

During a panel at a recent conference I heard an African American woman direct an important question. She directed it specifically to white males, and that is what prompted me to think about some response. Since she is a person for whom I have great affection, I am also eager to respond. Sharing some thoughts may prompt further discussion. The question asked was, "How do white males 'move over' and then deal with their sense of loss of control?" While the context of my friend's question cannot be fully available right now, she was wondering about how to get white males who are in positions of power to move out of the way so that others can take control.

Imagine a man in a position of decision-maker, exercising a considerable amount of control in an organization or institution. Assume next that he has come to see that it is important for him to enable a process by which others, white women, men and women of color, will increasingly become involved in making decisions which up until the moment have been primarily his domain. Our hypothetical white male understands that such a goal is desirable, and that the operation he currently supervises will be enriched when others become involved in the decision-making process. He is intellectually at least, committed to the idea that he must "move over". The question asks, "**how**" do white men do that?

My friend's question has two parts to it: first, the question of "how", and then the question about dealing with the sense of loss which comes after one has "moved over". The two are so connected in the one act of "moving over" that it is hard to treat them separately. Here are some "opening thoughts" on both parts of the question.

How Might White Males "Move Over"?

1. A first step is to practice listening, especially to those who are not white males. The claim that we white men do not attend as closely to women, to people of color, as to our white male colleagues finds easy evidence. "Listen" and you will hear the stories abundantly amplified. Before we start defending our behavior, before we start assuring ourselves and everyone else that we do listen, we will be better off if we simply start at the point of criticism, and listen. That requires setting aside our defenses, and hearing with our heads and our hearts both what is being said about our behavior, and how it causes pain for those who are not white males.

The "listening" will include observing our own behavior, watching exchanges which other men have with those who are not white and male, asking for feedback about ourselves. That includes understanding how we as white males may have been taught through much of our lives to behave in ways which are built on assumptions that white and male intelligence, wisdom, and experience is superior. All of this "listening" will not be easy, but if we want to function in an enriched and more productive way with colleagues who are not white and male, it is an important step to take.

2. We need to learn to accept roles which are not principal roles, up-front roles, with high visibility. This will mean accepting roles in which we

sometimes simply do the "legwork", the gathering of data, the calling of meetings, the detail preparation which facilitates someone else doing the thinking, directing, and performing in the more visible roles. It will mean that we will make ourselves available to women, women's groups, groups run by people of color, offering simply to serve them and help make things happen for them. One key to making this work is to find a goal which is commonly shared, important both to ourselves and to the others for whom we do the work. The reward, the sense of achievement then comes from seeing the common objective accomplished, rather than from any sense of personal acclaim.

3. We will need to think through for ourselves distinctions between "moving over" and "stepping down". A brief exchange with two white women elicited both the assurance that the first does not necessarily mean the second, and the comment that they might very well be the same, and both are necessary. Their comments raise some important questions for our hearts to ponder:

*Is it possible for us to "move over", or "step aside", without "stepping down"?
Is it perhaps necessary at times for us to intend a "stepping down"?*

A "yes" is my immediate answer to both of the above questions. In actual behavior my "answer" may be quite different; the route from head to habit may be full of emotional and status pitfalls, for which my training and experience as a white male have not prepared me. The months and years ahead will hold my real answer.

4. We will need to distinguish between the question originally posed in the panel, "how" do we move over, and the question, of "why" we should do so. This takes us into an exploration of the connections between the "how" and the "why". If we can identify some of reasons "why" we should move over, and some of the benefits of that action, it may help us deal with any sense of loss which may attend the "moving over". While that distinction is probably important, exploring the "why" is not the focus of these brief notes. Still, delineating the reasons **why** it is important to "move over" will be an essential step; hopefully, if we can be clear about motives there will be greater congruity between intent and action.

5. Perhaps the most important need is to confront a history which traps us into assumptions that to be "in control" is a major part of our identity. Here I take my friend's question to a different level of contemplation. "Moving over" and "losing control" were the focus of her question. Now I want to suggest that the loss of control is **not** the major threat to white men. The greater fear rests in the threat which "losing control" presents to the image and **identity** of white men. The fear of losing control may operate at a subliminal level to threaten the **identity of what it means to be a white male.**

In our history, written mostly by white men, we have been defined as those who are in control. History very clearly tells us that white men of property are in control; losing control therefore may threaten both our self-image and identity at a very powerful subconscious level. The record of white male control is vividly present in our world, described particularly by white women and by most people of color, as they experience us. A couple of instances will remind you of

how that works.

For instance, a black fiend of mine manages a clothing store, and often has people coming in to sell a new line of goods. When a white salesman comes into the store, asking to see the manager, he is greeted by my friend, who identifies himself as the manager. Often unable to accept the fact that he is addressing other than a clerk, the salesman will ask **who is in charge**, *that's* who he wants to see, he'll say. He is quite unable to accept the fact that he is talking already to that person!--In much the same way a white parent seeks to see the coach of her son's football team, and cannot believe it is the black man to whom she is introduced; clumsily she asks to see the "**head** coach". -- Those anecdotes are current, and represent a still-common phenomenon, one that "innocent" whites often want to deny, but cannot easily shake off.

James Baldwin, writing to his nephew, in *The Fire Next Time*, speaks to this issue of white male identity. Referring to white people, he says: "They are trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know.

To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity. ... Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations."

"Moving over", "losing control", for many white men becomes a threat to their sense of who they are. To see a woman, or a person of color take the "place" of control and power, may be a threat which becomes a block to any attempt to "move over". Baldwin's insight provides a clue for rescuing white men who are willing to "understand" the history of white, male supremacy. History creates much of our present, surely, but we do not have to let the history trap us into its falsehoods. So a step toward liberation for many white males is to enter into and "understand" the history which has formed our nation, and many of us as individual persons, but then to repudiate its lies and distortions. We can understand how history has created "places" for whites, for males, for people of color, but we can also learn how the places and roles limit all of us. At that point we need then to say a loud "no" to history's pretension to define our roles.

Baldwin comes to our aid again! We need not be trapped into the past. It is important to acknowledge that history does live in us, and does in many ways shape our present reality. It is also important to assert that history does not rule us nor completely define us today. We can release ourselves from it, once we understand it, and decide to will a different way of relating to male colleagues, to women, and to people of color.

So there are some thoughts in response to my friend's question, asked during the panel presentation. They are at least a starting point. Pick it up wherever this leaves you, and let's continue the discussion.