

Billie Wade on Racism and the Struggle for Equality



Des Moines Valley Friends Billie Wade, right, and Peter Clay

Billie Wade is a member of the Des Moines Valley Friends Meeting and several AFSC governance bodies, including the Midwest Regional Group, the United States Program Group, and the AFSC Corporation. A writer and teacher of journaling, she's been a Quaker for four years and recently celebrated her 75th birthday with Friends. Learn more at her [website](#).

In a recent interview, she talked about her lifelong work against racism and for equality.

Understanding the trauma of racism

On the final day of the 2023 sessions of Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative), Billie gave a powerful presentation entitled “Unrelenting: The Trauma of Perpetual Racism on Black People in America.” The talk was initially given for Crossroads of Iowa in 2021. Billie is in the process of converting the presentation into a printed form with a Quaker perspective.

Billie said PTSD from racism is widespread and ongoing, including the pain of the N-word and its equivalents. She encouraged white Friends to engage in thought experiments designed to see if they could begin to imagine what Black people have experienced throughout American history - and today.

She said all reforms lead to pushbacks and retaliation, such as the case these days with Black History.

Billie quoted Jesse Williams: “Equal rights for others does not mean fewer rights for you. It’s not a pie.” Many white people believe if Black folks get more opportunity, then white folks will get less.

Black people need spaces without white people, yet whites like to invade those spaces. She gave an example of the Des Moines branch of the NAACP being sidetracked by three white men. Colorism and the preference for lighter-skinned people in hiring and the beauty industry remain a major problem.

She quoted Reverend Traci Blackmon: “It is impossible to be unarmed when my Blackness is the weapon you fear.” And, she added, “If the January 6 insurrectionists had been Black, they would have all been killed.”

Billie talked about the devastation of Center Street, the Black business district in Des Moines, where she grew up. As in other cities, white developers and urban planners destroyed Black areas in the name of growth.

Billie said she journals and sees a therapist, but she’s triggered a lot by racism. She gets angry - and she tries to remember the value of going into silence.

She said white people need to ask tough questions and listen to the answers. We all need to dismantle institutions from the inside out. We can’t live in a silo - we have to talk with each other and listen to each other. People must ask tough questions and listen to the answers. Don’t say, “Why are we still talking about racism?”

Being a “Gray Person”

Billie explained her concept of being a “Gray person” who doesn’t fit into either the Black or white community.

She faces expectations to behave in certain ways in both Black and white communities, leading to a feeling of not fully belonging to either. In the Black community, she is often seen as trying to be white or showing off. In the white community, she is expected to conform to white expectations [while](#) remembering her “place.” This endless “code switching” is draining.

Intergenerational trauma and resistance

Billie said intergenerational trauma in the Black community is prevalent and stems from historical events, such as being kidnapped from their homeland and then sold into slavery. This trauma is so ingrained that it often goes unrecognized within the community.

She discussed the historical and ongoing segregation and discrimination faced by Black people, beginning with the separation of families during slavery and the systemic barriers that continue to exist today.

Billie outlined the different levels of Black protest and resistance, emphasizing the frustration and anger that build up when initial objections are ignored. This can lead to escalation and more visible and sometimes violent protests for which Black people are blamed.

Discrimination in education and housing

Billie highlighted the disparities in education and resources between Black and white communities, emphasizing the need for equal access to quality education and opportunities for Black students. Students of color at schools in the center of Des Moines have fewer resources than their white counterparts in the suburbs.

She said that redlining and housing discrimination - despite being illegal - continue to this day. She shared an example of a Black woman whose offer on a house was withdrawn once the seller discovered her race.

A positive experience with AFSC

Billie shared her positive experience with AFSC, expressing admiration for the organization's efforts to address racism and support Black people. Being new to Quakerism and AFSC, she said she is learning a lot. She also mentioned the challenges of adequate onboarding and understanding Quaker terminology and procedures.

Billie has been asked by her local Friends Meeting to provide occasional updates on AFSC's work for peace and justice. She's very pleased to do so alongside local AFSC staff.