

"It is white people's responsibility to bring other well-intended white people to the social justice work of our time."

—ANGELA RYE, CNN political analyst

# RAISING *Our* HANDS

How White Women Can Stop  
Avoiding Hard Conversations,  
Start Accepting Responsibility, and  
Find Our Place on the New Frontlines

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# HOW TO FACILITATE A LISTENING CIRCLE

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

—Margaret Wheatley



I've spent the past couple of years crisscrossing the country, having closed-door conversations with American white women. The conversations I facilitated and participated in, which I call Listening Circles, were lightly structured, based on inquiry, with no objective but to increase personal understanding of a subject or another's perspective. In some cases, these conversations marked the participants' first attempts to articulate their feelings about something happening inside them or out in the world.

The conversations had challenging moments, but all who participated were eager to engage more in just this type of dialogue—one that calls people in to this kind of collective work. I received messages for months, even years, after initial Listening Circles from people who were continuing to have these conversations, saying how much meaning the discussions continued to bring them.

## HOW TO FACILITATE A LISTENING CIRCLE

Following is a suggested blueprint for igniting similar conversations with the people in your own life. If you're considering facilitating a Listening Circle as part of a reading group, you may choose to hold that circle after the group has read the book, using chapter topics as conversation prompts, in addition to the questions suggested below.

While I'm not qualified to facilitate conversations on race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, or other complex subjects (as I've said, I'm still very much a student), and so did not include these as explicit discussion topics in the Listening Circles I held, the topics often surfaced anyway. When they did, I'd lean into participants' curiosity with further questioning, encouraging them to spend some time researching the subject and then share their findings and sources with the group over email. Before holding your own Listening Circle, you may find it useful to re-read chapters eight and nine for further support navigating tense conversations, in case these topics surface in your discussions, too.

At the beginning of a Listening Circle, I set the stage with a few specific ground rules:

1. Everything is off the record.\*
2. Strip yourself of the need to perfectly articulate a perspective or point—just speak, even if it's messy. Everyone has the right to edit their words or refine their points over the course of the conversation, and after. We are here to learn; our vocabulary and ideas will evolve. Your stance will shift.
3. Don't enter this conversation as if it's going to be a complete activity. These are the first few hours of a lifelong conversation.
4. This conversation is meant to make space for everyone to participate; please keep your thoughts brief so we can make sure everyone has a chance to be heard. I always tell the participants that if they do start to ramble, I'll do my best to break in gracefully, although the interruption is typically clunky. I apologize in advance for what might feel like me cutting them off (since technically I am).

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\* In the ones I held, if someone said something I wanted to share after the conversation or quote publicly, I would circle back with them, make sure I understood their point, and confirm whether the language they used then was still what they meant to say.

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5. Avoid “facts.” When a wedge issue or other complicated subject surfaces, participants often retreat to a specific script distributed by a news outlet, political party, or non-profit. Rarely have I found debating the facts helpful in Listening Circles; the conversation usually turns into a fact war, with people competing over who can recite more statistics. And let’s be real—nobody has a break in the conversation to verify the data or vet how it was collected to begin with. Try to stay away from talking points that aren’t your own.

I like to start Listening Circle conversations with an ice-breaker question; there are great ones available with a simple Google search. I always enjoy asking people about their “dream jobs,” with the pre-requisite that they can’t say their current profession (mine would be the interior designer of restaurants).

Since these conversations are meant to bring people together and help us see our common struggle as humans, I keep the questions very top level. Here are some of the questions I used during the research for this book:

- Why are you here? What motivated you to participate in this conversation?
- What is happiness for you?
- What are your regrets? How have you disappointed yourself?
- What stereotype about you is true? What stereotype about you is false?
- What part of the American narrative do you feel most tied to?
- How do we participate in and contribute to the world, outside of the jobs we have?
- Do you think any part of the “idea of American” has failed? If so, which parts?
- Where is it that you belong? How do you think of your place in society, beyond being an individual or being part of a family?
- What is it that you are most afraid to face in your own life?
- Who is your hero?
- What would you be willing to fight for (besides your children/loved ones)?
- What is your legacy (besides family/job) if you feel like you have one? What would you want it to be?

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- What would you want to be different about humanity? About yourself?
- What internal suffering do you work the hardest to avoid dealing with?
- Do you think you are understood by others?
- Is there something you hope people will understand about you that you feel they currently do not?
- What do you hope comes out of this discussion?
- What are you most hopeful about when you think of the future?

The most important thing is to come to this work in the spirit of civic responsibility, looking to engage in constant conversation with each other as we work forward. Thank you for doing this—it is the urgent work of our time.

*Review Copy*

