

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 gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. And before we dive into this very special episode, can I just say: thank you so much. I love you all so much. Thank you for learning with me, thank you for tuning in week after week and supporting our work on Getting Curious. We love you, we appreciate you. Thank you for sharing our work. Just, like, from the bottom of my big queer heart: thank you. I see you and I love you. This week, we're re-airing one of our most impactful episodes, all about mutual aid. We encourage you to take a listen and then take some time to learn about mutual aid initiatives in your community. Then take another second and maybe share this episode with someone who has not heard Getting Curious yet. Without further ado, here's our conversation with Dean Spade, where I ask him: How can we show up for 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 about how you figured all this stuff out. So anyway, how are you? And welcome to the show.

DEAN SPADE [00:01:22] Thank you. I'm so happy to be here.

JVN [00:01:24] 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 [00:01:31] Yes. This natural light is unusual.

JVN [00:01:33] 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 [00:02:06] Definitely, yeah. So mutual aid is the word we use for 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—so 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, 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 in our region. 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 [00:03:30] 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 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 [00:03:57] 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 work people are doing around COVID. So all these really amazing projects, which people are doing, 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 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. 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, because they 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 with 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. 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 [00:06:22] So, this one time we got to interview this amazing neuroscientist. Her name is Dr. Caroline Leaf, and she talks 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, 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 [00:07:07] Yeah, that's a great question. I mean, 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 need some people who speak Spanish in here," 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 want to stick around and get good at this. 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, transportation problems, so we can be, like, "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 [00:08:07] Mmh.

DEAN SPADE [00:08:08] "—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 [00:09:05] Yes!

DEAN SPADE [00:09:06] Ok, ok, good. 'Cause I noticed you mentioned it a couple of times and I do think it's kind of a pivotal thing for people's thinking. 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 "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 using drugs, the person who's 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 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 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 dignity matters, and your choices and your wisdom about the crisis from your position actually should inform how we all think about it."

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 in this day and age, it's like it's PR for corporations and rich people, I mean, Zuckerberg, et cetera, right. And so, 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, 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 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, 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 how we can network to support each other and make sure nobody gets hurt worse. I think that mainstream systems want to say charity and 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 [00:13:05] 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, you know, 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 [00:13:50] Yeah. So people do it a lot of different ways. My book is arguing for something that I've seen work really well and I think is, like, increasingly popular with people who are recognizing the limits of, of hierarchies. Basically, when 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 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 and 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, 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 don't have to all sit down in one consensus meeting to decide, like, what color 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 had 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 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," like, "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, like, 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," and we're going to, like, develop deep skills. I don't have to have a special degree to learn 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 send 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, 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 method of creating the new world.

JVN [00:17:36] I think about the onset of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 80s and, and so many, what 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 communal, like, needs. It's, like, our basic needs.

DEAN SPADE [00:18:01] Yeah.

JVN [00:18:02] So one thing that, you know, that makes me think is, like, 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, you know, place, first of all. And second of all, how does the mutual aid group determine, like, what the basic essential necessities are?

DEAN SPADE [00:18:22] 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—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. 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 support around mental health. A lot of that's happening online. Or support around you know queer or 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 because we're all networked. So it's, like, people who are doing 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. 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 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? 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 [00:20:58] 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 basic life needs, it's like, we can't come to a common understanding when 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, that, like, 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, blah, 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 is it 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: 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, "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. 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 can people go from this kind of apathetic, like, "Oh, I don't know what 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 [00:23:03] Yeah, great questions. I just want to go back for a second to what you were saying about, white supremacy and, like, the spell. I would say that white supremacy puts a spell on white people, including poor white people, 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 "You're not what I thought you were like." 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 to 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, 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, 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 with 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 some groups, like, "When did you, like, step off the sidewalk?" Like, "When did you, like, join the middle of the march?" And I think this is, like, a deep spiritual thing for us, like, living in 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 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 exactly say, like, we're never going to have any of those people involved.

There are those people who start a mutual aid projects, 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. You can also be part of mutual aid projects that have roles, 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, like, what would suit for this particular need or what would, what would people this up." 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 [00:27:55] 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 in 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, 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 [00:30:36] 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, it's 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 [00:31:37] 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 [00:31:49] 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 [00:32:15] Ah!

DEAN SPADE [00:32:16] —That's a really cool, like, just varied piece of infrastructure around people's food needs that a lot of people are doing. 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, 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.

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, 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.

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, the, 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. I mean, 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 [00:34:36] 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 [00:35:09] Well, mostly, as I understand it, the Capitol Hill, right, are people, were all, like, upper class—

JVN [00:35:14] That was a bad example! It was a bad example—

DEAN SPADE [00:37:16] 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. 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 [00:36:16] Ah! 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 [00:36:33] 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 it. We love to be the one who knows, you know.

JVN [00:36:43] I love to be the one who knows!

DEAN SPADE [00:36:44] 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, "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 [00:37:07] 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. There was 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. I feel like you've covered that.

DEAN SPADE [00:37:32] I, actually I want to answer that though because—

JVN [00:37:35] Yes.

DEAN SPADE [00:37:36] —This is a question a lot of people have, they're, like, when people think about scale, they're, 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 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." 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 [00:38:54] 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 [00:39:07] It's authoritarianism. We live in a society that values authority and hierarchy. It's, like, "I have more land, I'm the king of more things, extraction, I own more workers." And that is, to me, the opposite of liberation. Liberation is actually—

JVN [00:39:21] Yeah.

DEAN SPADE [00:39:22] 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 [00:39:27] Yeah.

DEAN SPADE [00:39:28] 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 [00:39:43] Yes.

DEAN SPADE [00:39:44] It's like having, like authority dispersed. It's a really different framework.

JVN [00:39:50] 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 [00:41:19] 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?" 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 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. 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 [00:42:12] Yes.

DEAN SPADE [00:42:13] It's hard in our society. We've not been told how to do that.

JVN [00:42:15] Yeah. And for some reason, like, I mean beauty pageants are, like, very young JVN, but, like, now the older I get, the more I, like, realize, like, all the other issues about, like, figure skating and gymnastics and, like, the other things that I've been obsessed with my whole life that I'm very shaped by, but I don't want to dismantle those things. I'm still obsessed with them. We just need to fix the systemic things that made them not o-fucking-k so that everybody can figure skate and do gymnastics if they want to in a safe, gorgeous environment!

DEAN SPADE [00:42:46] I love it; I see your mutual aid project about figure skating emerging.

JVN [00:42:49] Ok, yeah, because I actually I just learned late last year, like, how problematic, like, a lot of, you know, Olympics were and stuff, because I was, like, shoving my head in an ostrich stand because I didn't want, because I, I, I, I, IIII—, it's what got me through my young queer childhood in, like, the middle of nowhere, like, I needed to watch the Olympics, skating my fantasy! It is the fantasy. I love it. I can't help. it. You know, waiting with your, but I get that it's, like, steeped in a lot of bad stuff. So we got to like open it up, get the, get the corruption out, get this systemic, all the systemic-ness that's running, because there's several. Maybe we can all just go figure skating and make fake medals?

DEAN SPADE [00:43:28] But what, I think, the Olympics is a great idea, a great example, because of course, I want to abolish the Olympics. It destroys cities it goes to, it's this horrible, you know, thing. But, like, do I want there to be, like, amazing ways to participate in moving our bodies and watching people do things they're really great at? Like, what if that was decentralized? What if that was local? What if that was really resourced? What if it included everything, like, that's a different—

JVN [00:43:52] Oooh, Olympics in every city!

DEAN SPADE [00:43:54] And maybe wouldn't call it that because, you know, people have these bad feelings about what the Olympics has been, but just this kind of, like, like, what if and also what if we moved from having everything be a spectator sport? Like, one of the things about capitalism, it tells us, like, "Those people are good at sports. If you're not that good, you just shouldn't do it." If you're not that good at music, if you're not that good at, like, basically art, sports, all these important parts of our lives, are, like, we're only allowed to be passive consumer unless you're the marketable, like, best. And that's, like—

JVN [00:44:15] Yeah.

DEAN SPADE [00:44:16] —A loss for everyone.

JVN [00:44:17] 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 can't I just be an adult figure skater! But I am already an adult figure skater. 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, left a carbon neutral footprint and there was no violence or, like, exploitation? And it was in one city?

DEAN SPADE [00:45:02] Yeah I don't I don't know how that would happen, that part about the carbon neutral and the, people are going to like get there, but, but I think that—

JVN [00:45:10] But if?!

DEAN SPADE [00:45:11] 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 [00:45:25] 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 watched, 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, 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 [00:46:33] 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, 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, 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 [00:47:11] 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 [00:47:43] I don't think there's something about mutual aid that I'm feeling like I wish we'd said.

JVN [00:47:48] I'd be remiss if I didn't compliment your haircut. I'm just saying at the end.

DEAN SPADE [00:47:52] My God I was just thinking about how sad—

JVN [00:47:54] 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. You'll find links to his work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. We reference Dean's work so much in many recent episodes, so be sure to check out our archives for more, available at JonathanVanNess.com/podcasts. 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, honey, and please show them how to subscribe. You can also follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.