

00:04

You can ask anyone you want, and they will tell you that they are sick and tired of fighting for justice. People of color and members of the LGBT community are tired of carrying the burden of speaking up and stepping up even when they're being silenced and pushed back down. And white allies and cis allies are tired, too. Tired of being told they're doing it wrong or that it isn't even their place to show up at all. This fatigue is impacting all of us. And in fact, I believe we won't succeed until we approach justice in a new way.

00:57

I grew up in the middle of the civil rights movement in the segregated South. As a five-year-old girl, I was very interested in ballet. It seemed to be the five-year-old-girl thing to do in the 1960s. My mother took me to a ballet school. You know, the kind of school that had teachers that talked about your gifts and talents knowing that you'd never be a ballerina.

01:25

(Laughter)

01:27

When we arrived, they said nicely that they "did not accept Negroes." We got back in the car as if we were just leaving a grocery store that was out of orange juice. We said nothing ... just drove to the next ballet school. They said, "We don't accept Negroes."

01:53

Well, I was confused. And I asked my mother why they didn't want me. And she said, "Well, they're just not smart enough to accept you right now, and they don't know how excellent you are."

02:06

(Cheers)

02:07

(Applause and cheers)

02:12

Well, I didn't know what that meant.

02:16

(Laughter)

02:18

But I was sure it wasn't good, because I could see it in my mother's eyes. She was angry, and it looked like she was on the verge of tears. Well, I decided right then and right there that ballet was dumb.

02:37

(Laughter)

02:39

You know, I had lots of experiences like that along the way, but as I got older, I started to get angry. And not just angry at the outright racism and injustice. I was angry at people that stood by and didn't say anything. Like, why didn't the white parents in that ballet school say "Uh, that's wrong. Let that little girl dance." Or why --

03:07

(Applause)

03:08

Why didn't the white patrons in the segregated restaurants say "Hey, that's not right. Let that family eat." Well, it didn't take me long to realize that racial injustice wasn't the only place that people in the majority were staying quiet. When I'd sit in church and hear some homophobic comment being disguised as something scriptural, I'd say, "I'm sorry, why aren't the heterosexual churchgoers disrupting this nonsense?"

03:38

(Applause)

03:41

Or ... in a room filled with boomers and Gen-Xers who started degrading their millennial colleagues as being spoiled, lazy and overconfident, I'd say, "I'm sorry, why isn't someone my age saying 'stop stereotyping?'"

04:01

(Audience) Yes!

04:02

(Applause)

04:05

I was used to standing up on issues like this, but why wasn't everyone else?

04:13

My fifth grade teacher, Mrs. McFarland, taught me that justice requires an accomplice. Not just anyone will do. She said we need unlikely allies if we want to see real change happen. And for those of us experiencing injustice up front, we need to be willing to accept the help, because when we don't, change takes too long.

04:47

I mean, imagine if heterosexual and gay people had not come together under the banner of marriage equality. Or what if President Kennedy just wasn't interested in the civil rights movement? Most of our major movements in this country might have been delayed or even dead if it weren't for the presence of unlikely allies. When the same people speak up in the same ways they've always spoken up, the most we'll ever get are the same results over and over again.

05:25

You know, allies often stand on the sidelines waiting to be called up. But what if unlikely allies led out in front of issues? Like ... what if Black and Native American people stood in front of immigration issues?

05:42

(Applause)

05:45

Or what if white people led the charge to end racism?

05:52

(Applause and cheers)

05:57

Or ... what if men led the charge on pay equity for women?

06:03

(Applause and cheers)

06:07

Or ... what if heterosexual people stood in front of LGBTQ issues?

06:14

(Applause and cheers)

06:18

And what if able-bodied people advocated for people living with disabilities?

06:24

(Applause and cheers)

06:28

You know, we can stand up for issues, weigh in and advocate even when it seems like the issue has nothing to do with us. And actually, those are the issues that are most compelling. And sure, people will have no idea why you are there, but that's why those of us facing injustice must be willing to accept the help. You know, we have to fight injustice with a consciousness of grace. When white guys stand up to fight for the liberation of Black and Brown people, Black and Brown people will have to be willing to accept their help. And I know that's complicated, but this is collective work and it requires everyone to be all in.

07:25

One day when I was at kindergarten, our teacher introduced us to this beautiful, tall, white lady named Miss Ann. I thought she was the prettiest white lady I'd ever seen. Well, if I can be honest with you, I think it was the first time we'd ever seen a white lady in our school ever.

07:43

(Laughter)

07:44

Miss Ann stood in front of us, and she said she was going to start teaching ballet classes right there are our school and that she was proud to be our dance teacher. It was unreal. All of a sudden -- (sings) I didn't think ballet was dumb anymore.

08:06

(Laughter)

08:09

You see, what I know now is Miss Ann was fully aware that the white ballet schools would not accept Black girls. She was incensed by that. So she came to the Black neighborhood to start teaching the dance classes herself. And you know, it took love and courage for her to do that.

08:31

(Applause)

08:38

And where there was no justice, she just built it. We all survived, because we stood on the shoulders of our Black ancestors. We all thrived, because Miss Ann was an unlikely ally.

08:59

You know, when you add your voice and your actions to situations that you don't think involve you, you actually inspire others to do the same. Miss Ann inspired me to always be on the lookout for situations that weren't about me but where I saw injustice and inequality happening anyway. I hope she inspires you, too, because to win the fight for equity we will all need to speak up and stand up. We will all need to do that. And we will all need to do that even when it's hard and even when we feel out of place, because it is your place, and it is our place. Justice counts on all of us.

10:00

Thank you.

10:02

(Applause and cheers)