

Wayne Finegar

From: Jesse Miller V <jessemillerv@gmail.com>
Sent: Sunday, January 3, 2021 6:22 AM
To: Elaine; David Hunter; JoAnn Coates Hunter; Brian Massey; BYM Administration; Wayne Finegar; Linda Garrettson; Jane Megginson; Harry Scott; Jules Skloot; Sara Brigham; Damon Cory-Watson; Silas Gordon Brigham; Sean Hickey; Hope Swank; Dyresha Harris; Jesse Austell; Rosalie Eck; Steph Bean; Betsy Roush
Subject: On Blackness and BYM

Dear friends,

I'm sending this message out to those of whom I feel I worked with the closet as well as other "immediate chosen" family. Please forgive my lack of communication these many months. This past year has been occupying to say the least. I've mostly been caught up with building a new life in the Bay Area while trying to navigate the many, many, messy emotions I have about this world and my place in it.

I know that camp is already chugging along toward summer 2021, and thank God for that. I wish I could figure out a way to take part, but I don't see how I can be involved with camp for a while. Much of it is logistical: I currently can't afford the time, mindspace, or the financial juggling to make that possible. If these were my only reasons, I would have made that clear as soon as I could; I know that folks were waiting to hear back from me. In many ways, I imagine the hope was that I would return to direct Opequon. Mine was too. My heart sang at the possibility. Me, after all my years there, assembling a team to run that place? Get outta here, that would have been awesome!

But I can't. And it's not the logistics of life. It's because my heart's not aligned. I don't think it can be right now.

Feel free to share this message with anyone who is interested.

BYM is my family. There can't be that many people for whom that is more true than me. Lacking solid support structures and caught up in the deep and dysfunctional trauma of my own immediate family (thanks slavery!), I grabbed hold of camp and built my own. And it was there for me. And it made me who I am. It wasn't always easy, but that made sense to me. In what family is it always easy? The primary feeling I felt was love - coming and going - so little else mattered, as far as I was concerned.

Throughout my 20s and now into my 30s a few major things happened for me: I rose higher in the organization, and I became a bona fide youth development professional. This new vantage point gave me new insights into BYM and began deeply changing my experiences. In reflection of my last four years as director, I'm going to share some hard truths I felt and observed and why I can't return. These observations are directed toward BYM as a whole.

It's cultural. It's at the heart of lamenting a lack of diversity, yet failing to properly consider those who show up. Here are some concrete examples.

Let's talk about the caretaker at Shiloh. I love that guy. The people who know him best know what a sweet and caring person he is. They also know he holds views that are straight up racist and sexist. This is known. When I have interacted with him, I've initiated the most gentle and patient of conversations to delicately attempt to spell out why his views are painful to me. Did his views ever change with all that patience and space I gave? Nah. But he stuck around because he's pretty good in his position, problematic views and all. Heck, I never complained, good soldier that I am. But I also never hid how I felt from anyone.

There's that of God in everyone, right? BYM and camp try to hold space for all people. The practice is to show love and patience with whom we disagree. To come together in community and see our way to coexistence. I really do love Mike. But the very last time I saw that man he was making wildly offensive comments about my Asian girlfriend who he was meeting for the first time that I won't repeat. My love for him doesn't make me want to be around him anymore, is what I'm saying.

I bring Mike up because he's an example of how difficult it is to share space with someone who has views you disagree with when those views are opposition to your own oppressed identity. "Holding space" is not an equal exercise. You can be the leftiest radical in the nation who sheds an honest to goodness tear every time you witness oppression, but that is going to land differently for you every single time if you're white. I bring up Mike, a white man who believes black people are inherently criminal and told me so in Trumpian rhetoric, because as much as many of us agree that people like him in the community who have challenging views are difficult to work with, it is *always* going to be harder for people like me - a person of color.

And, by the way, the "challenging views" that we're talking about here are white supremacy. Just to name that.

Ya'll, when you're running a mostly white summer program in rural, politically conservative areas, with a mostly white staff, and you claim to want people of color in your program, you can't also let people with racist ideas share that community with them. That's not a tricky situation to navigate. That's open hostility against the minority portion of your population you claim to value.

This is my overall experience at BYM when it comes to race. For fifteen years I've been held up in the community as an ideal because of my identity; heavily visible for the obvious reasons, but also heavily featured in BYM promotional materials as people of color in the camp community always are. For fifteen years I've simultaneously assisted white people bring people of color into their community while also constantly trying to softly - ever so softly - pull and push that community to be more accommodating. At this point, it grieves me to say that I feel I've spent most of my time trying to help white people be less racist, rather than actually building a safer space for people of color. And I don't feel those efforts to have been successful.

To be fair, I believe this is a primary problem with mostly white organizations in general in this country. That the intention is to be more diverse and inclusive, but that the work falls to the few POC folks, and that true movement in culture is slow if at all. Yet my experience is that BYM as a spiritual, Quaker, organization often leans on its intentions rather than direct action.

I think about the practices. I think about the slideshow of campers of color of whom white families complained about, again and again. How often there is outside pressure from families who demand we take disciplinary actions against these campers and how these campers negatively impacted their experience. I think about how we have all clearly seen the phenomenon of black campers receiving harsher reactions and punitive measures from our mostly white staff. I think about all the black kids who were viewed as problem campers. I think about how often directors have to justify and defend ourselves to the broader community when we teach and train on social justice.

I think about Dyresha and everything she's had to endure over the years. There were so many who were vocal about the issues they had with her leadership; including her own direct supervisor. She was then placed on a co-director team with me, the only other black director at BYM with the explicit intention of being balanced. I could feel myself becoming the "good" director which - due to historical racial undertones- was more than uncomfortable. I continued to watch with unease as I increasingly felt set-up to oppose and correct her leadership.

You can say what you will about it, but anyone familiar with the issue knows very well how difficult it was on her and I, and you can't avoid the reality that the only two black leaders in the organization were intentionally placed in conflict with one another.

For four years.

And we still ran the hell out of that camp too. Despite these difficulties; again a theme for POC folks in the community. Bearing it for the greater good. Bearing it for you.

I think about the Brighams. Good Lord, I think about the Brighams; particularly Sara and Elaine and how much they fought (fought, fought, fought!) for racial equity with their campers and staff and the resistance I saw them face. They were never afraid to ruffle feathers and push the community to face itself for people who look like me. I understand that the circumstances around Elaine's departure are complicated. It's just that - once more - many of the conflicts centered around the community's discomfort with her navigation around issues of race with our black campers; issues BYM is too quick to turn away from.

I think about all those black kids we hauled in from Philly, Baltimore, and DC. How jarring and terrifying it was for them to come into our community, and how much we failed them when - all too often - their fears came true out on the trail with strangers, or even in the cabin with fellow campers, or our own staff. If the breach was loud enough the community would rightfully reel, but we're too quick to forget who it hurts the most.

As a director, I spent time in communication with black families convincing them that the experience was worth it. I would smooth over their concerns. "I know," I found myself saying multiple times, "But they're good white people. Give them a chance. We're working on it."

My heart's heavy, ya'll. I don't feel angry or hostile toward anyone. Or bitter. You know me. That's not in my character. What I feel is love. And exhaustion. My love tells me that I must be truthful about my experiences. That I've watched POC folks like myself come and go and face a lot of challenges as we carry weight for you. That I've watched white allies depart for the same reasons. And finally - most alarmingly - that while the mostly white BYM community no doubt receives some cultural value and benefit from having POC folks around...I'm just no longer sure if the difficulties these same POC people face in the community justifies that experience. That, right now, if a black family asked me if they should send their black child to be a camper or staff member at a BYM camp I'd have to give a long, hard, sigh, and - in this moment - I don't know if I would say yes. If I did, there'd have to be a lot of qualifying statements, that much is certain.

My love tells me to say that I hope BYM can find it in itself to be more comfortable with being uncomfortable on issues of race. That it can notice when it feels tense and inflexible. That it can lean in and allow itself to stumble. That it can be courageous enough to be messy with itself. But my exhaustion wants me to say that asking us to show up isn't enough anymore. People like me are too tired to show up, and will always become too tired to keep showing up if BYM doesn't face itself and become intolerant of intolerance. You can't build a safe space for people of color unless you do. But you can't expect us to pull you through it.

And BYM must stop saying, "Please show up."

Followed by, "We have issues with how you came."

I understand that some of these statements may arouse questions, and I can imagine the desire for further elaboration. However, these are all the words I have to share. I still believe in BYM. I still believe in the mission.

You got this.

Much love and peace,

Jesse