A message to White folks on supporting PGM ONE

During the inaugural PGM ONE in 2017, I was the woods in New Jersey with very limited internet. After a full day, I took my computer to the one spot with wireless. It was one of those balmy, East Coast almost summer evenings replete with fireflies and crickets; it was a lovely, calm evening. But when I opened up my social media accounts and saw all of the PGM ONE pictures, I got an intense sense of FOMO (fear of missing out, for you non-millennials), which is striking because as an introvert, FOMO is not something I feel very often. Nevertheless, there I was, in the woods of New Jersey, seeing photos of amazing people talking about things I care deeply about. I couldn’t help but feel jealous.

But being the pragmatist that I am, I then thought, “but really, what would it be like if I was there?” I imagined, me, a White person, walking into a space that had specifically and respectfully asked me to not be there. My feelings immediately shifted from intense FOMO to relief that I wasn’t there. Not because suddenly my desire to be with all of these brilliant people dissipated, but because imagining myself walking into that space, I could also imagine the immense harm I would cause.

I was at the familiar intersection of my feelings and my values. My feelings told me to be jealous and even frustrated that this opportunity was not available to me. And yet, my values told me that PGM ONE, a space specifically for people of color/people of the global majority, is a space that is deeply needed. In my job as a “DEI consultant” (a term I’m not in love with, but that’s for another time), I have heard my colleagues of the global majority & of color express their frustration, loneliness, fear and pain associated with being in a sector (and let’s be frank, a nation) dominated by whiteness. In a talk at the Women’s Outdoor Summit for Empowerment event in June 2017, Carolyn Finney told the audience that she’s acutely aware that as a black woman, the world was not made with her in mind. She then went on the talk about the “possibility of us,” which I interpreted as the hope and work required to carve out a space for communities who have been structurally oppressed, ignored and erased. Finney’s talk perfectly sums up the problem that PGM ONE is trying to address. PGM ONE is one of those few spaces in which it was not only made with people of color in mind, but also centers the myriad voices and experiences of people of color in the outdoors, nature, and environmental field.

So what’s up with the disconnect between my feelings and my values? Dr. Finney’s quote has been so helpful to me not only in understanding her experience as a black woman, but also to interpret my own feelings. I live in a world that was built for me; I can be seen, heard, and represented in so many different ways. So, when there is a space that is specifically not for me, I feel disoriented and untethered to a world I thought I knew. And that disorientation brings out some ugly feelings, like jealousy. Perhaps your emotional response to this is different, but us White folks would do well to remember that our knee-jerk emotional reactions are rooted in our whiteness. And it is incumbent upon us as White people to process those feelings without asking our friends and colleagues of the global majority to support us in that process.

So, if I showed up at PGM ONE after being asked to kindly refrain, I would not only be disrupting the power of the PGM ONE, but I’d be centering my feelings and my whiteness. Since the inception of PGM ONE, my feelings of jealousy have dissipated through my own
personal processing of my emotions. I now feel genuine joy for those who participate, but that isn’t to say those emotions imbued with whiteness have gone away in other settings. I have and will continue to experience those disorienting moments throughout my journey. That’s the work we White folks have to do; we have to be able to understand and process (rather than ignore) our feelings without creating undue burden on people of the global majority. And so, the simplest way you can support PGM ONE is resist acting on your knee-jerk reactions to attend the summit, do the work to interrogate where your feelings are coming from, and process in community with other White folks.

Finally, if you’re looking for more specific ways to support PGM ONE without attending, you can do the following:

- Spread the word about PGM ONE in your circles
- Like, follow, and share the PGM ONE facebook and instagram (@pgmonesummit).
- Encourage your organization to support PGM ONE by:
  - Financially supporting staff of color/of the global majority’s attendance
  - Participating in the job fair (contact Grace Anderson partners@pgmone.org)
- If you’re a leader or hold the purse strings, let the staff of color in your organization know how you can financially support their participation.
- Connect PGM ONE staff with potential sponsors. See the sponsorship kit here.
- During PGM ONE, commit to engaging other White colleagues in conversations around racial justice, whiteness, and White supremacy. (This should always be happening, but it can be a nice complement to the healing work colleagues of color and of the global majority will be engaging in during those 3 days).
- Don’t let your support of PGM ONE be your only engagement with racial justice!
- If you have a particular skill set or access to resources that may support the summit, get in touch with PGM ONE Summit Organizer Sophie Sarkar (info@pgmone.org).