

Mutual Aid

My Mutual Aid Journey Thus Far

Jeff Kisling

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Some friends have asked for concrete examples of Mutual Aid. Can't see how to escape the capitalist system. I'll try to explain as I tell you the story of how I first got involved in Mutual Aid and what has happened since.

I've learned that mutual aid has been practiced globally for centuries. But I was unaware of what mutual aid meant until a fortunate meeting with Ronnie James last February. Several of us were holding a vigil in support of the Wet'suwet'en peoples who were trying to stop the construction of a natural gas pipeline through their territory in British Columbia. We posted the event on Facebook. Fortunately Ronnie saw that and joined us. I learned Ronnie is an Indigenous organizer with many years of experience. And that he works with the [Great Plains Action Society](#), along with other friends of mine, including Sikowis (Christine Nobiss), Trisha Cax-Sep-Gu-Wiga Etringer, and Alton and Foxy One Feather.



Ronnie and I didn't get a chance to visit much at the vigil, but he accepted my Facebook friend request. And that was the beginning of our friendship, and his patient mentoring me about Mutual Aid. One of the first things he shared with me follows.

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[NOTE: unless otherwise noted, all the quotes here are from Ronnie James]

I'm of the firm opinion that a system that was built by stolen bodies on stolen land for the benefit of a few is a system that is not repairable. It is operating as designed, and small changes (which are the result of huge efforts) to lessen the blow on those it was not designed for are merely half measures that can't ever fully succeed.

So the question is now, where do we go from here? Do we continue to make incremental changes while the wealthy hoard more wealth and the climate crisis deepens, or do we do something drastic that has never been done before? Can we envision and create a world where a class war from above isn't a reality anymore?

I was really impressed with how he expressed that. Poetic. That distilled so much of what I believe about capitalism, white supremacy and racial injustice. Capitalism is the system that can't be repaired.

So I work with a dope crew called Des Moines Mutual Aid, and on Saturday mornings we do a food giveaway program that was started by the Panthers as their free breakfast program and has carried on to this day. Anyways, brag, brag, blah, blah.

So I get to work and I need to call my boss, who is also a very good old friend, because there is network issues. He remembers and asks about the food giveaway which is cool and I tell him blah blah it went really well. And then he's like, "hey, if no one tells you, I'm very proud of what you do for the community" and I'm like "hold on hold on. Just realize that everything I do is to further the replacing of the state and destroying western civilization and any remnants of it for future generations." He says "I know and love that. Carry on."

This was how I first heard the term Mutual Aid. I also like "anyways, brag, brag, blah, blah" because I also feel a bit awkward talking about work I've done.

This is where you begin to see how Mutual Aid moves away from capitalism. "Just realize that everything I do is to further the replacing of the state and destroying western civilization and any remnants of it for future generations." Seriously. But this is a nonviolent, peaceful revolution. I mean besides the state sanctioned violence against us. The more we take care of each other, the less power they have.

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What we have is each other. We can and need to take care of each other. We may have limited power on the political stage, a stage they built, but we have the power of numbers.

Those numbers represent unlimited amounts of talents and skills each community can utilize to replace the systems that fail us. The recent past shows us that mutual aid is not only a tool of survival, but also a tool of revolution. The more we take care of each other, the less they can fracture a community with their ways of war.

I began to learn what was going on in Des Moines by following the Des Moines Mutual Aid (DMMA) Facebook page. I was intrigued by the follow Ronnie wrote, impressed that DMMA was continuing the food giveaway program started by the Black Panthers so long ago.

Happy 54th Birthday to the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. The Panthers have been a lifelong inspiration and one of the major influences on how I act in this world. The Free Food Store that Des Moines Mutual Aid helps coordinate was founded by the Des Moines chapter of the Panthers and has continued to this day. I deeply value that we get to carry on that legacy. All Power To The People.

I asked Ronnie to tell me more about Des Moines Mutual Aid.

It started as group of my friends working with the houseless camps some years back. It has now grown into a solid crew that runs a free food store started by the Black Panthers, still work with the camps, we organized a bail fund that has gotten every protester out of jail the last few months, and we just started an eviction relief fund to try to get a head of the coming crisis, in cooperation with Des Moines BLM. We have raised \$13,000 since Wednesday and the application to apply for the grants goes live this week.

Besides the food giveaway program, Des Moines Mutual Aid has built a network to respond to those who are being evicted, or forced to leave the houseless camps. There is also the bail fund to support those who are arrested advocating for change. When Des Moines Black Liberation declared a black state of emergency in Iowa, Patrick spoke at the press conference, and said Des Moines Mutual Aid fully supported that. Another project involves Des Moines Valley Friends (Quaker) meeting which allows the use of their kitchen to cook food to take to the houseless camps. In Sioux City, my friend Trisha Etringer takes personal protective equipment to those in need there.

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As I began writing about Mutual Aid, the Black Panthers and Black Lives Matter, Ronnie told me ***“connecting these dots of history to present will lay out your plan for the future.”*** One way Ronnie mentors me is to read some of what I write, and make comments like that, for which I am very grateful.

I’m hearing about all these things that are answers to so many of my questions and prayers. This sounds like the way to build the Beloved communities that I’ve longed for. At this point my question was, what am I going to do now? I both want to learn more, and offer my help. I’ve since learned one of the keys of mutual aid is this power to draw people in.

I’m sensitive to the need to be careful about inviting myself into new things. I could tell trust is very important in what Ronnie was sharing with me. In part because law enforcement surveilles and abuses its power against those who are agitating for change in various ways.

But as we exchanged messages we began to get to know each other better. When I felt the time was right, I asked if it would be OK for me to join in, he said “def”. He warned me things things moved pretty fast, but at the end of an hour and a half you’re tired, sweaty and feeling good. **And so it was.**

He told me to come to a church in downtown Des Moines at 9:00 Saturday morning. I’m not great at meeting new people, so was a little apprehensive that morning. But I also have a long history of engaging with groups working for justice, and you can always count on them being wonderful people. **And so it was (again).**

When I got there Ronnie greeted me and we went into the church basement where around a dozen mostly young, but very diverse people were beginning to distribute the food. Everyone is very careful about COVID precautions.

The basement was full of tables. And large quantities of various kinds of food in boxes and bags. The food that was past its freshness date came from local grocery stores. Sometimes vegetables were donated by farmers or gardens. And since schools were closed because of the COVID pandemic, arrangements were made with food banks to distribute that food.

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Patrick introduced himself, and told me this really was about mutual aid, and we are all encouraged to take food ourselves. And I have seen some of us taking some food. He also said we don't do a lot of telling anyone what to do. It would be some time before I appreciated this was an example of how mutual aid resists vertical hierarchies.

Forty or fifty empty boxes were set out, and we would grab food and deposit it in each of the boxes. The amount of food in each box increased steadily. I noticed that bread was put in last so it wasn't squashed. When there were pork products, those were kept separate so that wouldn't be given to families who didn't eat pork.

We started this at 9:00 and were done around 10:00. Tables were set up near the street outside the church. Once the boxes were full, we took them out to the tables.

In the meantime those who came for the food were parking in line in the school parking lot across the street. People find out about this by word of mouth. We had to be somewhat flexible as the numbers fluctuated from time to time.

One of us went to the cars, and controlled the flow to our food tables. We sorted out who was going to open the door as the cars pulled up in front of the tables. Someone else would put a food box in the car. When we had boxes of food from the government (school lunch) someone else would one of those boxes in the car. Often there are gallons of milk, which another person put in the car.

Sometimes Patrick will call for a team huddle, and we'd all circle around and divided up the tasks by volunteering.

Everyone of us is polite and friendly toward those picking up the food, as were the people in the cars toward us. I like the cars with kids in the back seat where we put the food. They always had smiles. This is a very important part of mutual aid. Recognizing it was the failure of the capitalist system that people needed help. Not their fault.

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Another important part of mutual aid is the knowledge we are in this together. At another time we might be in need of help with food. Mutual aid is not “us” helping “them”. It is definitely not charity. It is all of us being in these things together, and working to make things better for all of us.

After the last car has been loaded with food, we sanitize and take down the tables. While most of us had been loading cars, others had been cleaning the church basement. Now was the time we got to relax together. Sharing news of what others are doing. Almost everyone is involved in multiple other justice work. Someone mentions another possible source of food.

By participating in groups in new ways and practicing new ways of being together, we are both building the world we want and becoming the kind of people who could live in such a world together.

“Mutual Aid is essential to our survival” by Dean Spade, Truthout, October 28, 2020

Several times different accomplices (a term Ronnie uses that I love) have told me these Saturday mornings are the highlight of their week, as it has become for me. For the past three months I've only missed one Saturday morning.

Randomly passing an accomplice on the street and throwing up a fist at each other as we go our separate ways to destroy all that is rotten in this world will never fail to give me extra energy and a single tear of gratitude for what this city is creating.

Ronnie James

In his book, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* Dean Spade says there are three key elements of mutual aid.

1. Mutual aid projects work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need.
2. Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements.
3. Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors.

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Working to change the world is extremely hard because the conditions we are up against are severe. We cannot blame ourselves for having a difficult relationship to our work, even though we understand that learning to work differently is vital for our movements and for our own well-being and survival. We must be compassionate to ourselves and each other as we practice transforming our ways of working together.

We need each other badly to share what is hard about the overwhelming suffering in the world and the challenge of doing work for change in dangerous conditions. Even in the face of the pain that being awakened to contemporary conditions causes, all of our work for change can be rooted in the comfort and joy of being connected to one another, accompanying one another, and sometimes being inspired by each other. Reflecting deeply about our own orientations toward work— what it feels like to participate in groups, what ideas we are carrying around about leadership and productivity— is crucial to building a practice of working from a place of connection, inspiration, and joy. This means intentionally creating ways to practice a new relationship to work, and diving into the psychic structures underlying our wounds from living and working in brutal, coercive hierarchies.

Dean Spade. Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next) (Kindle Locations 1469-1481). Verso.

It is really significant that Mutual Aid is how justice groups are beginning to organize our work and invite others to work with us.

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mutual aid is the new economy. mutual aid is community. it is making sure your elderly neighbor down the street has a ride to their doctor's appointment. mutual aid is making sure the children in your neighborhood have dinner, or a warm coat for the upcoming winter. mutual aid is planting community gardens.

capitalism has violated the communities of marginalized folks. capitalism is about the value of people, property and the people who own property. those who have wealth and property control the decisions that are made. the government comes second to capitalism when it comes to power.

in the name of liberation, capitalism must be reversed and dismantled. meaning that capitalistic practices must be reprogrammed with mutual aid practices.

Des Moines Black Liberation

I've tried to illustrate some of these things in this diagram that I've been working on for over a year.

Returning to the questions Ronnie posed at the beginning of this:

So the question is now, where do we go from here? Do we continue to make incremental changes while the wealthy hoard more wealth and the climate crisis deepens, or do we do something drastic that has never been done before? Can we envision and create a world where a class war from above isn't a reality anymore?

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

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I've been asked how we can engage huge numbers of people to affect change. First, I believe the Margaret Mead quote, "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing hat ever has." I believe, and have experienced that.

And I have witnessed what Dean Spade called one of the key elements of mutual aid, "Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements."

A Google document was recently created for people to sign up for roles needed for the food giveaway each Saturday morning. That was partly done for social distancing related to the virus, and because the number of people coming to help was rapidly growing. Mutual aid projects do mobilize people. I think an analogy is going to be how the civil rights struggles of the 60's exploded with national participation.

And as noted previously, frontline justice movements are calling for creation and participation in mutual aid groups.

The greatest driver to build networks of mutual aid groups is we have no choice. It is increasingly clear our political system has failed us. Capitalism has failed us. And most of all, environmental chaos will rapidly worsen. So many tipping points have been triggered. Air temperatures will increase rapidly, resulting in severe drought, crop failures, more ferocious wildfires, stronger storms and rising sea levels.

For those friends I mentioned at the beginning who are wondering how to become involved in mutual aid, I hope this has been helpful. I think the most important thing know is to you have to be present with those you are working with. Participatory. Mutual aid can't be done from a distance. This is necessary because you have to learn new ways of being with others. You have to learn to abandon vertical hierarchies. You have to show your commitment that we are all in this together.

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*"Quakers will only be truly prophetic when they risk a great deal of their accumulated privilege and access to wealth. Prophets cannot have a stake in maintaining the status quo. **Any attempt to change a system while benefiting and protecting the benefits received from the system reinforces the system.** Quakers as much as anyone not only refuse to reject their white privilege, they fail to reject the benefits they receive from institutionalized racism, trying to make an unjust economy and institutionalized racism and patriarch more fair and equitable in its ability to exploit. One can not simultaneously attack racist and patriarchal institutions and benefit from them at the same time without becoming more reliant upon the benefits and further entrenching the system. Liberalism at its laziest."*

Scott Miller

<https://friendlyfirecollective.wordpress.com/2018/06/05/scott-miller-on-why-quakerism-is-not-prophetic/>

The next American Revolution, at this stage in our history, is not principally about jobs or health insurance or making it possible for more people to realize the American Dream of upward mobility. It is about acknowledging that we Americans have enjoyed middle-class comforts at the expense of other peoples all over the world. It is about living the kind of lives that will not only slow down global warming but also end the galloping inequality both inside this country and between the Global North and the Global South. It is about creating a new American Dream whose goal is a higher Humanity instead of the higher standard of living dependent on Empire. It is about practicing a new, more active, global, and participatory concept of citizenship. It is about becoming the change we wish to see in the world.

The courage, commitment, and strategies required for this kind of revolution are very different from those required to storm the Winter Palace or the White House. Instead of viewing the U.S. people as masses to be mobilized in increasingly aggressive struggles for higher wages, better jobs, or guaranteed health care, we must have the courage to challenge ourselves to engage in activities that build a new and better world by improving the physical, psychological, political, and spiritual health of ourselves, our families, our communities, our cities, our world, and our planet.

The Next American Revolution, Grace Lee Boggs

My Mutual Aid Story Thus Far