



# **We Are All Some of You You are All Some of Us**

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It is hard to say who wrote this paper. Monika Chappell started with an article by Margo Adair and Sharon Howell, called "Breaking Old Patterns and Weaving New Ties", and reworked it.

Then Monika and barbara findlay had a conversation to prepare for a joint workshop at the LEAF 1999 conference in Vancouver, after which barbara wrote down their insights... and this is the result. barbara and Monika take responsibility for what is here.

This booklet contains general legal information. It is not legal advice. The information is accurate as of May 4, 2000. But the law changes frequently. You should consult a lawyer for information about your particular situation.

## **Being in the World**

Life affirming relationships can only be sustained when we trust and support one another. This is only possible when we are mutually accountable.

Some of the guiding principles we have found useful:

- All human beings are social beings. Individual well-being depends on collective well-being.
- Society carries the spirit of the individual people in it. A society will not be healthy unless the people within it are healthy.
- We have all been wounded by a society dependent on relations of exploitation and oppression.
- Each of us is as important as, and no more important than, every other human being.
- Everyone gains fulfillment through harmonizing with nature.
- Everyone has intelligence and sensitivity and is in a continual process of learning.
- Everyone is fulfilled through creative activity.
- Everyone has something to contribute.
- Everyone wants to create relations of mutual care and respect.
- Our individual and collective well-being depends on honouring nature.
- Our individual and collective well-being depends on honouring each other.
- Our individual and collective well-being depend s on honouring ourselves.
- Each of us is doing the very best we can at any given moment.

## With all of who we are

Before we are able to begin to work with other people across differences between us and them, we must become fluent in understanding the ways in which oppression and dominance have affected our own lives. In what ways were we targeted for socially sanctioned oppression? In what ways were we singled out for taken-for-granted privilege?

Ask yourself where you are on the following list, which is a partial list of the ways oppression works in Canada. You will notice that there are some categories which don't fit you at all.

Under Over 55	Over 25 Under 55
Female	Male
Transgendered	Non-transgendered
Person of colour	White
Criminal record	No criminal record
Heritage anything but British or American	Heritage British or American
Lesbian, gay, bisexual	Heterosexual
Parent	Non-parent
Jewish heritage	No Jewish heritage
Survivor of institutions as a child (residential school, orphanage, etc)	Not survivor of institutions as a child
Single parent	No children or two parents
Raised working class or poor	Raised middle or upper poor class
Immigrant or the child of immigrants whose language is not English	Born in Canada of English speaking parents
Aboriginal	Non aboriginal
Survivor of psychiatric system	No psychiatric history
Bisexual	Lesbian, gay, or heterosexual

Mixed heritage (person of colour w/ white)	Person of colour or white person
Less than grade 12	More than grade 12
Working class or poor now	Middle or upper class now
Refugee	Not a refugee
Abused as a child	Not abused as a child
Raised other than Christian	Raised Christian
Unemployed	Employed
Ever been called fat	Never been called fat
Abused in a relationship	Not abused in a relationship
Visible or invisible disabilities	No visible or invisible disabilities
Difficulty reading and writing English	Ease reading and writing English
Survivor of addictions	No addictions
Francophone	Anglophone
Ever been called stupid	Never been called stupid

Now ask yourself how the particular combination of oppression and privilege works in your life. What parts of your identity are most important to you? What parts of your identity have changed — your class? Your religion? Your sexual orientation? How has that change affected how you see the world?

## **Making alliances**

Alliances, like all relationships, begin with self-respect and an appreciation of what we offer one another. Self-respect and trust go hand in hand. Alliances cannot be built by anyone who thinks they are helping others solve “their problems”, an attitude which is destructive to everyone’s humanity. When we think we will “help others solve their problems”, we are acting from guilt. Guilt prevents us from seeing our own strengths and it clouds our judgement. It comes from a shallow understanding of oppression, which assumes oppression only hurts those on the outside — not recognizing that the oppression of others also distorts our own humanity.

In any setting where people with different life experiences and different amounts of social privilege try to work together, uncomfortable feelings, anger, mistakes and great difficulty are bound to arise. It is important to learn about each other so that we become sensitive to the many realities in which people live, and to learn how to work together to avoid repeating the dynamics that hold domination in place despite our best intentions.

People who are targeted for oppression have always known about their dominators. Survival often depends upon not making a mistake which would upset those who control the resources needed to survive, as a result those “on the outside” (whatever the particular outside is) have a much clearer understanding of those on the inside than those on the inside have about the experiences and sensitivities of the “outsiders”. The more privilege people have, the more ignorant they are likely to be of the experience of others, so the more narrow is their reality. In whichever ways we each have privilege, we need to educate ourselves about the history, culture, struggle, and everyday obstacles that must be contended with by people different from us. Otherwise their experiences remain invisible.

## **Excavating assumptions/Rebuilding the foundations**

We all need to become aware of our assumptions: both the assumptions which support our power and privilege, and the assumptions that support the ways we are oppressed. The first is one

form of internalized dominance. The second is one form of internalized oppression.

Once you have become aware of an assumption it is important to name it out loud. By their very nature assumptions are hard to identify. I remember the very day that my assumption about women in marriages changed. Till that day I had assumed that most women were not abused in their marriages, unless they told me otherwise. After that day I assumed that most women were abused in their marriages, unless they told me otherwise. Notice: in each case this is an assumption. It is impossible to live without making assumptions. But my assumptions frame what it is possible to see, like the frame on the lens of my camera. I noticed, for example, that once I had changed my assumption in dealing with women in marriages, many more women talked to me about their husbands' abusiveness.

I remember the very day that the fact that I am fat was not a burden, but a source of pride. One day as I was sitting in my chair, my belly resting comfortably on my thighs, my feet apart, square on the floor, my hands folded... my body suddenly felt right. Perfect. The body that a middle aged woman of substance deserved, had earned. And my body was proud of itself, and content.

Every fat person will know how the assumption that being fat is wrong/bad/lazy/unhealthy/to be apologized for/ informs all of every day. What I am talking about here is not the determined pride that I have insisted upon as a deliberate antidote to the fat phobia I encounter, but a peaceful pride of acceptance.

My assumption had changed.

Shared, unspoken assumptions about how the world works is what keeps the world working the way it does. Shared, unspoken assumptions are what keep oppression and inequality in place.

When you speak about your changed assumption, you break the assumption — even if just for a moment — for all the other people in the group. And by breaking the assumptions that keep people down we contribute to breaking the patterns of oppression, weaving new patterns of relating to each other.

It is equally important to name an assumption another person might

have. One time when I was organizing a meeting I suggested that we meet in a coffee shop. Someone pointed out that I was assuming that everyone could afford to buy a cup of coffee, and that assumption would exclude people who did not have the money and would not want to pay the “dignity cost” of admitting that they had no money. Another assumption: I had assumed everyone was comfortable meeting in restaurants. Not true of people who have difficulty hearing and don't want to pay the dignity cost of drawing attention to their disability.

## **Looking for the Power**

In most groups of people in Canadian society there is an unspoken shared assumption that “everyone is equal here”. Though there may be a hierarchy of president, executive members, and so on, there will also be an assumption that anyone could be the president. This assumption is a myth.

In all groups some people have more power — more credibility, or status, or privilege, or decision-making, or education, or money... what ever count s as power — than others.

There is usually a strong taboo against pointing out that some people in the group have more power than others. In particular, there is almost never a discussion about the dynamics of power: racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, educational elitism, ablism, anti-semitism, and so on and on which are operating in the group.

But there is no doubt that those dynamics do operate, in every group. They cannot help but be there since we have all been raised in a culture which teaches us those justifications of inequality at the same time that it teaches us the myth of equality.

## **Talking about the Power**

It follows that if a group is going to work actively against the dynamics of oppression which are endemic to Canadian society, it will have to be willing to find ways to work on those dynamics within

the group itself.

Think about the groups you are involved in, and ask yourself: who has the most power? Who has “formal” power? How does that person get chosen? In the history of the group is it the case that only one kind of person (e.g. straight white able bodied men) have held the position of formal power? How did that come to be? In this group, what are the rewards which are available to people? Money? Prestige? Recognition? Gratitude? What is in it for people to be in the group? What are the unofficial “benefits”?

In this group, what assumptions are made about the people who participate? What are the assumptions about

- whether people are on welfare?
- how much education people have?
- whether people are powerful in the community?
- what race most of the people will be?
- what kind of place the meetings will be held in?
- what gender most of the people will be?
- what gender identity most of the people will have?
- what sexual orientation most of the people will have?
- what kinds of contributions people are expected to make?
- whether it is ok to have a meeting in a place with stairs?
- if the organization has meetings on Jewish holidays?
- whether it is ok to wear perfume to a meeting?
- whether the group will use recycled materials as a matter of course?
- whether fund raising events will have a sliding scale as a matter of course?
- who has the information about how the organization runs, and how is that information shared?
- whether there will be an ASL interpreter at the meetings?
- whether people are expected to be able to read fluently in English to participate?

You will probably know as soon as you ask yourself the question



what the assumption of the group is about each of those things — even if, or rather especially if, no one has ever talked about it! That is why these are assumptions. And you can see how the assumptions, which are enacted as practices of the group, can keep people out of the group, with absolutely no bad intention on anyone's part.

## **Enjoying discomfort**

Feeling bad is a good sign.

We are taught to ignore signs of social dis-ease in ourselves and other people, in favour of being polite. How often have you heard, “If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all”?

Being taught to ignore our own discomfort in order to fit in, make the group run smoothly, etc. is one of the most basic ways that inequality is enforced and difference is erased. Whether it is sitting in chairs that are uncomfortable because they are too short/too narrow/too deep for your body, or being in a room where someone is wearing scent to which you are allergic, or whether it is listening to someone tell a racist joke “all in good fun” of course, or hearing your coworkers decide that there will be a Christmas party at the office without acknowledging that you are Jewish and others are Muslim... each of those things may make us uncomfortable. We may also experience discomfort if an aboriginal person sits beside us on the bus and we can smell booze on their breath. Or (if we are women) if a black man walks up behind us quickly on a dark street. Or if we see a woman behave in ways we think are “like a bimbo”.

*Discomfort is important.*

Our culture teaches us that discomfort is a bad thing. We learn to deal with it by ignoring it, or by blaming someone else for it. Or we may assume that our discomfort signals something wrong with us: that we don't know enough, or are too stupid, or should have done something different.

Discomfort is important. It is a signal of something new to be learned. Discomfort may contain fear, humiliation, embarrassment... many things. It also contains opportunities, opportunities to grow.

There is strength in vulnerability, to take the risk to reach out and make the heart-to-heart connections that our spirits really need.

Discomfort may be there because we, or someone else, is being vulnerable — something which exposes our/their inner selves. In this mostly Euro-centric society, most of us are taught not to speak of our fears, our weaknesses, our mistakes — anything that can be used against us. We are taught to protect our selves at all costs, to keep that wall up so we are not hurt. Yet while that wall protects our vulnerabilities, it also prevents us from connecting with each other.

Some discomfort is an indication that something bad is happening. Other discomfort is an indication that we are doing something bad.

Discomfort may arise when we realize we have made a wrong assumption, misspoken and hurt someone's feelings, forgotten to consider people whose needs are different than our own.

The first thing to do with discomfort is acknowledge it to yourself. Being honest to yourself about your discomfort is hard. What are your feelings? Fear? Anxiety/Nervousness? Embarrassment? Inadequacy? Guilt?

The second thing to do is to identify what is causing your feeling. What, exactly, are you reacting to?

The third thing to do is to check whether your discomfort has a basis in reality, or a basis in stereotype and prejudice? Our bodies, our stomachs, our hearts may react the same way to both!!! Is fear of the black man behind you based in reality or racism? Is wanting to keep women's spaces free of transgendered people prejudice or prudence?

Checking out your fear involves talking to other people, reading, listening, thinking. Who has the relative power in the situation — you or the other person? How does that affect the reality/myth of the situation?

Feelings by themselves are an inadequate basis for action. If feelings were the only guide to action we needed, prejudices would never change.

## **The Trouble with Rules**

We have been taught that treating everyone the same is good, and fair. Not to do so, we have been told, is discrimination.

Anything that treats people as if they are the same is suspect. Start with the furniture. Everything matches? Then it is certain that someone will be uncomfortable.

Food: One meal for everyone? It is certain that someone — for health, or religious, or environmental reasons, will be uncomfortable with the menu.

Same entrance fee for everyone? Will be more or less than someone reasonably can pay.

We need to focus on differences and focus on commonalities. We need to carry two ideas in our heads at the same time.

Everyone has to fill out a form? Excludes people whose vision is impaired, whose first language wasn't English, who have dyslexia, who don't understand big words.

Meetings always in the evenings? What about parents with small children? Meetings always in the daytime? What about people with day jobs?

## **Being Comfortable with Difference**

Speak up for yourself and what you need. If people hear me insist on a chair without arms because I am fat, they will feel more comfortable speaking up about the things they need.

Make a time in the group to ask if there is anything anyone needs to make it more possible for them to participate fully.

## **Open Mind, Willing Heart, Growing Spirit**

Why do we look for ways to work together across differences we may have with each other? Why bother?

We do this work because we have found it infinitely enriching of our own minds, hearts and souls. We do this work because in the end, it is the only real way to grow. It is the only real way to connect — through all our differences, through all the baggage we carry in our lives — this is a way, the only way we know, to honour the spirits we have been given and to honour the other spirits who walk on Mother Earth with us today.

We do not do it because we feel guilty, or because someone else says we should.

## **If you find yourself interested**

Some of the questions that have helped us think about things that are important to us:

- Do I compare myself with others?
- Am I able to be entirely honest, with myself or others? If not, what would it take?
- Do I interrupt people? What is important to me about getting my point across in this manner?
- Am I either deferring to another person, thinking they know better, or not fully listening because I assume I know better?
- How do I recognize for myself the difference between prejudice and reality, between assumption and description?
- Is anyone being ignored or left out? How could I change this?
- What is the motivation behind my remarks?
- Am I remaining silent because I am afraid I will be put on the spot or discounted?
- Do I notice that I am the one who seems to be speaking the most? The least? Why is that?
- Am I impatient with other people's process?
- Am I willing to change my opinion? If not, why not?
- Am I speaking from the heart using words which are understandable and inclusive? Why not? How can I change that?
- Do I build on another's contribution, or do I tear others down?
- Do I take the time to pass on information to someone who does

- not have it?
- Am I expressing the appreciation I care and feel?
  - At what points do I feel discomfort? What is the cause of the discomfort?
  - What does it have to teach me??

## **Appendix A**

To make sure you are excluding anyone from your group, think about things that have made you feel like an outsider, or that you don't fit in or don't want to go to this group. Then think about your group from the point of view of people in places like the following:

Would someone feel welcome in your group and be able to participate effectively if she or he:

- has trouble with stairs
- has trouble reading and writing
- is a person of colour
- is a person who has children under 5
- is a person who has no money
- cannot hear well
- has a first language other than English
- is over 70 years old
- has different politics than others in the group
- is transgendered
- is lesbian, gay or bisexual
- has no car
- did not finish high school
- is a teenager
- is fat

- is a Muslim
- has developmental disabilities
- has never been involved in a group before
- is hard of hearing
- has trouble speaking because of CP
- is a woman
- is a man
- has trouble understanding big words or complex ideas
- is aboriginal
- has Jewish heritage
- and ...

What would it take to ensure that each of them felt welcome and was able to participate effectively?

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