

**Walking with Intention:**  
*Racial Equity and Anti-Racism Work*

**By Bonnie Olson**

Was this path an intention? Intention seems like a conscious choice... that is, you choose between one option or another. But the core compass of my life does not feel like an intention, because for me there is no alternative. It is more like the integrity that holds my bones together; without this I cease to be me. I cannot be myself unless I am true to my sense of justice. It does not seem like an intention but a result of where I landed this time around.

A little Blonde girl with an Afro-centric orientation. A smart, poor kid living in the projects while going to Catholic school. At home surrounded by drug dealers and addicts, predators and victims, while studying ideals in comparative religions and hanging up posters of my political heroes. The beautiful, strong foundation of Black culture is the ground I stand on, drawing deep from within to maintain dignity, as instinctual as breathing, a core survival strategy.

I knew many human jewels disguised as battered rejects of society, who blossomed amid all manner of disdain and dehumanization. Wisdom born of creating a way from no way, folks shining with love for wounded relatives; deep understanding that what appeared as destructive behavior had striving for love at its core. Wise and brilliant Black folks that white society could not see, blinded by their ignorance and false sense of superiority.

The blessings from my childhood grew as the sorrows faded. I am not enchanted by the trappings of status nor enamored by the sophisticated language of the over-educated. I am mystified that so few seem to notice that their public faces – personal, professional, cultural - are actually **not true**. They spout the company line and rationalize all manner of official lies, disconnected from any information that would contradict their illusions. I am puzzled by this rampant, immobilizing deference to authority, especially incompetent authority which bureaucracy often produces. I realize it is a natural weakness from growing up with parents.

So where else could I have landed, than in this work of social justice and countering institutional racism? My antennae notices when white people dominate conversations, even on topics they have no experience with. My hair raises up when managers ignore the insights of the people actually doing the job. And over the years I have left behind many shocked people. Stunned when I fired them. So accustomed to treating poor people with disrespect, they didn't see it coming, although they were warned.

Tolerance is over-rated. More precisely, people use it opportunistically to hide their cowardice. Side conversations in the halls, after the meetings, supposedly outraged by unfairness. But making waves carries risks, which most of us will not take if we can avoid it. As long as it is not happening to me....

I do not regret any of my battles, not for a moment. I do not regret walking away from "good jobs" because the services were a sham. I do not regret creating upheaval in the agency I ran, discovering the structures were making money off of homeless people, money that should have been used to expand desperately needed services.

Where does intention come from, if not the core purpose of a particular life time? I did not choose this intention; it was molded into my cells. Perhaps this is what intention is, or perhaps this is dharma. To be

true to the path that was given to you this time around. To not compromise, or withdraw or rationalize away the place in which you are meant to stand, or the gift you are meant to share. The universe sets you up and you really don't have a choice in the matter.

If this path is my dharma, at the moment, my conscious intention is to be effective in this work - reducing racism, increasing justice, increasing respect for others. And to be effective requires deep work in itself.

- In this work there can be no enemies, no dualistic simplicity of good guys and bad guys. We are all infected; it's just a matter of degree.
- One cannot be attached to any outcome, or you could be consumed with frustration and anger, real quick. Real, real quick.
- You must let go of any illusions of security, for when you speak 'truth to power' you may easily be dropped like a grenade, no matter what your contract says.
- Definitely cannot, for a minute, have any attachments to being liked, or need to be appreciated, even though you awoke at 3 a.m., contemplating how to reach them.

And definitely, definitely, not wait for permission - be alert for the right moment, yes. But the right moment is a very complex matter. It is something your gut will tell you, if you are attuned to all the elements at play: intuitive, emotional, rational, and irrational. And though it is complex, it is also predictable. Human behavior does follow patterns. We are not the individual actors we think we are.

It means you must not care...

- when you are labeled impractical, politically naïve,
- if the people with money will not pick you,

And keep speaking up, even if you know you will not win this one. You must put your heart and soul in the work, while being willing to walk away at any moment. Committed and detached, a surprising, expanded dimension of freedom.

I am content. Whether it is intention, or dharma, or simply the reality of living with my stubborn self, it is the road I am walking on. And walking is good.

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