

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dean Spade

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Dean Spade, a writer, activist, and Associate Professor at Seattle University School of Law, where I ask him: What's mutual aid? Welcome to Getting Curious, this is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited for our guest this week, we have Dean Spade. You have spent your entire career working to build queer and trans liberation based in racial and economic justice, including--this is one of my very favorite parts of the sentence--including founding the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. Your new book is 'Mutual Aid,' which I just have to say, after having read, it starts off as mutual aid, but then it turns into this, like, stunning advice book for all things life and made me have lots of questions on how you figured all this stuff out. So anyway, how are you? And welcome to the show.

DEAN SPADE [00:00:53] Thank you. I'm so happy to be here.

JVN [00:00:55] Me too. And also, there's some very stunning natural light on your face. And you are coming to us from Seattle, right?

DEAN SPADE [00:01:02] Yes. This natural light is unusual.

JVN [00:01:05] Yeah. So I'm really happy that Seattle is having a sunny day. And, on that note, I really just want to kind of jump right in. One thing that we've talked about on Getting Curious in the past is the nonprofit industrial complex. And we've also talked about some of the ways that, you know, charities like--, sometimes it doesn't reach to the levels of the people who need it the most. And so in learning about mutual aid, I was just, like, *this* is amazing. I think what you study and what you've started is also so amazing. So just to get everyone on the same page, can you tell us what mutual aid is?

DEAN SPADE [00:01:39] Definitely, yeah. So mutual aid is the word we use for, um, the part of social movement work where we're getting together to meet people's survival needs based on a shared understanding of the kinds of crises people are facing are created by the systems we live under and worsened by them. I also think of it as being particularly important because it's often the on ramp for people in social movement organizing, like, people tend to show up to social movements because they're like pissed and scared and like something terrible is happening and they, like, need help, and then they meet other people who also think that things shouldn't happen, and then they work on it together, both directly supporting individual people in struggle and also trying to, like, get to the root causes of it.

So maybe I show up because I'm, like, facing all these horrible conditions in my housing, my landlord is neglectful and, you know, profiteering, and all these things. And I meet with, you know, people who are going to help me with my specific individual case--I don't get evicted or whatever--but also I end up joining the tenants rights movement, my city, or we work on a rent strike with all the other tenants who have the same landlord, or we can tell the same story. Like, I show up because I'm undocumented and I'm scared about what's happening, and I am here to, you know, find out what to do to protect my family if there's a raid at my job. And then I end up like getting together with other people who are undocumented and their allies and accomplices to also, like, fight to close the detention center down in our region. Like, this is, like, it's just the part of the work that is about, like, people's immediate needs, but it's tied to these like deeper transformative strategies.

JVN [00:03:05] And like, in order to do the transformative strategies, you need lots of people, it seems, like, but maybe it doesn't start with, like, lots of people. So what are some of the, like, contemporary examples of mutual aid that, like, if people are still, like, "I don't know, sounds great. Dean just said, like, a lot of words that I'm obsessed with, but I, what are some more conte-," I know for myself, I have this really annoying habit of being obsessed with, like, examples--and I hate that about myself, no I'm just kidding, I love that about myself; I need examples!

DEAN SPADE [00:03:35] Yeah. Well, obviously, I think the most visible mutual aid right now, like that's caused a lot of people to learn about mutual aid recently, is all the mutual aid people are doing around COVID. So all these really amazing projects, which people are doing, um, like, we're going to deliver groceries to people who can't leave the house because they are more likely to get sick with COVID and be really in danger. We're gonna pick up their prescriptions. People are doing so many different kinds of, like, food bank and food justice-type work that's about getting food to people in communities because people are, so many people are unemployed right now.

Fundraisers for specific groups of people who are unlikely to be getting unemployment benefits right now, like people in the sex trades, you know people who are artists, there's been all different kinds of, you know, rent funds. Bail funds have been huge. A lot of people are aware of, like, I mean, there's been this huge growth of bail funds in general the last few years as more and more people come to understand the violence of the money bail system and the criminal system in general. But then specifically this summer, when there was these uprisings and there was tons of protesters arrested, you saw the law enforcement people organizing bail funds to bail people out. There's also, like, enduring examples that aren't COVID or this summer's uprising examples, like prison letter writing projects.

Like for, for years and years and years and years and years, maybe you've heard of Black and Pink, which is a national organization that's got chapters all over, and they help people connect to writing letters with queer and trans prisoners. And it's, like, for the people receiving these letters and the friendships that get started, like a lot of queer and trans prisoners have no outside contacts, it makes them more likely to be targets when they're inside. It makes it harder for them to transition when they get out, um, because they, um, don't have any contacts. And so people are starting these relationships, and those relationships aren't just really great for, for the two people who become friends and pen pals and showing mutual support and wisdom and friendship and all of that. But also, Black and Pink has been, like, a long term leader in thinking about what's wrong with the prison system, because they have all these deep relationships, these huge networks of people with deep relationships, people inside right now, so that we can learn, like, how our queer and trans people really experiencing prison and what would be things that would help and what are, like, bad idea reforms that could make things worse for them.

So, like, this, this kind of, like, very grassroots, meeting people's immediate needs work, really, like, generates the actual wisdom of the movement about how it moves on policy issues or in terms of, like, what the next big strategies are to, like, get us out of these crises. So it's, it's very-, I mean, I could give you endless examples of mutual aid because it's happening everywhere. But I think that probably most visible these days have been the COVID and bail-fund type work.

JVN [00:06:06] So, this one time we got to interview this amazing neuroscientist. Her name is Dr. Caroline Leaf, and she talks about, like, she does this, like, visualization technique that I'm paraphrasing here. But it's basically about, like, trying to, like, undo whatever things you don't want to do anymore, like, you know, self-destructive behavior type stuff. And one thing that she does is this, like, visualization technique where you kind of are, like, visual-, like I think the rule is like you have to, like, visualize that same thing for, like, 30 days or 60 days or whatever. You're not doing like different visions like every day 'cause your brain's got to concentrate, like, on the one thing.

How does someone decide what they want to focus on or how do they even start to get involved with mutual aid or, you know, finding it or you know wanting to be involved in an organization that isn't, you know necessarily it's not a charity, it's, like, a different sort of, you know, it's a different sort of, of good, of good doing?

DEAN SPADE [00:06:59] Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, I think that, I think it's really useful for each and every one of us to try to actually go deep with something, like what mutual aid projects need to sustain is people to, like, stick around and like, like let's say

you and I are going to help try to help people in our town, their housing court. And, like, because we, we know they're not guaranteed a lawyer, there's not enough lawyers to go around, so we're going to try to help people with all the easiest issues in housing court and people who have a hard time with English or a hard time with reading or whatever. And so we up set that project. Like, we're going to want to like spend years together practicing like, like we're going to want to, like, help people and then realize, "Oh, we've been missing this whole set of people, we actually miss people who speak Spanish in here," or, we're going to be realizing, like, we're going to be like, "Oh, wow, this kind of case is too complicated for us; what would it take for us to learn that," we're gonna like--.

We want to stick around and get good at this. And, and so we can be deeply in that project, but we can also be deeply in solidarity with the other stuff going on around us, right. Because everybody who's coming through housing court, they've got other things going on like migrant justice problems, they've got transport, transportation problems that-, so we can be, like, "Oh, we're going to we're going to also show up as our project to the transit protest, we're going to also show up as our project to the migrant justice protests, we're going to also work in solidarity--"

JVN [00:08:02] Mmh.

DEAN SPADE [00:08:03] "--With the people who are doing the food banking, and we're going to ask them if they can bring food to the same spot where we need people to fill out forms for housing or whatever." Like, so, one of the things I think happens to people when they do mutual aid is that you learn more about whatever it was you were first fired up about. So maybe you knew your own experience or your best friend's experience that got you fired up. But you learn about, like, all the other things that are connected. And, of course, you know, it's all connected. And so I think that solidarity is the frame I would give that. Like, we learn solidarity skills by practicing consistently and deeply. Like, I like the story you told about the neuroscientist because it's not about a flash in the pan, it's not about showing up once. Mutual aid is actually about, like, trying to sustain, like, building new social relations, like, "How do people get food, how do people support each other?" Like, that's, that's not a kind of, like, "I show up once on a weekend." It's like, "Oh, I'm going to keep writing to this person who's in prison for years," you know, and I'm gonna still know them when they get out and think about how we can support each other, then. So it is, that's the same stuff. I do want to talk about the difference between charity and mutual aid. Is this the moment?

JVN [00:09:01] Yes!

DEAN SPADE [00:09:02] Ok, ok, good. Um, 'cause I noticed you mention a couple of times and I do think it's kind of a pivotal thing for people's thinking. So I mean, we grew up, we all grew up inside the context where charity is, like, the norm for talking about, like, poor relief in the United States and in general capitalism. It's, like, this idea that, like, you know, basically nonprofits like social service nonprofits or the government should decide kind of who's the deserving or undeserving poor people. Like, "Oh, we don't serve people who are undocumented," or, "We only serve people with kids," or, "We don't serve queer and trans people," or, "We don't serve you unless you're willing to take these meds," or, "We don't serve people if they use these drugs." Like, charity is, like, a framework in which elites, like, rich people in the government, decide which poor people get basically crumbs.

Charity frameworks are not designed to get rid of the problem. They're not designed to get to the root causes. They're designed to kind of, like, parse using these kind of rigorous eligibility criteria, like, who gets this crumb, who gets that crumb. And as you mentioned at the beginning, like, the most vulnerable people always get left out of charity programs because it's, it is the person who is undocumented, the person who's in the sex trade, it's the person who's currently doing drugs, the most stigmatized people, the person that got a felony record, the most stigmatized people get left out by design. And so charity is, like, something that sustains the current wealth distribution, whereas mutual aid is, like, politicized support that's trying to destroy the current wealth distribution and everything that's creating the current conditions.

So inside that we could look at a lot of, like, kind of cha-, characteristics of charity versus characteristics of mutual aid, like, I have a chart about it in my book. But we could see, like, in charity, there's often, like, a savior complex, like, kind of a white savior complex is the framework, but it can just be any kind of savior complex. But it's in that model of white savior complex. There's the idea that the people getting the help or support, like, there's something wrong with them and we should, like, intervene upon them. So, like, "You're poor because you need to take a budgeting class or a parenting class or you need to get sober" or whatever. That's kind of, like, that's part of the eligibility criteria; it's very paternalistic. Whereas mutual aid is like, "Oh, you're poor, you're homeless or you're in crisis because of a system that put you there and your, your dignity matters, and your choices about what and and your wisdom about the crisis from your position actually should inform how we all think about it." Right, so there's a--.

We could go on and on, but, like, typical charity models is that you've got some people who are paid, who are elites, maybe that've got high degrees and they're deciding for the poor what they need and how they should get it. Whereas mutual aid is usually volunteer-based projects and organizations and we're all just like, "Ok, like let's decide together horizontally." We don't have an ED, we don't have a boss, a CEO. We're, like, "Let's

decide together, like, what works." And, one more thing about charity is that this day and age, it's like it's PR for corporations and rich people, I mean, you know, you know, like Zuckerberg, et cetera, right. And so, so it's really a, a reframe. It's not-, mutual aid is not, is not PR for the systems that be like, wow, look at how generous! It's like, no, the distribution of wealth itself is, like, a horrible injustice, that's also, like, an artificially created nightmare, and we're here to destroy that.

So mutual aid is usually it, it might-, sometimes it's, like, stuff that looks just, like, really wonderful and generous and kind of, like, softer, like, we're delivering people's groceries. But sometimes it's stuff like we're helping people who've crossed the border illegally or we're helping people hide from the cops or from ICE, or it's often also kind of like more dangerous stuff. Like, here where I live in Seattle, we had this Occupy protest during this summer during the protests. And mutual aid is the infrastructure of those kinds of occupations. It's like tents where people are giving out like food and you know um mental health support and free haircuts. Those tents actually become the, the occupation itself and they're illegal, you know.

So mutual aid, it has teeth. And sometimes it's kind of explicitly, like, really, er, you know, at odds with the cops or like we just had a thing where in that same park, the cops tried to remove the homeless encampment that was there and people came and built barricades all the way around it and fought the cops; that is mutual aid. It's supporting the survival needs of those unhoused people, right. And sometimes mutual aid looks more, like, "I'm just getting to know the old people on my block," so that, like, when the storm comes or the lights go out, I can know who is going to like-, how we can network to support each other and make sure nobody gets hurt worse. But all of that, like I think that mainstream systems want to say charity, mutual aid are the same thing and they're really, really not. They have really different political commitments that I think are, like, very significant.

JVN [00:13:25] Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me. And I also think that a lot of times with charities, it's like-. I don't, I mean, maybe people at the highest levels of charities have more sinister things that I feel like so many of the people that get involved in charity work, the intention isn't to keep people down, it's not to keep the systems as they are, but it's kind of like that saying, like, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. It's, like, if you're trying to make things better and it seems like that would be a good thing, but sometimes it does take a deeper, more critical look. So, but because of you know mutual aid not having those, like, classic leadership structures, how would a mutual aid group deal with, like, a leadership or decision making thing if it doesn't necessarily have, like, a board or, like, a boss?

DEAN SPADE [00:14:09] Yeah. So people do it lots of different ways. My book is arguing for something that I think works really well and I think is, like, increasingly popular with people who are recognizing the limits of, of hierarchies. Basically, we organize ourselves in terms of hierarchies. When you're going to tell me just because you're the boss and you start it or whatever, how I should do this and I'm doing this work for free and I don't get any say, it's just, like, I'm less likely to stick around. So, like, the way to create mutual aid projects that are, that are dynamic, that people stay in is to have everybody have a say in how we do the work. And also those hierarchies, if we keep them, we're going to end up being the same you know hierarchies from our society, right. It's likely that we're going to end up with, like, people on top because they're older, or because they're white or because they have a degree or whatever, whereas what we really want is all the wisdom of the group to determine, like, if we were going to do it on Wednesdays, I'm, like, "I'm the boss, Wednesdays." And then you're like, "Actually Wednesdays is when the migrant business group down the block does its thing, it would be a bad idea." But if I didn't listen to you because I'm not part of that group, you know, like, I would miss the wisdom, right?

So, I can think of a million examples or how to best reach people in our community, you know with all of our wisdom is going to create the best answer. So in the book, I propose things that I've been working with mutual aid groups for two decades, practicing in different ways, just methods of making decisions together where we can still-, where we don't have to all sit down in one consensus meeting to decide, like, what kind of the, you know, poster board should be, no! We don't have to type everything as a group, but instead, how can we break into teams for particular types of decisions that are, like, implementing our big plan. And then how can we also make sure that we all have a say in our big plan and that we know what other teams are doing so we all feel co-ownership over the work and we all know we could have- and so, like, part of this is that we don't want a group where something's bothering me the whole time, but I never get a chance to say it, so I never say it and so then I explode and I'm, like, "This group sucks and I want to tear it down." We want to actually move towards people having lots of say all the time and having, like, deep participation.

And this relates to another difference between charity and mutual aid. In charity groups if you want to volunteer, which, I think what you just said about how people have good intentions, like, of course, people show up because they're, like, "Oh, my God, I'm so freaked out about what's going on under Trump and with increasing poverty and migrant justice," and they show up. And then what, what nonprofits and charities offer them is like, you can stuff envelopes or be a donor or, like, post on social media, like they offer a very thin relationship; mutual aid is a very thick relationship. Like, "I'm going to co-steward this project with you for years," because we, like, we're going to like-, and we're going to, like, develop deep skills. And I'm going to get, I don't have to have a special degree to learn

how to, how housing court works with you, you know, or to learn how to, like, talk to people about having cleaner energy in their homes or whatever. We can actually participate so much more deeply. And honestly, like, we're trying to create a society, right, in which people co-govern our lives and have a say in what happens in our lives, and we need the skills. We need to stop being, like, passive kind of observers of politics, which I think is also what, like, election politics feels like for a lot of people, it's like a celebrity slideshow kind of.

And nonprofits can do the same thing like, "Oh, those people with elite degrees who study that are going to do this, and all I can do is extend them my donation or like show up once a year to their march." Like, we want people to, like, take our lives into our hands and know how to work together and collaborate, not because we're a job and a boss is telling us we have to do it because we're choosing to work together about something we care about. I mean, I also think it just, like, breaks our isolation so many of us are experiencing in this culture, especially during COVID but before. And it breaks that sense of, like, powerlessness and alienation that I think really people feel longing for.

And this is part of why I think mutual aid is, like, the hidden truth that social movements-, like, we're told social movements are just, like, the big speeches by the charismatic people, the big moment when the law is passed. But really social movements are made up of this kind of deep collaboration, coordination, and that has been narrated out to keep us, um, passive and demobilized. So, so this kind of thick participation which I'm talking about I think, is like a deep social need for us as beings and also a deep, um, like, a method of creating the new world.

JVN [00:18:08] I think about the onset of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 80s and, and so many, that now I'm kind of realizing, like, were definitely mutual aid things, like, people coming together and helping each other and they weren't getting paid, they were doing it because of, you know-, what was that word, the phrase you said, it's, like, our common, like, necessities, like our, debt? But was that exactly what you said? It was, like, a different gorgeous phrase about our communal, like, needs. It's, like, our basic needs.

DEAN SPADE [00:18:38] Yeah.

JVN [00:18:39] So one thing that, you know that makes me think is, like, well, how does a group-, ok, well first of all, how does someone even find a mutual aid group to get a part of, especially if they're, like, in, you know, in the middle of nowhere, just, like, in a smaller, more rural place, first of all. And second of all, how does the mutual aid group determine, like, what the basic essential necessities are?

DEAN SPADE [00:19:02] Great, great questions. Yeah, so I think there are a lot of different ways to think about doing mutual aid. One is, like, you could look at existing resources, especially during COVID, people have been making cool websites. So, like, mutualaidhub.org is an example where you can go on and be, like, "Well, what's going on in my state or in my region?" And you might not find something right next to you, but you could contact-, and of course not every group is listed by any means, but you could contact groups that are anywhere near you and be, like, "What do you know that's closer to me or something?" And it might turn out there is something closer to you, 'cause some mutual aid is very much like local, it's very much-, but also there's like anyone can write a letter to a prisoner who's anywhere, right?

And there's tons of other work, like, that, like, there's, there's work that's more long distance: people doing support for, like support around mental health; a lot of that's happening online. Or support around you know queer and trans youth. So there's, there's kind of many levels, some of it's very place specific and some of it's not. So one thing is finding out who's already doing the stuff near you or who's doing this in a model you like. I spent tons of time communicating with people doing mutual aid projects that I think are interesting in other places and try-, because we're all networked. So it's, like, people who are doing like homeless encampment defense in LA are talking to people who are doing it in Seattle and talking to people who are doing it in Bellingham, and people who are doing it in New York State or whatever and so that's another part of it is, like, finding that people are doing.

A great resource for that is the, the podcast and then the website: 'It's Going Down,' which is, like, a media site. They, they list mutual aid projects, they do deep interviews with all these different mutual aid projects. You get, like, the details, like, "How they'd do it?" and, like, "What was hard and what's working?" which I really recommend. And then the other thing is just, like, it's great to start where you are, like, what are you noticing in your community? You know are you-, so it can be great to start with people who are already activated and, and work with them and learn from them and see what they're doing. But also it could just be like, "I really want to do disaster prep on my block you know, or in or in my county."

JVN [00:20:49] Ok, so I really want to zero in on this because there is so much hopelessness and despair. And, I think when there is so much hopelessness and despair, especially in light of, you know, how polarized we are politically and, like, I'm very much one of those people that's, like, "Yeah, we're polarized because there's one group that's super, like, you know, white supremacist and doesn't believe in, you know," like, when we talk about how do we decide, like, what is you know basic life needs, it's, like, you know, it, we can't come

to a common understanding when half the people, like, you know or however many percent of the people can't come to a common understanding on our history.

And I was actually thinking a lot about that lately and writing a lot about that lately. And, I've been thinking a lot--this is really non sequitur, but stick with me--about how it really comes back to this issue of education, because in public school, growing up in the United States, like, we are not taught about the fact that we are brought up on stolen land at gen-, you know- There's been several genocides that have taken-, I mean, we know way more about WWII than what we know about what happened in the Civil War, what led up to the Civil War and what precipitated even, like, what happened to Native Americans here. I mean, we just-, there isn't a lot of accountability that Americans have ever taken from its inception. So until we face so many of those things, I think that's really a lot of what's originally at the issue that the United States is facing because we haven't dealt with our past. So that's you know a huge thing.

But because we can't come to a common understanding, there is so much hopelessness and there is so much despair. And then also, you know, these fucking Republicans were, like, "We've got to heal, we've got to put- uh, it's time to move on it," which doesn't make anyone want to do anything because obviously you're just sticking your head in the sand. But, the thing that I think is beautiful about mutual aid as-, it is an inroad, mutual aid is an inroad for us to make community with each other, even if you don't agree politically, because it's about human needs and coming together.

So here's the question: a lot of people- I'm getting, you know after having read your work and spending this however long we've been together, I get the sense that you're a self-starter. No one needs to really come up to you and say, like, "You know, hey, you know, would you like to, like, Dean, would you like to-." It's, like, no, you're, like, out there trying to already figure it out. You know you are a self-starter; I am a self-starter. A lot of people see the stuff going on, they see that there's suffering, they see that. But it just feels so big and it feels so hopeless. And it's just, like, it's, like, there-, "How am I supposed to start a mutual aid thing, like, I can't even watch the news". They're, like, "I'm so, you know-," and then I was reading about, like, that cycle of injustice, like, the injustice, the apathy, the performative activism or, you know--

So how could you and your experience and all the different people that you've worked with over the years and all the ways in which you've seen people go from not involved to involved? Because also the idea with mutual aid is obviously you can't have elites helping people that have never lived it. But there's also probably people who have made it out of things and are like, "Bye girl, I got mine! I'm-, bye now, like, good luck, let me know how it goes!" So how (laughs) can people go from this kind of apathetic, like, "Oh, I don't know

want to do," to finding some of, finding some of, finding some of it to get in the fight, as Elizabeth Warren would say?

DEAN SPADE [00:24:06] Yeah, great questions. Um, I just want to go back for a second to what you were saying about, um, white supremacy and, like, the spell. I would say that white supremacy puts a spell on white people, including poor white people, um, to have aspirations to be rich. So, like, I grew up, like, working-class, you know, white, south, and rural. And the ways I see people there identify with Donald Trump 'cause they think they could be him and they don't realize there isn't actually class mobility in the United States. And so people talk about this as, like, the wages of whiteness, like, like, white people get to feel like, "Well, at least I'm white, or at least I'm not those people, or at least I'm not Black, at least I'm not indigenous, whatever, whoever it is they're hating on, at least I'm not an immigrant," or whatever they, they're being told. And then they think that means that their class interests, their interests are aligned with the white elites and they're actually not at all. And their actually, like, lives are getting worse and worse.

And so one of the questions is: how is mutual aid part of breaking that spell? And one of the things that happens to people when they are part of mutual aid projects is they end up getting political education. Right, because when we're in a politicized project saying, like, "These conditions are unfair and they're terrible, and so we're going to help everybody right now with them." We also-, and any group of people who are coming for support to mutual aid projects are different from each other in a number of ways. And so you get there and you're, like, "I'm still mad that this thing happened with my landlord," and then you meet somebody out there who also is organizing against that landlord or against another landlord or against the housing court or city or whatever. And that person is trans or that person is an immigrant or that person has a criminal record or something that you thought you didn't like. And I've seen this happen my whole life in mutual aid projects. Like, we all meet each other and we grow our solidarities because we're, like, "Yeah, we fucking hate the landlord, whatever." And, and then I, I--

JVN [00:25:46] Heh--

DEAN SPADE [00:25:47] --Can, I'm gonna-, "You're not what I thought you were like." And, or, you're like, "Oh, hey, like you know this is the thing about my pronoun," or this is the thing about, "We don't use that word talking about people with disabilities in my community, this is the word we do use and this is why." And I'm, like, open to you because I am working with you on something I deeply care about that affects me or some people I love. So that's, like, a really key piece, like the political ed part of mutual aid, which is explicitly part of most mutual aid groups. Like, "We're having, we're having a workshop today on disability justice at our mutual aid group," or, "We're having a workshop tonight

on pronouns and trans stuff and make sure that we're not, like, harming people in our group or make sure we're more open to people who are not joining our group because we haven't been good about this." So that's one piece.

The piece about how to mobilize people that you're asking, like, um and that question about the role of allies or people who are not directly impacted, like, I think this is a really important one. I think a lot of people get mobilized because they do hear about an existing project. So that's part of it. Like, it's not everyone-, I agree with you, not everyone wants to start a mutual aid project, nor is everybody, like, well suited to, like, it can be really great to just like join something that's nearby or that exists, like, anyone can write a letter at Black and Pink for example right now, you know. That can be a great way in. And, but I think that question, that emotional question, like, sometimes we talk about it in, in some groups, like,

"When did you, like, step off the sidewalk?" Like, "When did you, like, join the middle of the march?" Or, like, "When did you, you know what led you-," and I think this is, like, a deep spiritual thing for us, like, living capitalism and white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy, like, what does the demobilization feel like? What are we scared of? How are we being deskilled socially?

Like, "I'm scared to go to a meeting with a bunch of people I don't know, who are going to be different from me." Like, that's something a lot of people feel. So for me as an activist, the way I handle that is I invite people a lot and I accompany people a lot. I'm like, "I can tell you're really interested in, like, the transit politics of Seattle. The Transit Riders Union has these meetings; can I share the email with you? Do you want me to go with you?" Like. I, like, that's one thing is we can all try to be bridges or go with a friend if we're feeling, like, nervous but interested, like, just try it. And maybe before that for some people, like, immersing themselves in, listening to the 'It's Going Down' podcast and all those stories of mutual aid will help that feel within reach. And then the piece around, like, the roles of different kinds of allies or people directly affected, like, I think it's really key that we see, like mutual aid often has a lot of solidarities in it.

So, yes, everyone should be participating in mutual aid. And, inside mutual aid groups people do thoughtful work about being, like, "Oh, how do we make sure that people with the most wisdom and experience are centered in this decision-making process about this key question of whether we're going to go in this direction or that direction." Like, there's tons and tons of tools people use to make sure that, like, the wisdom of people who have direct experience is centered. But that's not about not having any people who are not experiencing it right now participate, because we actually need everyone to get mobilized. We need hundreds of millions of people if we're going to take down, like, U.S. military

imperialism, capitalism, white supremacy, like, we can't, we can't exactly say, like, we're never going to have any of those people involved.

There are those people who start a mutual aid project, and they're, like, "We're going to have an all Black mutual aid project." Excellent. Or all trans or whatever. So that's one type you can start. And you can also, you can also be part of mutual aid projects that have roles for, you know that are multiracial or across gender, across class. There's, there's room for all of this. There is so much crisis. There's so much work to be done. And the question is, like, "Oh, well, what what, what would suit for this particular need or what would, what would people this up," and that's, like, or inside some mutual aid projects then they'll have a caucus, like, "We're gonna have a Black caucus," or, "We're gonna have an indigenous caucus." Like, there's so many different ways to sort of manage the real life, different social positions we come in and the ways we hurt each other with them. But the answer to all of it is, like, more engagement, not less.

JVN [00:29:14] So, I mean, in many ways in the last, you know, two years, and I mean, it's it really is so much more than that, but-, we just I think we do have a, a-, a more unique set of challenges than what we've had at some time, because the racial injustice and the white supremacy and the transphobia and the homophobia and, like, the xenophobia and stuff, I feel like that has just been teeming for the longest. What has not been teeming for the longest is, like, all that right after a gigantic pandemic. So, I do think that, you know, mutual aid is going to play such a critical role.

And I think another thing is, is that I thought a lot about especially in 2020 is, like, had I been 17 or 25 in 2020, my life would have looked completely different because what I was going through at 17, being a young queer person in my first year outside of, you know, in the world and then at 25 contracting HIV and being addicted to drugs in the midst of a pandemic. I mean, I don't think the pandemic would have necessarily, like, curtailed my acting out or my drug use. In fact, I think it probably would have exacerbated it you know because of the instability of housing and working. And, I mean, I honestly can't imagine. I mean, I barely made it out when there wasn't a pandemic, so to be going through it and a pandemic, I don't know if I would have.

And so I think that mutual aid is that access and it is the community-building that will lift so many people out of this. So, I would-, so, so really, so the first question is in that--because it is going to be so important--who's really doing it right? And, you know, some of the things that-, like--this is gonna sound like a Midwestern read, but it's not--I love everything you say so much, like, I want people in, like, Hannibal, Missouri, to be like, "How are we going to break down the imperial military establishment of this country, you know?" I don't know if even the most liberal queer person in Hannibal knows, like, would say that quite

yet, (laughs) because there's just, like, so-, so with that is, like, I love the Seattle in you, I'm obsessed with the Seattle in you. The rest of the United States needs so much Seattle in them. So I hope this episode goes very far. But what are some of the ways--you know, as far as access to food, housing stability, the HIV social safety net--how are some of the ways that you are seeing, like, cutting edge differences in mutual aid and some of the ways that people are really doing it right in their own community?

DEAN SPADE [00:32:03] Yeah, totally. I mean, I think that, yes, one thing that I love about mutual aid is that we don't all have to be signed on to the same politics. So I'm a prison abolitionist, but I can work with you on a prison letter writing project whether or not you're there yet, right, or whether or not you're ever going to get there. But also then we can form a real relationship where we can talk about why I think that and we can try and convince each other of our views and see what happens. And so that, I think, is really meaningful. So I think, I do think it's useful for people to start with the things that they are already passionate about, because then they'll meet people that have that in common and then they might learn other things together.

Who's doing it right? I mean, some of the things that have been really inspiring to me lately, one is Critical Resistance Portland, the specific Portland chapter. Like I'm moved by the scale of their work, like they made a commitment I think last year to, to, together write a letter to every prisoner in Oregon. I don't know anyone who's done that in any state; that's incredible. And then they also made a commitment to raise money for every single imprisoned firefighter in Oregon. I'm sure you followed what's happened with the fires in Oregon this year. And so, like, that, that's, like, big scale, like, "Wow, that's so bold."

JVN [00:33:04] So Critical Resistance is, like, something that there's, like, chapters of in a lot of cities. So if you're in a city where there wasn't a chapter and you were listening to this, you're like, "Oh my gosh, that's amazing." You could be, like, "Oh my gosh, I think I love all those things and I want to do that in my community?"

DEAN SPADE [00:33:16] Absolutely. And they have, Critical Resistance has tons of tools for their chapters. And people in different chapters are doing different things. Like, in some places they're trying to fight to stop a certain prison from being built or a certain jail. In some places, they're, they're doing direct support to prisoners. I mean, they do that pretty much everywhere but Critical Resistance Portland has a particular wide scale. I've been moved by all these fridges people are putting around. Have you seen this? Where, like, people are putting in cities, like, they'll create a community mutual aid fridge and people will keep it full. So it's like--

JVN [00:33:42] Aw.

DEAN SPADE [00:33:43] --That's a really cool, like, just varied piece of infrastructure around people's food needs that a lot of people are doing. Um, I'm really moved by all the work people do to support people to get out of prison. I mean, right now, COVID, the crisis of COVID in prisons is unbelievable. So people are doing all kinds of, like, amazing protests and stuff, but also, like, direct-, being part of groups where you can, like, try to create a support team for people who could write letters to get that person compassionate release or get that person to a halfway house sooner or things like that. So people doing that kind of work.

All, in every city, there's so many more encampments of unhoused people and, in, I think, rural places, like, unhoused people are also facing crises in various ways. So there's all kinds of projects people are doing around that. Like, I've also seen people do, do, like, like, "Let's do a network for kids aging out of foster care into homelessness." So let's be, like, "Ok, you've got a room in your basement, let's have a Google Doc and just, like, see if we can-" and maybe we're coordinating with, like, a local legal aid group that knows who some of these young people are, and we're going to be, like, figuring out who can offer housing for a month, who can offer housing for two months, like, anything that's short of, like, living on the street, right.

And so just people you know, I mean I could go on and on and on, but there's kind of, like, creative problem solving that's about like instead of being like, "Well, I hope a law passes that will someday resolve this problem." It's not going to happen, you know--or to instead, like, "Well, what would actually help people, like, not get COVID tonight or not sleep outside tonight or not be hungry tonight." I mean, that's, the level of support that parents are needing right now, figuring out what we can do in our communities to, to rally around people whose kids are out of school. And there's just, there's bottomless numbers of problems. I think that, as you were mentioning, the crises are going to get worse, like, we're, we're in a severe, severe economic crisis that I think is going to continue and worsen.

We're in a climate crisis, that means there's going to be more storms, more fires, more floods and all of that. Like if we've already organized mutual aid before the next fire or before the next flight or storm or drought, we're more likely to know who's vulnerable, to be ready to organize and share resources, to have a plan to push back when the city is not doing what it supposed to do or FEMA's not doing what it's supposed to do. So the more we can just, like, actually be engaged with helping each other with basic needs, even if it's something that seems like not the most urgent thing, but feels like it just starts to connect people to being in a group together to, to working together. All of that is, like, building our infrastructure of survival.

JVN [00:36:11] So at the beginning, we were talking about you know how, like, some charities, like, "Well I'm only going to help this type of person or that type of person," and then that the idea that mutual aid is, like, "Ok, we're going to help anybody who comes here that's dealing with the same problem." So have you ever been minding your own business and then, like, you know, like, a big old Capitol Hill rioter came in and was, like, "I fucking hate these landlords, too." Like, what if a big old Trump supporter comes in and you just have to be, like, "Yeah, I'm going to help you." Like, isn't that part of what you have to be prepared to do if you're going to be, do mutual aid because you don't turn people away?

DEAN SPADE [00:36:43] Well, mostly, as I understand it, the Capitol Hill, right, are people, were all, like, upper class--

JVN [00:36:48] That was a bad example! It was a bad example--

DEAN SPADE [00:36:50] No, but it's a good example. It's a good example for that reason, because what I notice is when we go to, like, where people are really in crisis and it doesn't mean people who are there won't have, like, messed up views, like you're going to encounter racism, sexism, transphobia everywhere. But it's, but it's and I, and I think, I think everyone deserves support and help, even if they're holding those views. And it's an opportunity to engage people. And if they do things that are harmful or whatever, it's a great chance to like engage and give feedback and support. Like, I think that's how we transform people.

There's not, like, people who are racist and people who aren't. There's just like everybody. We all have a lot of gaps in our analysis, we all have ways we hurt others and don't know it. We all have things to learn and we all deserve compassion and feedback, like, including boundaries when needed. So, so, yes, whenever we go anywhere, like, if we're gonna hang out at the, at the encampment in the park and try to support people and give out food and talk to people about things they might need, or maybe they need plastic for their tents to keep it dry from the rain, we might encounter all kinds of people with all kinds of views and behavior, and how can we lovingly engage all those people and also like have boundaries and give feedback? And so that would be the same in any group.

JVN [00:37:52] Ahh. The having boundaries and giving feedback - I wish I could just, like, bring you with me all the time. I'd probably be, like, way more, like, less hateful. Sometimes, I get so mad.

DEAN SPADE [00:38:10] I think it's, I mean it's a thing in our movements is that we can be kind of um, we, one thing that mutual aid requires is actually being open to people being on a learning journey, you don't have to show up already knowing every single thing I know and we're not always that good at. We love to be the one who knows, you know.

JVN [00:38:25] I love to be the one who knows!

DEAN SPADE [00:38:27] Yes, but how do I be really, like, "Oh, there's things I don't know and there's things I remember not knowing and there's ways I've hurt people by saying stuff that wasn't cool." And so how do I just, like, be a bit more generous and be, like, "I'm trying, we're trying to bring people in and win them over and make them fight with us for life in the struggle. We are not trying to prove how I'm right right now." And that is, like, a skill issue, like, how to, like, gain that skill.

JVN [00:38:50] I think we all, well, you I feel like you're nailing that skill. I hear what you're saying, that we're not all perfect. I do feel like you are, you know, maybe just because you've been practicing for so long, you are *really* good at it. Much compassion, much patience. So we all need a little bit of a page out of your book. I, well then I have one, there is a question I was asking earlier that took me, like, 15 minutes to get the question out, it's like really mutual aid can be really small concepts all the way to really big concepts. And that's what I think I was meaning to ask; I feel like you've covered that.

DEAN SPADE [00:39:22] I, actually I want to answer that though because--

JVN [00:39:23] Yes.

DEAN SPADE [00:39:25] --This is a question a lot of people have, they're, like, when people think about something, like, "Well, this all sounds like a bunch of people doing these little projects; how is that ever going to, like, solve poverty or whatever?" And, and people often think that because we live in a hierarchical society that believes in centralization, people are like, "Well, if you're going to build your little mutual aid project here, you're going to eventually get to have the state-wide one or the national one," because that's kind of what's considered important in, like, the nonprofit world, like, the ACLU or Planned Parenthood, these, like, big groups.

That's actually the opposite of the theory of mutual aid. Mutual aid is based on the theory that we should actually have decentralized, small projects that maybe are replicating each other's best practices, but also, like, "In this neighborhood, it works best this way because there's a different culture over here," or, "In this group people like to do it like this," like, actually that there's local wisdom around meeting crises and that it's all about the people

who are in crisis. Like, they're going to say what they need and it's not going to look the same in every single spot with every single group of people. And so, and the strength is in the solidarity and networked-ness of all of these small, decentralized things, not in, like, some person in the middle or some group in the middle saying, "This is how it's done."

JVN [00:40:28] Mmh.

DEAN SPADE [00:40:29] And this is just, like, a really important reframe, that scale, like, a lot of people involved doesn't mean centralization. Actually, you can scale up better when you decentralize and coordinate. So I just wanted to say it because people ask that a lot.

JVN [00:40:41] Yes! No well-, yes! And why do we do that? Is it Miss Universe? Is it the, is it the Olympics? Is it the patriarchal capitalistic society? Is it, does that, explain-, Miss Universe *and* the Olympics? I don't even want to know! I do want to know, but--

DEAN SPADE [00:41:01] It's authoritarianism. We live, we live in a society that values authority and hierarchy and that says that-, and a, like, an acquisition, it's, like, "I have more land, I'm the king of--"

JVN [00:41:11] Mmh.

DEAN SPADE [00:41:12] "--More things, extraction, I own more workers." And that is to me the opposite of liberation. Liberation is actually-

JVN [00:41:17] Yeah.

DEAN SPADE [00:41:18] Instead of some boss or some politician far away who's never met you deciding the conditions of your life and what kind of air you breathe and what kind of housing you live in-

JVN [00:41:24] Yeah.

DEAN SPADE [00:41:25] It's, like, we de-, we co-govern our, own we, we collectively, a collective self-determination over our conditions of life. And we have deeply democratic ways of deciding things together about our neighborhood and our workplace and our schools. And that is the opposite of what we've been told is, like, how things work or efficient. And so--

JVN [00:41:42] Yes.

DEAN SPADE [00:41:43] It's like having, like authority dispersed, um, is, it's a really different framework.

JVN [00:41:50] I also, I mean, in the last two months, this idea of, it's actually so much longer than that because really in my book I talk about, like, how my whole life I've always-, I just love the idea of just something tied up into a neat package; I want to understand, I don't want it to be messy. Like, I just, I want to put it up in a package and say, "I understand that," and then, you know, I just want things to just make sense. And the more life I live, the more I realize that it, just, it is not really ever like that. It is not. And, and then I also make that, that kind of that analogy of like you know with any of the issues that we come to with mutual aid or even just having compassion and understanding for *everyone*, sometimes having compassion and love for everyone feels like having to go to the kitchen and make a salad when you want to go to Taco Bell.

Because going to Taco Bell, it's much easier to eat, you know, a cheesy gordita rage-filled crunch. You know, eat your rage, 'cause you're so fucking mad, 'cause there's all this suffering and ignorance, but really it's the salad is, like, but it's not as much of a box, like, salads are messy, you know, cheesy gordita crunch comes in a very nicely packaged box. You can throw it away afterwards. You don't have to think about it. You know, the salad is a much more, like, self-care, community, you know, loving approach to it. And it's just, it's not as simple. And I think that people, myself included, are guilty of just, you know, that human condition in this society that we've been raised in that we want to be able to make it simple and sometimes these answers just aren't simple, and it's not even *unfortunately* not simple, they're just not simple. And that's actually kind of gorgeous. It's just a reframe.

DEAN SPADE [00:43:29] Yeah, that's why your podcast is called *Getting Curious*, which is, like, my number one value for myself is being curious, like, "How can I be ok with not knowing everything yet, spend my entire life curious about what I don't know?" So, and, including, like, finding out that the way I've been doing it is not the right way or that someone else has other wisdom or that I've been actually leaving people out or hurting people, like, that value of being, like, "Yeah, I can't draw a str-, a neat line or put a simple box and then be done," like, a lot of people want to feel that way, especially about, like, "I'm not racist anymore because I read this or thought this or said this," or, "I'm not sexist anymore or whatever," as opposed to just, like, "Wow, I was shaped by these systems. I am so curious about how to undo them. And I want to study all the movements in the world to figure out how they're what they're trying, what they've tried, what worked, what didn't. And I also want to, like, find out how I, what I've missed and then have those aha moments that are pleasurable, not shameful." And that's--

JVN [00:44:24] Yes.

JVN [00:46:28] Yeah.

DEAN SPADE [00:46:29] --A loss for everyone.

JVN [00:46:29] So, yes, because I want to be, like, the adult Bronze Novice beginner, adult figure skating champion. But this must be, like, the imperialism capitalist in me still because, like, I do want to be like the United States Bronze, like, beginner level champion or at least, like, the state of Texas. What's wrong with me?! Why should I just be an adult figure skater! But I am already an adult figure skater. (pause) Yeah, maybe, what, ok, so let me pitch this to you as an end, as a, as an Olympics ab-, abolitionist. What if the Olympics was always in one city and if it was, like, a carbon neutral footprint and there was no violence or, like, exploitation? And it was in one city?

DEAN SPADE [00:47:15] Yeah I don't I don't know how that would happen, that part about the carbon neutral (laughs) and the, people are going to like get there, but, but I think that-

JVN [00:47:22] But if?!

DEAN SPADE [00:47:23] Absolutely. I'll join you in, in the fantasy. I mean, I think this thing about, like, how can everyone get to, like, participate fully in whatever they're into, that's, like, my question, you know.

JVN [00:47:35] Yeah. Because you know what it could be too, it could just be that maybe you name it a different thing, because for me, honestly, you could have, like, whoever wanted to participate from every country do it. And I would watch. If you made, like, the arena look cute with those bold colors and, like, that they do. I mean, I, I think I watched, like, 56 hours of gymnastics the last Olympics because I found the live feed like that wasn't the one on prime time. Like, I watch, like, all 8 flights, like there's like 56 teams like there were, there were certain teams from certain places where, like, I can't like, I can't still do it like the, like the not most advanced team does that I could like think about doing it into a pit sometimes.

So I was even watching girls that, like, you know, do stuff that, like, you know, and boys that do stuff on, like, you know, American high school, like, the high school cheer squads. But I still am obsessed. Like I mean, you don't need to be Simone Biles for me to, like, want to watch gymnastics, honey, I'll watch myself do gymnastics and I can barely, I can't even twist. So, yeah, I'm into that. We just need more all-level competitions for everyone. And I will be the number one fan as long as it's figure skating or gymnastics.

DEAN SPADE [00:48:45] I think this is cool too, to be talking about this and all the pleasure that you feel in this and how much it, like, how much relief it probably brings to, like, a hard day or whatever. And I was thinking about how, like, like, throwing really amazing queer parties can be something that is related to mutual aid. Like, people's isolation is, like, a huge-, like isolation, devastation, all the things people are feeling because the world we live in, like, giving people ways to connect to pleasure and and to break isolation is, is, is, like, a legitimate social need. And it's, it's a survival need. So I love what you just shared, showed me how for you, like, being able to watch people do beautiful, amazing things to their body is like part of your survival and wellness.

JVN [00:49:28] Um, wait but I didn't mean to go into such an Olympic tirade. It happens to me, like, three times a day; I don't know what my problem is. Dean, it's the part of the podcast where, you know, what, it's Yogi Recess. You wanted to open up your hips, but I wouldn't stop doing, like, Surya Namaskar A, so, like, your hips are still feeling hella tight and there's only two minutes left in class. But your answer can take more than two minutes and you don't have to say anything, but I would love for you to if you do want to-, if, what did we miss on mutual aid? What would we be remiss if we didn't get to?

DEAN SPADE [00:50:02] Um, I don't think there's something about mutual aid that I'm feeling like I wish we'd said.

JVN [00:50:08] I'd be remiss if I didn't compliment your haircut. I'm just saying at the end.

DEAN SPADE [00:50:10] My God I was just thinking about how sad--

JVN [00:50:12] Oh my God so fucking gorgeous goddamn, like, fucking gorgeous shag, like, giving me a 70s shag. It's visually very balanced and I've been loving it the entire time.

You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our guest this week was Dean Spade, a writer, activist, and Associate Professor at Seattle University School of Law.

You'll find links to his work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thank you so much to her for letting us use it. And if you enjoyed our show, please, honey, introduce a friend and show them how to subscribe. You know, sometimes people just don't know where to go to find that little icon for, like, their Spotify, or for their Sirius, or for their podcast icon, so if you could just show them, we would live.

You can also follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak.

Our editor is Andrew Carson and our transcriptionist is Alida Wuenscher.

Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, Emily Bossak, Chelsea Jacobson, and Colin Anderson.