

An Open Letter to My White Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Sisters and Brothers

By Diane Finnerty

It is indisputable -- we are living in historic times. I watched on May 17th, 2004 as our brothers and sisters in Massachusetts stepped forward again and again to claim the legal right to marry their beloved. All over the country, our lgbt communities are engaging in daily forms of organizing – in creative and risk-taking ways – for the lives of our families, for the short-term legal landscape of this country, and for the soul of this nation as it continues to slip into a corporate theocracy as never before. These are indeed historic times filled with great hope and celebration, intense fury and impatience.

My partner, Jill, and I celebrated our 14th anniversary in June with our usual private expressions of thankfulness to each other for the love we share. Neither of our families of origin knows of nor recognizes our anniversary, but on many levels it doesn't matter because we have our own private fanfare and the occasion is recognized by several of our friends. This year's anniversary was a bit different than the others, however. Just a few months before, we joined with forty same-sex couples in requesting *en masse* an application for a marriage license from our Johnson County Recorder's office. Not surprisingly, we were denied. What was surprising to us, though, was the deep sadness we both felt upon hearing the denial of our request. We were somewhat shocked by our own private reactions and stunned later that evening to hear that the other had felt similarly affected. Call it internalized homophobia, call it being forty-something lesbians who have learned to stop asking for justice and have become satisfied with the modicum of acceptance we receive in our community and workplaces. Whatever the source, I walked away from that "official" proclamation of my social status deeply aware of the pain buried within. Since that day at the County Recorder's office, a lump in my throat has grown increasingly difficult to swallow and my anger less easily assuaged.

But this letter is not about that pain or anger; neither can it be written without an acknowledgement of it.

I am writing to my white lgbt community to implore you – in these days of legal and rhetorical battles – not to take the bait and allow the White Right's tactics to enlist us knowingly or unknowingly in their racist agenda. Living in the "first in the nation" caucus state of Iowa where the presidential campaign has been omnipresent for over two years and same-sex marriage used sinisterly as a political divining rod, I want to chronicle some of the tactics I have observed from white lgbt people on the regional and national level that I believe may be intended to create short-term political gains, but will increase unnecessary division among people of color and lgbt communities. If left unchecked, I fear this will result in strengthened white supremacy in our society, increased silence in communities of color around issues of same-sex sexuality, and intensified oppression of our lgbt brothers and sisters of color. That very same lump in my throat turns from pain and anger, to grief and "can't-you-see-what's-happening?" rage when I see the following tactics from my white lgbt brothers and sisters as we struggle for lgbt civil rights:

- **Piggy-backing on the civil rights struggles of people of color**, most notably the Black Civil Rights Movement, without first studying those struggles to honor the true legacy which they have offered this country, as well as the work yet to be done. I see this

happening by lifting quotes and metaphors from the Black Civil Rights movement: incessantly quoting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; evoking Rosa Parks' civil disobedience by proclaiming that "gays should no longer have to sit at the back of the bus"; equating the *Nabozny v. Podlesny* (7th Circuit, December 18, 1995) case confronting homophobic harassment in schools as the "*Brown v. Board of Education* decision for gay people"; using the rhetoric of "separate, but *not* equal" to confront the difference between civil unions and marriage rights for same sex couples without understanding the historic case law behind it; showing our disingenuous use of these race-based civil rights references by only using comparisons to African American civil rights achievements and ignoring the presence of other communities of color and their struggles for liberation.

- **Making statements that diminish the impact of racism or imply racial discrimination no longer exists:** "Gays are the last oppressed minority." "Gay rights are the last bastion of civil rights for this country." "Gay rights are *the* civil rights issue of the day." "If these were racial slurs, teachers would be stopping them." (Reis et al) "At least if you're a person of color, you have your family as a place of harbor against the world. Gay and lesbian youth don't even have that!"
- **Engaging in acontextual shaming tactics with a person of color** who expresses views about marriage rights for same-sex couples that are different than your own: "Of *all people* who should understand discrimination, I'm surprised that *you*, as a person of color, wouldn't understand this is a civil rights issue."
- **Playing the "tit for tat" activist game:** "They want *me* to support racial diversity efforts? Well, as soon as their definition of 'diversity' includes sexual identity, I'll work with them. Not until."
- **Talking about sexual identity to claim it as a badge of victimization** or making statements that if you were free from this one form of discrimination everything would be okay. Heard recently from a gay white man: "If you think I could, don't you think I would choose *not* to be gay and live my life without discrimination?" To which my friend, Sarah Hallas, responds, "So that instead of being a *gay* white man he can be unencumbered by discrimination and live with the entitlements that *straight* white men possess."
- **Saying under our breath to each other or merely holding on to the unchecked belief that communities of color are essentially more homophobic than white communities,** with no exploration of the sources of homophobia in different communities nor interest in engaging in meaningful dialogue to have our beliefs challenged.
- **Dismissing the contributions of leaders of color who are not quite "there yet" on "our issues."** This is different than being committed to challenging leaders' of *all* colors views and rhetoric if it is based in hate and misinformation. I mean when we choose not to attend a speech by someone highly regarded within a community of color solely because the speaker has expressed what we consider to be homophobic views – which then, of course, eliminates the possibility that we might learn something about the reasons this person is so well-respected or be challenged about issues of racism. It also implies that "our issues" don't include issues of importance to communities of color.

For several years now, I have been sharing these observations in conversations and embedding them into workshops co-facilitated with Jesse Villalobos, National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ), on the intersections of and differences between racism and heterosexism. And now, with the heightened attention to same-sex marriage rights gripping our society, I am compelled to write these moments down into this letter to engage in an open

conversation with my white lgbt brothers and sisters. The stakes are growing increasingly high – not just due to election cycles and court cases, but because coalitions are needed now more than ever to take on the multi-headed dragon of social injustice in its many, many, many forms. We *need* allies and we need to *be* allies. While being leaders on issues of sexual identity discrimination, we need to understand our work as part of a broader agenda for social justice and allow our efforts to inform, as well as to be informed, by the struggles of others. I believe straight people of color committed to social justice will continue to ally themselves with lgbt civil rights struggles even if we don't do this. But I believe if we continue to advance a white lgbt agenda, they will offer their support *in spite of* us rather than because we are trusted allies whom they know, if they have our back today, will be right behind them tomorrow.

So I am writing this open letter to my white lgbt community to implore us not to salve our pain with the privilege of whiteness. It is truly suicidal for us to forge ahead believing we can wage our civil rights struggles without being part of a more comprehensive social justice agenda. (Baldwin, 1971) Beloved community, I ask us instead to use our pain and anger at injustice in this historic moment to strengthen our readiness and worthiness as white anti-racist allies who understand that united we stand and divided we truly fall.

Strategies to Move Forward a Social Justice Agenda

The following suggestions are a compilation of ideas developed through numerous conversations with allies of color (straight and lgbt), and lgbt white anti-racist activists. They are beginning suggestions for what we can do to develop greater alliances for short-term political battles, as well as for participating openly as lgbt people in long-haul strategies for a broader social justice agenda.

1. **Do our white homework** (Holladay, 2000). Educate ourselves about the history of whiteness in the U.S. and contemporary white privilege that continues to operate in our society (See Wise, Wildman, McIntosh among others in Works Cited and Resources). Being queer does not make us immune to experiencing skin color privilege. It may be easier for us to see how societal systems *prefer* heterosexuals with informal and formal privileges, but I encourage us to understand how our whiteness confers everyday preferences to us, as well. In addition to the resources listed below, a powerful learning opportunity occurs each spring at the White Privilege Conference coordinated by a strong ally of color, Eddie Moore, Jr. For more information, see: <http://www.whiteprivilegeconference.com>.
2. **Understand how a people's history undergirds their views on issues of sexuality, sexual identity, gender relations, family, and religion/spirituality** – all of which impact traditionally defined “homophobia.” How, for example, does the experience of historic and contemporary genocide among Latino, Indigenous, Asian, and African peoples impact views within their communities on the roles of men and women, sexuality, families? How might heterosexuality be protected in a community in which children are stolen from families, men routinely castrated, and women raped and forced to bear the fruit of their colonizer? How might religious views feel impermeable, if spiritual traditions were the only source of sanity, strength and social interaction ‘allowed’ within a community; how does the sacred become a matter of survival in the here and now and not just the hereafter? What strength does the Church take on if the congregation is an oasis where community leadership is developed and honored? How has state-sanctioned and community-sanctioned scrutiny of Black sexuality (Cohen, 2000) impacted the ways in which sexuality, in general, and same-sex intimacy, in

particular, are discussed within Black communities? What if cultural values deem overt conversations about sexuality, in general, as disrespectful? What would it mean to be “out” in this context? As a white lesbian, I need to do my homework on the histories of communities of color and understand how others’ experiences differ from my fourth generation Northern European immigrant views of the world *before* I can enter any dialogue about the complex views of sexuality and same sex relationships within communities of color. For many of us, grappling with this may begin with understanding our own ethnic histories, which have been too often hidden from European Americans in exchange for becoming “white” in the U.S. (Ignatiev, 1995).

It is important for me to state that I am not suggesting that we excuse hateful and hurtful statements that may come our way from people of color as “cultural” and, therefore, unobjectionable. Neither am I suggesting that we submerge ourselves in “white guilt” nor some version of “martyrdom for the cause.” But if we are committed to offering something more than a white-washed (*white-privileged*) response of “That’s homophobic!” then we need to understand and honor the historical and cultural context of our differences as we engage in dialogue about our mutual humanity.

- 3. Develop critical media skills and question the media’s positioning of communities against each other.** You know the type of oppositional media tactics that I mean: “Blacks Angered by Gays’ Metaphors” (Wetzstein, 2004); “Martinez Likens Gay Marriage Advocates to Castro” (LaPadula, 2004); “Ethnic Communities Speak out Against Gay Marriage” (Shore, 2004). A recent article that appeared in a local “alternative” newspaper, the Des Moines *CityView* magazine, was titled, “Is Gay Marriage a Civil Rights Issue?” (Hennigan, 2004). The article followed the same tired format: several leaders in the local African American community responded “no” to the title question and white gay and lesbian activists responded “yes.” Two other community leaders were included to offer a bit of balance: a straight African American legislator responded that he is against “any type of discrimination” and a white straight leader within the Iowa Civil Liberties Union weighed in that “it’s hard to defend” the assertion that there aren’t comparisons between gay/lesbian civil rights and Black civil rights. The article follows a prototype that we will see more and more in the days ahead and, if we play into the wedge tactics, one that will serve to enlist us in strengthening the White Right’s agenda. We need to be critical of such divisive strategies by posing questions such as: What racial/ethnic identity do the people writing those articles claim? What sexual identity? In the past, how has the media source covered the powerful work being done by lgbt people of color within communities of color? Why did this type of article make it to the fore and voices of lgbt people of color and allies ignored? When selling copy is the primary intention of a newspaper, and not promoting social justice, who literally is profiting by our taking the bait of divisiveness and reacting with white entitlement and furor?

The following “Editor’s Note” prefaced the *Pacific News Service* article, “Ethnic Communities Speak Out Against Gay Marriage” (Shore, 2004): “*Editor’s Note: In cities across the United States, some of the staunchest opposition to gay marriage comes from African American and immigrant communities.*” Upon what is this statement based? Do you personally believe it is accurate? Who truly controls the “staunchest opposition”? What are the racial/ethnic demographics of the national/state/local decision-makers? Of the judiciary? Probably not a lot of “African American and immigrants.”

- 4. Engage in a much more thoughtful responses to the request to compare civil rights struggles with one another.** It is true that contemporary liberation movements owe a great

deal to the legal and social template created by struggles for civil rights by communities of color, in particular, the struggles of African American communities against the U.S. apartheid system. We will be stronger by being students of those movements – honoring their legacy rather than just using soundbites to prop up our contemporary struggles for civil rights. To do this, we need to be clear about several things: the ways in which the term “civil rights” looks different around matters of race and matters of sexual identity (D’Emilio, et al, 2000), and ways it is similar (Bond, 2004). I can do this by acknowledging historical and contemporary “civil rights” struggles waged by communities of color (i.e., right to vote, right to equal education, right to fair housing, right to freedom from police maltreatment, right to language access) and I can enumerate historical and contemporary struggles of lgbt communities (i.e., right to nondiscrimination in the workplace, housing, public services and healthcare; right to form families, right to decriminalization of intimate behavior; right to education free of discrimination).

Further, when articulating the similarities/differences between civil rights struggles, I need to educate myself on the issues that are most challenging for communities of color, including:

- the degree of “invisibility” among lgb people and relative “visibility” of many people of color;
- the argument that homosexuality is “chosen” but skin color is not;
- the pronatalist assertion that marriage must be between a man and a woman for purposes of procreation;
- the belief that gayness is a ‘white’ phenomenon (largely because of the whitewashed images depicted in the mainstream media, as well as, in our own magazines);
- the support for more ‘traditional’ gender boundaries and the defense of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity norms (Evans, 2004);
- the importance of spiritual traditions, an honoring of religious leaders, and the adherence to a more literal reading of religious scriptures;
- modest views regarding the public discussion of sexuality.

And I need to educate myself on the issues upon which our communities share common ground, including:

- opposition to the use of the U.S. Constitution to authorize discrimination;
- belief in the guarantee of “equal protection for all”;
- support for the rights of children to have access to education free from school harassment;
- need for public institutions (e.g., hospitals, schools, social services) to honor family diversity;
- belief that families of origin should be sanctuaries for children, not places of harassment;
- opposition to the historic manipulation of religion to justify discrimination in social policy;
- challenge to forced compliance with white, gender-conscripted roles of what it means to be a “man” and a “woman”;
- commitment to the right to healthcare free from practitioner bias;
- shared caution against alarmist rhetoric, e.g., the accusation against “judicial activism,” which has “routinely been used in the past to attack judges who made courageous decisions on civil rights matters.” (Leadership Council for Civil Rights, 2004)

Given its historic weightiness within and between communities of color, it is particularly important to address issues of “passing,” or the relative ability of many lgb people to conceal our sexual identity in hostile environments. I have always asserted this ability is both a blessing and a curse, but it *is* a privilege to pass as “normal” and, thereby, avoid moments of interpersonal discrimination. In comparing civil rights struggles, it is important to acknowledge passing, but it is not sufficient to end there. Our analysis must continue to focus on *institutional oppression* and not just the avoidance of individual hostilities. For example, it was little consolation to know that I could walk out onto the street following the County Recorder’s dismissal of my rights and feel relieved that some straight passerby would perceive me as “just like them” and, thereby unworthy of their hate, while my own government had just moments before proclaimed my family to be deviant and deplorable. Passing, of course, is also often not an option for many members of our communities who experience gender-based oppression. Differentiating between oppression on the basis of gender and sexual identity must be addressed in our analyses, as well.

5. **Similarly, as individuals and as a movement, we need to better understand the civil rights cases upon which our legal strategies today are built** so that when I, as a community activist, parrot the language used by attorneys arguing same-sex equality in the courtroom, I will know more than just the soundbite “separate, but not equal.” Without an understanding of the original case, I am treading on sacred ground with only my ignorance and personal interpretation to fall back on. By showing we know and honor the struggles and hard-won victories, it will demonstrate our commitment to broad social justice, rather than just a willingness to appropriate the pain and power of those who have come before for our gain.

Our communities need to educate ourselves on the case law behind historic civil rights decisions, such as: *Plessy v Ferguson* (1896), *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), *Loving v Virginia* (1967). Our movement’s legal strategists could do this by providing accessible briefs on the issues or, with Internet access, a quick Google search can bring the same information. We also need to understand how the legal precedent applies, but also how the cases differ. For example, anti-miscegenation laws (prohibiting people of different “races” to marry) and laws prohibiting same-sex couples to marry share commonality as examples of the courts being used to inflict social policy upon people’s intimate lives. The separate laws may even shore up the supremacy of the same people, but the rationale against the ‘intermingling’ is not the *same*. With a little homework and guidance by legal strategists, our community can understand the distinctions, build upon legal precedent, *and* honor those who have fought before us. But first we have to be motivated to learn.

6. **Do not say that racism and heterosexism are the *same* thing or that white lgbt people experience the same type of discrimination as people of color.** The different forms of oppression share commonalities (Pharr, 1996), but they are not the same. Both bring great harm to their targets, but the oppression comes in different forms and with different intent. No community has a corner on the pain market, and you can find a white lgbt person who believes his/her personal “suffering” registers as high on the pain Richter Scale as that of a person of color. However, we too often get caught up comparing individual pain and allow ourselves to get distracted from our work to understand and dismantle systems of oppression. Whom does this personal warfare serve?
7. **Show your trustworthiness as an ally by being articulate and clear about your understanding of racism and white privilege.** To develop allies, let’s first show our

commitment to dismantling white supremacy and *be* allies. Begin by showing up at events of importance in communities of color. Educate ourselves on English-only legislation, disproportionate minority confinement and the prison industrial complex. Listen to parents of color talk about the experiences of their kids in schools and show up at Board meetings when there is a call to action. We need to demonstrate our willingness to *show up* and *step up* to make our voice heard as anti-racist whites on these issues. Think about how powerful it is when I, as a white parent, approach the school district and challenge that I want my daughter to be taught about racism and multiculturalism to make her stronger and more prepared to create authentic community in the future; when I challenge our public officials about why there are more Brown and Black men in prison in our state than there are in institutions of higher education; when I as a white monolingual English speaker oppose “English only” laws. We currently see how powerful it is when our allies of color step up on our behalf. For example, the following individuals and organizations have gone on record as opposing the Federal Marriage Amendment (FMA): Coretta Scott King; Hon. Willie Brown Mayor, San Francisco; Dr. M. Jocelyn Elders; Rep. John Lewis (D-GA) (Lambda Legal, 2001); the Japanese-American Bar Association (JABA); the Japanese-American Citizens League (JACL) (Minami, 2004); the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, 2004); Representatives Charlie A. Gonzalez of Texas, Xavier Becerra of California, Lucille Roybal-Allard of California, Nydia M. Velázquez of New York, Grace Napolitano of California, Linda Sanchez of California, Loretta Sanchez of California, Ed Pastor of Arizona, Luis Gutierrez of Illinois, Hilda Solis of California, Raul Grijalva of Arizona and José E. Serrano of New York (LLEGO, 2004). These allies used their status as highly respected civil rights leaders to support the assertion that marriage is a “basic human right.” What have we given back to our allies of color on issues of importance in their contemporary struggles?

8. **Don't allow our white straight allies to triangulate us against people of color.** Ever had a conversation with a white straight ‘ally’ after a meeting with people of color and heard, “Wow, I didn’t realize how homophobic she is! Of all people, you’d think *she’d* get it!” Know that given the way white privilege works, white straight allies will have a much easier time bonding with us across their heterosexual privilege, than with communities of color across their white privilege. White straight folks are more likely to have an lgbt person within their near/distant family than they are to intimately know a person of color. Rather than encouraging white/straight allies in a ‘taking care of their own’ type of alliance, expect and ask them to use the understanding of how ‘privilege’ works to expand on issues of race, class, and gender privilege, as well.
9. **Learn about the powerful work going on within communities of color by lgbt and allied people of color and ask how we can support those efforts.** For example, when having the “Are gay rights civil rights?” question posed to us, in addition to showing ourselves to be worthy allies in how we respond, it is also important to share the analyses offered by people of color regarding the comparison. And I don’t mean doing so by name-dropping, “Well, *Coretta Scott King* supports gay/lesbian rights,” but rather by understanding and articulating arguments such as those that are offered in the Works Cited & Resources section by Julian Bond (Bond, 2004), the National Latina/o Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Organization (LLEGÓ, 2004), the National Black Justice Coalition (NBCJ, 2004), Beth Reis, Mona Mendoza, and Frieda Takamura (Reis et al, 2004), and the Japanese American Citizens League (Minami, 2004). The National Black Justice Coalition (NBCJ), for example, is making compelling arguments within Black communities by exposing White Right groups:

“It is important to note that all of the black ministers participating in anti-gay marriage initiatives have joined coalition with conservative right wing groups that supported segregation 40 years ago. The co-sponsors of the Federal Marriage Amendment have a dismal civil rights record. One would have to ask why are our black ministers working with them?” commented NBJC member Donna Payne. (NBJC, 2004)

In particular, we need to listen to, support, and learn from our lgbt brothers and sisters of color who have a powerful border-crossing vision and immense insight for joining struggles. I honor the inspiring and challenging voices of Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Lamont (Montee) Evans, Will Roscoe, Keith Boykin, Mandy Carter, Daisy Hernández, Barbara Smith, Merle Woo among many, many others for their contributions to our understanding of lives lived as lgbt people of color.

10. **Learn about and embrace the important contributions white lgbt people have made as allies for social and racial justice.** As a white lesbian, I honor the inspiring and challenging voices of Mab Segrest, Suzanne Pharr, Jennifer Holladay, Irene Klepfisz, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Ricky Sherover-Marcuse. I am proud to join in that legacy and, rather than wish away my sexual identity, I want to proclaim to my allies that my commitment to social justice is *stronger* because of my experiences as a lesbian – that my sexual identity is my strength and power, *not* a form of victimization I wish to discard in order to enjoy my white entitlements.
11. **Forge genuine relationships with people of color – lgbt and straight people.** The powers-that-be do *not* want those lines of division crossed. Know that. Be ready for the pull to abandon one another. The relationships I share with allies who are straight men and women of color and lgbt people of color hold amazing strength, growth, and power. As queers, we know deep within our hearts the power that comes with stepping across societal lines and forming intimate relationships against all odds. This is a strength – this resilience, this ability to forge community – that we can undeniably bring to the table of social justice. It can and will change the world – if we do it with intentionality, strength, and vision across social lines that divide communities from one another.
12. **As we are on this journey, we need to join with each other and create intentional communities of white queer anti-racist organizations.** We need to strengthen each other on this journey – support our continued growth, struggle together to develop accountability to communities of color in our efforts, and be visible as a white anti-racist presence. Many of us are doing this work already around the country – what are the guiding principles that would enable us to be stronger and more visible in these efforts? Paul Kivel, in his article, “‘I’m not white, I’m Jewish. But I’m white’: Standing as Jews in the Fight for Racial Justice,” offers the following framework for working as an antiracist Jew within the Jewish community. If we substitute “LGBT people” in the following principles, I believe they offer useful direction to an anti-racist lgbt community, as well:

As *Jews* we must:

- a. Identify and attack racism within the *Jewish* community, both against people of color in general, and against *Jews* of color in particular.

- b. Work in solidarity with people of color, but not at the expense of our own safety.
- c. Use whatever contingent status and resources we have as whites to combat racism.
- d. Be visible as *Jews* and combat *anti-Semitism* which helps reveal racism and its Christian underpinning.
- e. Work in broad coalition to disperse political, economic and social power to all people, and create a democratic, anti-racist and secular multicultural state.

Non *Jews* need to know that as a *Jew*, I participate in the struggle against racism as part of my identity and in fighting for justice, equality, the end of exploitation, and for my personal and group safety. My greatest effectiveness as an ally to people of color comes from my history and experience as a *Jew*. (Kivel, 2003) *Italics added*

Lastly, we must know – deeply within our hearts – that our pain will not be salved, much less healed, by creating greater divisions between communities or within our own community. We must engage in battles for lgbt equality not as “walking wounded,” but as healers in the tradition of so many lgbt people who have walked this earth before us. We need to continue to embolden each other with the knowledge that our struggle for justice for lgbt communities is right and rich, and will only grow stronger through alliances with others. We can’t and shouldn’t ignore the pain we feel with each denial of our humanity, but we must care for our wounds outside of our coalition work (Reagon, 1983) – with each other as if our lives depended upon it and with our allies as the time is right.

My dear white lgbt communities, let us seize this historic moment by working side by side to move this society toward greater justice, love, and healing. Many have walked this way before and it is upon us to re-create the journey today.

Yours in love and struggle,

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Thank you to many allies of color and white lgbt anti-racist companions for our struggles together to understand the differences and similarities among oppressions and to embrace lives allied for social justice: *Rusty Barceló, Beth Barnhill, Linda Bolton, Shakti Butler, John-Paul Chaisson-Cárdenas, Joanna Daniel, Monique DiCarlo, Cat Fribley, Valerie Garr, Teresa García, Laurie Haag, Jennifer Holladay, Jill Jack, Dau-Shen Ju, Ju-Pong Lin, Adele Lozano, Susan Mask, Eddie Moore Jr., Salome Raheim, Jesse Villalobos, Stacie Walton, Sherry Watt*. Your voices are omnipresent in my life and interwoven throughout this letter.

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