

“The Spiritual Practice of Mutual Aid”

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"In times of trouble, such as the one we now inhabit, what with the burning fires and broken oceans, it is customary to ask: what shall we do? What do we do about the killing of whales or the loss of Sumatran tigers? What do we do about the plumes of toxic waste embroidering the air, and the virulent dots of pestilence and sickness infiltrating our pandemic streets? What do we do? It seems a natural thing to ask, does it not, dear? It feels self-evident, obvious, and maybe even "moral" However, it is quite emphatically not as fundamental as it seems."

– Bayo Akomolafe, *There are Always Other Questions*

“In times of trouble, such as the one we now inhabit, what with the burning fires and broken oceans, it is customary to ask: what shall we do?” writes Akomolafe.

In times of trouble, such as the summer of 2020, I, like many people across the country and across the world, asked “what shall we do” to protest the specific murders by police of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the troubling pattern of racist brutality in policing and the prison industrial complex.

In this time of greater investments of energy and involvement from folks who hadn’t been as plugged into the activism scene to that point, groups quickly organized trainings to set people up well to act as marshalls for protests to notice signs of potential harassment and ensure that the protesters were always participating to the degree of their comfort with risk. Groups organized trainings for street medics to take first steps if a fellow protester experienced dehydration or extreme heat, that hot Memphis summer, or if antagonists or counter-protesters caused physical damage.

Across many cities, including my hometown of Memphis, these protests turned into semi-permanent encampments and autonomous zones.

From the storied Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone or CHAZ in Portland, OR, to our more modest City Hall Occupied Plaza or CHOP in Memphis, tactics escalated, as did the needs for sustaining this work.

The questions we were asking shifted from “what shall we do,” to “what is in the way of what we deserve,” and “how can we build it, still, here, now?” We were asking “what is your role in building a beautiful future together?”

First, the need was for tents so that folks could maintain a presence night and day. People brought extension cords and found publicly accessible power outlets to charge phones and walkie-talkies.

Folks who couldn't spend time at CHOP dropped off food and water and masks, or sent a hopeful message.

Musicians boosted morale with concerts, and folks drew messages declaring that "Black Lives Matter" in beautiful chalk portraits.

At the protest, as a student affording rent and not much else, my role in building that place with values meant not much more than my time and commitment, keeping watch for any antagonists or folks in need overnight.

My role wasn't getting arrested when the police overtook the space; it was livestreaming to document any brutality, and it was waiting with pizza for our folks getting out of jail. Just as there are redundancies in nature, there were redundancies in roles. I was not the only one livestreaming or the only one ready to accompany those arrested for holding the space of our protest - and our redundancy meant we had multiple angles of video for better clarity and more cheerleaders supporting our comrades.

What is your role in building a beautiful future?

I see the City Hall Occupied Plaza as an example of a community centered around mutual aid, an ethos and a way of being together where you give what you can and you take what you need. Whether you can give time or food or chalk or tents or prayers or conversations with family members who do harm to marginalized communities they're not part of, and whether what you need is food or a place to stay, a moment of hope in witnessing a disparate community work to care for one another, or a strategy to live in alignment with your values and avoid stagnation, or a prayer. In a community centered on mutual aid, we all carry abundance in tandem with our need.

In his book *Mutual Aid*, lawyer and activist Dean Spade writes that "mutual aid shouldn't feel like volunteering or like a hobby - it should feel like living in alignment with our hopes for the world and with our passions. It should enliven us."

"It should enliven us."

Mutual aid, after all, is as natural as can be.

Mushrooms attach to trees for carbohydrates and provide trees with other necessary nutrients. Some figs are pollinated by wasps who burrow into the fruit to lay eggs who feed on its juice as they develop.

Smaller fish feed on the detritus of larger fish who appreciate the car wash, and small birds peck at the nuisance insects that bother larger mammals.

When Charles Darwin theorized evolution as the natural selection of the survival of the fittest, competing for scarce resources, other animal behaviorists noticed that was only part of the picture, that cooperation and collaboration are just as necessary for a species or an individual to survive and thrive.

The question might not be “what shall we do,” but “what practices of mutual love and respect can we remember for our collective thriving?”

Many mutual aid networks sprang up at the same time as the City Hall Occupied Plaza protest, but they looked very different. Maybe you’ve been part of an online Buy Nothing group for your neighborhood. One way I grew into a sense of belonging in Allston after moving up here for seminary was to join and make use of the Everything Free Allston-Brighton group to find crafting supplies and to offer furniture that no longer suited my space.

Just as you have many beautiful things to give, you honor our web of intricate interdependence by honestly owning what you need, asking for it, and taking it when given.

When I was finding my part as just one thread in the web of offerings to maintain the protest, I was fostering a new dog who grew anxious when I left at nights. Part of the mutuality of this community meant that I knew to ask for a change. I paused my overnight marshalling shifts and resourced advice for soothing an anxious pet. I sourced a large crate from one of these mutual aid networks for the times I did need to leave, and found my place marshalling again when we got to a manageable place.

Just as you have places of much great need, make space to honestly discover what you have to give and offer it. Maybe you’ve seen mutual aid through personal fundraisers through sites like GoFundMe, where community care steps in where systems have failed to protect people facing eviction, or insurmountable medical debt, or to afford funeral costs for an untimely death. The City Hall protest was maintained in the summer of 2020 when the phrase “COVID vaccine” was only a prayer. Those with great need were often working dangerous but essential jobs and needed to maintain social distance in the other places they could, rather than risk greater exposure outside of work. Those with great need were often immunocompromised, or had previous incarcerations that made their presence at a risky protest even more risky. Some people had great needs that kept them away from that City Hall Occupied Plaza.

I admire the ways these folks found ways to give, still, while honoring their needs. They supported bail funds to help beloveds out of superspreader jails, they drove by and

dropped off masks from a distance, and they supported those present with words and prayers and Signal-chat moderation.

Maybe the question isn't "what shall we do," but, as we asked in the Climate Justice Revival earlier this month "what lives at the intersection of my community's needs, my offerings, and my joy?"

Of course, all of our giving must be boundaried, for our boundaries give shape to our amorphous love so that we can share it sustainably, without getting depleted. This is a lesson I've had to keep learning for myself. What you have to offer can only be as much as keeps you in relationship, not so much that you must withdrawal. As Dean Spade writes, "That doesn't mean that mutual aid work never feels good. In fact, it is often deeply satisfying and connective, creating caring relationships, raucous celebrations, and an enduring sense of purpose...It feels good to let our values guide every part of our lives."

When I think back to CHOP, I often ask if it was successful. There were lofty goals and only semi-articulated demands, none of which have been met in the almost five years since its occurrence. But I don't know that that's the only metric to measure success.

With more folks bringing food and water than staying the night in tents, and few resources for managing leftovers, each meal was a bounty that we shared with all who came for it. We knew that the system we were protesting was responsible for the inequitable distribution of resources like food which kept the most vulnerable of folks hungry. Folks who slept near City Hall for reasons other than protest shared meals with us as we built a world of values in miniature. If it was limited, it was nonetheless transformative.

The protest ended, but the Buy Nothing groups have maintained. Mutual aid networks like Food Not Bombs and Warm Up Boston continue. And many of us hold the memories of modest meals with good company as a glimpse of Beloved Community, almost within reach.

What is your role in building a beautiful future? Whatever it may be, hold it loosely and allow it to bloom and decay and change shape. Whatever your role may be, it is one piece in a magnificent web of mutuality and interdependence - allow yourself to give, and allow yourself to receive. Whatever your role may be, may it let hope blossom and may it create new possibilities through love.