a result, we are separated not just from each other but from ourselves, as we negotiate all the ways we have internalized the messages about what’s important. As such, accountability requires authentic relationship across these false yet powerful divides.

Authentic relationship refers to the ways we treat, respect, and honor both ourselves and each other based in an acknowledgement of our essential interdependence. Vivette suggests we remember “Hūk winédéwahe;” in the words of the Tutelo language of the Sapponi people this means “all my relations, we are all related, we are accountable to each other on a human being level.”

This is not particularly easy. Vivette shares how she “was 39 years old and just finding out [about systemic oppression]; it was hate, rage rolling up I could have bitten the heads off every white person I know and let them drop, step over the bodies and move on [even though] I was aware enough to know I didn’t enjoy feeling like this.” Tema shares how she spent years distancing herself from other white people in an attempt to “prove” herself as “better, more anti-racist,” than them.

As we negotiate our socializations, we communicate differently, bring different needs, life experiences, and stakes in our relationships based on which identity point we are moving from or most connected to in any given moment. We also hold very different desires for accountability. Therefore we must develop a level of self-awareness about our own socialization and how it inhibits or supports attitudes and behaviors that serve us and our relationships with others. Self-awareness sharpens our skill of discernment, where we can begin to identify personal and collective interests beyond our socialized conditioning. With increased self-awareness, we can recognize that our feelings and behaviors, the

result of longstanding patterns of racism and privilege, are not about us personally even though the fear, pain, or distress feels very personal. We can begin to understand the power of socialization on our psyches, our hearts.

We develop this self-awareness, this accountability to ourselves and each other by building systems of mutual support that help us acknowledge, normalize, and validate the inevitable emotions arising from oppression and deep socialization. Vivette was able to draw on a network outside of her organization that kept her from feeling isolated and vulnerable in a situation where her boss was acting in racist and irrational ways. Doing this, she explains, “helped me know I wasn’t alone even at the lowest point when I began to internalize.” Similarly, with the help of her network, Tema came to understand that she held accountability not just to people of color but to white people and communities as well; understanding the behavior of other white people as a reflection of her own has helped her build compassionate rather than judgmental relationships.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that not all of us are in a position to develop these skills. Michelle notes, “the first time someone is not accountable, I don’t shut them out, probably not even the tenth time, but then my compassion gets used up; ... the relationship is harmful, feels toxic, to me and/or the community.” Accountability often requires that we set boundaries because, as Vivette says, “everything that walks is not positive energy.” This can be a tender process where we are again called into the task of (collaboratively) discerning the delicate balance between our own needs and those of the community.

The third aspect of accountability to help us in the discernment process is a set of values. Without values or principles, accountability too often becomes a punitive instrument wielded for personal gain. Principles help us focus beyond our own socialized confusions. These values or principles are collectively created, grounded in the generational wisdom of elders, what we have learned from history, our experience, our understanding of the Creator and/or environment, and our desires for liberation.

At a recent gathering of community aimed at creating a food collective, the group spent a significant portion of the agenda fleshing out the meaning of terms embedded in their mission and vision statement, understanding the need to assertively define what words like “liberation,” “justice,” and “family” mean. When Vivette was struggling with a challenging boss, her support circle helped her be thoughtful (as opposed to impulsive), focus on her intentions, and think both about what she needed and what was in the best interests of the organization so she could maintain alignment with the mission and the people she was meant to serve. We have to work with each other to deepen our understanding of what living into our values on both a personal and collective level actually looks like. Again, this is an ongoing process of discernment, where we make mistakes and learn from them in a spirit of generosity that our relationships make possible.

The final aspect of accountability is our responsibility to act. Here again, our actions need to be collaboratively and collectively considered, grounded in strong relationship and values.

After years of co-facilitating anti-racism workshops, Tema and Michelle were hired to teach separate sections of a class on Diversity and Oppression at a local university. Working with the same curriculum, Michelle's (white) students constantly questioned her authority, accused her of pushing a race agenda, and complained to the administration. Tema's (white) students gave her such high evaluations that she received a Dean's Teaching award. These dissonant experiences, unfortunately common, elevated and reaffirmed a white professor while marginalizing a Black one, with both financial and career consequences. Although we wanted to continue teaching, Michelle knew she could and should not tolerate another semester of such toxic dynamics while Tema knew she could not simply proceed after witnessing Michelle's experience. Strategizing together, we informed the Dean that in the future we would co-teach the course, splitting the salary. Although this strategy did not address all the dynamics of racial inequity in the classroom or the institution, we did build accountability to each other, the students, and our principles.

The action component of accountability requires both relationship and principles grounded in a strong vision of transformative justice. We have seen how (white) people and groups attempt acts of accountability in isolation from those they are attempting to be accountable to and/or reinforce power constructs with a shallow understanding of what it means to "help." Accountability requires some level of authentic relationship, even with those who are physically distant. For example, efforts to provide solidarity and support to people and communities in New Orleans, Haiti, Palestine can be meaningful and authentic when we take the time and effort to build a network of relationships with affected people and communities while educating ourselves about the constructed power dynamics at play and the values and principles guiding solidarity efforts.

We follow in the footsteps of Tecumseh (a Shaawanwaki leader) who instructed, even as he fought for independence for his people, that "everyone must treat with respect all things that are sacred to other people whether one comprehends them or not." In our vision of a racially just world, we understand accountability as an ongoing and fluid process of building and sustaining authentic relationships across constructed divides of race, class, gender, geography. We collaborate in the project of decolonizing our hearts and minds, grounded in an understanding and analysis of the intricate weave of power dynamics that shape and socialize us. We acknowledge our essential interdependence as we collectively live into principles that help us act effectively and with compassion to build the solidarity required for "a different pie," for justice.