

### ***Shut Up and Listen***

*You are the least prejudiced person I know*—a simple statement directed at me by my then 14-year-old child while we were discussing some issues a friend at school was having. My response was to deny the fact, not in some self congratulatory fake way, but in a more direct assertion that I was, very much so, a prejudiced person. How could I not be? As a white, middle class woman, I was knowingly benefiting from a system that allowed me freedoms and liberties not extended to other women, or minorities, within Canada. Furthermore, I grew up in an extremely xenophobic, homophobic and racist family. While I can pride myself on saying, “At least, they weren’t white supremacists,” they weren’t that far from such extremism.

These beliefs, and my lifelong aversion to them, has contributed to the understanding that I am not without my own prejudices. I have scripts within my brain that are automatically triggered at times. No matter how much work I do to erase those scripts, they can come to the forefront in my mind without warning and I have to begin again, working to erase that particular script and not allowing the lies I was taught as a child to affect my behaviour in the present. As many marginalized groups know, overcoming colonialism, especially when it has been socially constructed into your upbringing, is an exceedingly difficult task that takes a lifetime of work.

So why am I starting with this? I am not, by any means, virtue signalling. There is no thought of looking for brownie points because a white woman has figured out that to be free of her prejudices means that she has to actually acknowledge that she is still, in fact, benefiting from those prejudices. No matter how novel the idea, books by the thousands have been written on these points, and I have nothing illuminating to add to that discussion.

Instead, I bring it up to illustrate my own failings as a person who has believed herself to be understanding of the plight of others. When my oldest child came to me and said the words, “I think I’m trans,” my beliefs were challenged in ways that I never thought they’d be challenged. The first question I

asked: was I truly that accepting? What I said, much to the hurt of my child, was, “Are you sure?” As though we could argue ourselves out of this “predicament” we had found ourselves in. Then I started to think of how this could be fixed. How could I take my assigned male at birth child and fix that child so they fit with the heteronormative roles I’d been taught?

This wasn’t the “least prejudiced person” my child had claimed I was only a few years prior, this was the ugly white woman in my brain who was standing there thinking, *Not my child*. The contrast was soul shattering to my child as I watched her eyes fill with tears at the realization that I was flawed even more than I’d ever claimed to be.

She had grown up with me advocating for the rights of trans individuals, boycotting local businesses that discriminated against them and had a childhood filled with the discourse of human rights. However, in that moment, despite years of advocacy, I was just another white woman more worried that the proverbial chickens had come home to roost.

Privilege. It came down to privilege. What was my child losing the moment they began to transition? What would that mean for my family? How do I tell those I know? Who would I have to inevitably cut off when we stepped forward? But the biggest question, the one that was the truest to who I had become and who was driving all those terrified questions through my mind was how can I protect her from the hate and prejudice she’ll face as a trans woman?

And with that thought, I was in a position I’d never expected to be in with my kids. I’d been confident in the privilege that my children were afforded through the colour of their skin and the gender they’d been raised in. I was that white woman who, once her privilege was challenged, tried to change the narrative to fit the structures she was comfortable in. I tried to fix it.

I’m an excellent fixer. I fix things. Failings with schools, teachers, life—I can fix it. While being acutely aware of the history behind it, I still embraced the caregiver. My own desire to fix things, to be the super caregiver, is a by-product of the intergenerational trauma in my family caused by poverty and

abuse as well as my own personal trauma of childhood poverty, neglect, physical and sexual abuse. In my very effort to lift myself out of trauma and break the cycle within my family, I reinforced the belief that I needed to fix everything...and my child, weeping beside me, was something I needed to fix.

But I didn't ask her if she needed to be fixed. I didn't ask her what her needs were and how I could be that support to her needs and to her journey. I am ashamed to say, I felt safer in seeing her trans identity as something that was outside of her, a blip on the life journey that would right itself if we spent enough hours challenging the very nature of who she was. At least, I did this until I finally woke up and understood that there was nothing to fix in her trans identity. The fix that was needed was in how I was looking at it and what was fundamentally within me. I loved her. I used to tack on the words, no matter what, but then I removed them. Of course there are no parameters to my love, my respect for her grew each day as she challenged me and reminded me that, at one time, I was the "least prejudiced person" she knew but at that moment, I was failing miserably. My adoration of her for being my child was amplified by the strong, beautiful woman she was becoming...she was living her truth and was holding up a mirror to show me the ugly truth of my own prejudices so I could start the hard work of correcting and removing them.

Of course, she should never have had to be that mirror. In an ideal world, I would have done the right thing from the instant. I would have shut up, ignored all those worries, and asked the simple question, "What do you need?"

Which brings us to the main point of why I'm writing this personal essay. Often, as white women, especially white women who view themselves as activists or feminists, we don't stop talking. We have an idea of what we want the world to be. We see the problems within the narrow lens that we peer out of from between the curtains of our own privilege but we don't actually ask other marginalized groups what the problems are from their perspective.

We are blind to the intersectionality of an individual's lived experience while, at the same time, talking about the importance of intersectionality and feminism. It is a double edged sword. As women, we understand oppression in our own unique ways; however, as white women, we often ignore the oppression that is happening to other marginalized groups. We are in a unique position of being "othered" by patriarchal systems in place within our society, all while "othering" individuals and groups that do not fit into the cisgendered, heteronormative, white binary.

But in the same breath, we have an overwhelming urge to yell, "Not!! I'm not one of those white people," when any colonial, white or heteronormative oppression is identified. We are, after all, the "saviors" and we enjoy the privilege of being in that space. That's why we come up with all our theories of what it means to be a racialized person, a gendered person, a queer person in Western society and we come up with ways that we can remedy the situation...perhaps even pulling those marginalized groups into an equality that we've shaped but one that still fits within those patriarchal and colonial structures that have seen the proliferation of white lives.

While theories and suggestions are always welcome, and I'll never say no to a good one, it is time for us to move past that "savior" mentality and really embrace what it means to be a white woman who is an advocate and ally. And what that means is that, for the first time in an exceptionally long while, white women need to shut up and listen.

Don't listen with the thoughts of how you are going to fix it. Don't listen with the worry that you are being blamed. Don't listen with the kneejerk reactionism that white women are excellent at enacting. Listen to the actual problems without planning to say the way you would fix it. After all, it is not ours to fix because any way that we will fix it will be slanted toward our privilege. But that statement doesn't mean that we aren't culpable or that we don't need to contribute to furthering the needs and rights of others; it means that we have to actually stop, listen to what the problem is and how those

groups want society, and us, to change in a direction where those problems are no longer insurmountable for them.

For us to truly advocate for others, it is time to finally start following, to offer our advocacy and loan our privilege, all under the direction of other marginalized groups who are clamouring, “We are here, and we deserve to be seen.”

After all, we all know what it is like to want to be seen. What it feels like when our pain is acknowledged, our rights actualized and the “othering” effect of society is removed from us so we feel like a person.

When I, the savior, was sitting in that car, listening to my trans child crying, not about being trans, but about the failings of a mother who should have shut up, listened and followed her lead on her trans journey; I should have said that no matter what, I would stand with her. And we, as white feminists, need to turn to those who are struggling to have their oppression really be seen and say, “We see you; we hear you; we will stand with you and slay Goliath, just tell us the stone we need to throw.”

We are in this together, at the table as it were, and its time to let others speak so we can finally reach toward that equality we’ve been grasping at for a hundred years or more.