



How to be an Interrupter: A White Person's Guide to Activism

By Aaryn Belfer

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"The battle is and always has been a battle for the hearts and minds of white people in this country. The fight against racism is our issue. It's not something that we're called on to help people of color with. We need to become involved with it as if our lives depended on it because really, in truth, they do."

— Anne Braden

Dead is final. And Sandra Bland is dead.

The 28-year-old black activist was driving to her new job in Texas on July 10 when she was stopped by police for changing lanes without indicating. Truth: Black people have zero margin for error. This ridiculous traffic stop ended with Bland's arrest and, two days later, what police claim was her suicide. Setting aside her controversial death, what preceded Bland's detainment is itself an urgent human rights issue.

If you haven't watched the video of her arrest, you should (and don't miss the vids of her alive and vibrant, speaking out against police brutality, remembering while you watch that she's dead because of it).

If you haven't watched Walter Scott being shot in the back; or Freddie Gray having his neck broken; or the unambiguous assault and harassment—first by grown adults and then by a police officer—of children (let's not get that point twisted) who did nothing more than attend an end-of-school pool party; if you have chosen to avert your eyes because it hurts too much, I invite you to get up and over yourself and schedule a date night with YouTube.

Such videos are calamitous but crucial in helping deniers, dismissers and apologists acknowledge as real the experiences of black people. We must then become allies or—as adoption- and anti-racist activist Dr. JaeRan Kim recently framed it—interrupters.

During the Underground Railroad, a light in the window of a home signified a safe "station" (hat tip to interrupters Sarah and Bernard Gilpin of Maryland). After hearing from many white friends and acquaintances who have had quite enough but are unsure of how to channel their despair and grief, I decided to list a few ways to put the light in the window:

- 1. Put a Black Lives Matter sign in your yard.** Yes, it will get stolen and defaced. Get another one. Encourage neighbors to do the same. [Get them here]
- 2. Engage with your white friends and family about racism, white fragility and white supremacy.** These will be uncomfortable, daunting, treacherous conversations. Will you get it right every time? No. Will people drop out of your life? Yes. But you can learn, adjust, move forward. What is important is staying in the conversation.
- 3. Get informed.** Read *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson or *The Half Has Never Been Told* by Edward Baptist, or *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander. Get knocked the fuck out with *Between The World And Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Read anything by Coates for that matter. Start reading. The well is deep.
- 4. Talk with your children about racism, skipping the sunshiny lie of colorblindness.** Include discussions of who has privilege, who doesn't and why. Talk frankly about who you eat with, who you pray with, who you love; discuss who is and isn't part of those intimate groups and why that is. Provide books that feature black characters and characters of color and talk about them. A few of so many greats: *Please, Baby Please*; *Shades of Black*; *Amazing Grace*; *Black is Brown is Tan*; and *Tar Beach* are beautiful options for the littles. *Brown Girl Dreaming*, *One Crazy Summer*, and any of the *Ruby* and the *Booker Boys* series for the middles and elders.
- 5. Form partnerships with people of color at your child's school and agitate for equity.**
- 6. Speak up whenever you hear a comment or joke that disparages any marginalized community.**
- 7. Write op-eds and/or letters to the editor.** The ever-present story of injustice and violence equals endless opportunities to take a public stance. Let the sparks fly from your fingertips and hit that send button to correct the abundant and widely-accepted use of sanitized and coded language under the pretense of fair and balanced reporting.
- 8. Urge your local and national LGBTQIA organizations to bring their energy and activism to the Black Lives Matter movement.** The hard-won right to marry didn't happen without the support of the privileged majority. Pressure them to pay it forward.
- 9. Call/write the local city officials in any of the cities where violence against black people is documented (there are so many).** Urge them toward systemic change and accountability.
- 10. Get involved with Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ), a national network of white people who stand for black and brown lives.** There are local contacts in every city, including San Diego. One guess as to whom ours is...

11. Seek out your local black-led organizations to find out what they are doing, and more importantly, what they need. Talk less, listen more. Attend rallies and protests, but don't take the mic. Don't co-opt the message. Follow their lead.

Whatever you do, don't do nothing.

Be an up-stander, not a bystander. Be an interrupter. Leave your porch light on. For Sandra Bland. For the Sandra Blands to come.

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