

DIVERSITY, INCLUSION & BELONGING

A Q&A with Dr. Willie Griffin

A discussion on the current racial climate with a focus on historical civil rights events.



You observed that stories from the Civil Rights movement have been oversimplified. How can we gain a more authentic view of what happened during this era and why is it important to do so?

A more authentic view of the Civil Rights Movement requires a genuine curiosity and willingness to understand on an individual level. Like many other topics, the Civil Rights Movement is best understood when we study it from many angles and consult as many different resources as we can with an open mind. There is a lot of scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement; we need only avail ourselves of it.

An excellent example is William Chafe's, *Civilities and Civil Rights, Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom*. This work takes an in-depth look at the Greensboro Sit-Ins. There is also a wealth of information in libraries about socio-political events and race relations; one does not have to be an historian to access that information. A library card can provide free access to digitized copies of old newspapers and other publications from the civil rights era.

I emphasize the importance of local history because local stories help to contextualize broader events such as marches and legislation but, more importantly, help us to understand where we live. So much of what happened during the 1950s and 1960s civil rights era continues to reverberate in our society today. Information makes us all more responsible citizens.



What's your view on the ability of a decentralized movement like Black Lives Matter's ability to be effective versus a more centralized effort like the Civil Rights Movement?

The Movement for Black Lives is a work in progress. It is difficult to weigh the experiences of these participants with those of the Civil Rights Movement.

From an historical perspective, however, we can view Black Lives Matter as another movement along a very long continuum in the black struggle for freedom. Just as we have been able to identify successes and failures of the Civil Rights Movement, we will be able to identify successes and failures of Black Lives Matter over time.

Black Lives Matter has, thus far, been able to raise awareness around issues such as police brutality and criminal justice. With the aid and instantaneous nature of social media, this movement has been able to mobilize its supporters quickly both here and abroad.

The decentralized nature of Black Lives Matter eliminates the need for or presence of a single national leader. It also allows for organizers, supporters, and protesters to raise awareness around issues that affect their local communities. However, its decentralized formation also allows for less cohesion in its messaging.

We will have to wait and see what impact the Black Lives Matter movement has on policy and legislation because awareness alone does not change things.

Until Black Lives Matter participants begin to provide access to and document their own stories, we will not get enough of an accurate picture to compare this movement to previous movements for civil rights.



Please talk about how social media and other technologies have affected recent civil rights movements?

Social media has proven to be a great organizing medium because it provides individuals and organizations with the means to distribute information instantaneously. But social media is a double-edged sword because it allows for disinformation to spread just as rapidly. Social media also gives the illusion of true engagement; however, likes and follows do not change policies. In terms of garnering greater participation and fundraising, social media has been an asset to recent civil rights movements.



Learning is key to improving our knowledge; how would you suggest people broaden their education in a fair and balanced manner?

I think efforts to improve our knowledge should always begin with reading. Read as much as you can from as wide a variety of resources as you can. We cannot wait for someone else to tell us what we should know. There is simply too much information out there for us to hide behind ignorance.



What recommendations do you have for allies to help create a more inclusive and equitable environment?

Allies have to become aware of and have the courage to confront their own biases first. Allies must respect the lived experience of others even when that lived experience does not reflect their own. Doing this requires a willingness to learn and a willingness to be uncomfortable. Allies must be informed. Creating environments that are more inclusive and equitable requires honest exchange and discourse grounded in an authentic desire to be helpful and a commitment to real change- change that is intentional not just symbolic.

