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A Service by Any Other Name

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"Mutual aid is a voluntary reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit."– Wikipedia

"Mutual aid… is [to embrace] the idea that we can cooperatively reason with one another, and thereby instantiate our common inclination to build a society that benefits all without instituting any sort of hierarchy that functions to enforce such arrangements."– Nathan Jun & Mark Lance, Anarchist Responses to a Pandemic: The COVID-19 Crisis as a Case Study in Mutual Aid

"…We see also that the practice of mutual aid and its successive developments have created the very conditions of society life in which man was enabled to develop his arts, knowledge, and intelligence; and that the periods when institutions based on the mutual-aid tendency took their greatest development were also the periods of the greatest progress in arts, industry, and science." –Pëtr Kropotkin: Mutual Aid, A Factor of Evolution

A mid-November spate of below-freezing cold this year brought into relief the thin membrane between services and survival for those who, under capitalism, lack means, and this in turn got me to thinking about the notion of mutual aid.

A winter shelter program for the Columbia unsheltered, called Room At The Inn, begun 7 years ago and until this year housed by a conglomeration of churches, was delayed in their new digs this season until 28 November. That's when a loose community of volunteers – volunteers from Room At The Inn, Loaves & Fishes, Columbia Mobile Aid Collective, Operation Safe Winter, John Brown Gun Club, Como for Progress, Wilkes Blvd Methodist Church, and more – came together to staff overnights for almost two weeks of below-freezing weather so that unhoused people could sleep indoors on carpeted floors with blankets and restrooms instead of on the concrete floor of a bus station. And luckily, just when our improvised aid network was about depleted of exhausted volunteers working 4-hour shifts at 2:00 AM (and still having to report to a job the next day), the cold abated.

But then it happened all over again. On the week of Christmas, when "bomb cyclone" conditions throughout the country unleashed more cold, once again an improvised network of shelters and food initiatives powered by volunteers staffed shelters and ran gloves, soup, and handwarmers to keep people from freezing to death or losing digits to frostbite. Before the Christmas weekend, John Trapp, Operations Manager at Room at the Inn Como, remarked that either this weekend "will be remembered as our finest moment, or as the time that we went down in flames." The finest moment aspect prevailed, and like the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes in Luke 5:1–11, a situation that was at first overwhelming was handled by a city-wide care community… although not without uncertainty and confusion as well as external hardships like broken hot water tanks.

Each winter brings the fatigue and stress on our unsheltered population to the fore, but it also centers the way in which our

already-thin volunteer community is stressed and stretched to the max, and my friends and I often notice how very few in a city of over 100,000 do the work of taking care of those most at risk. Room At The Inn has a regular volunteer staff of about 30 who provide repeated weekly service throughout the winter; our soup kitchen – the Catholic Workers' Loaves & Fishes – provides nightly meals run by volunteer groups who cook once a month, but are anchored by weekly teams of "Doorkeepers" – about 14 people total – who have the challenging work of deescalation; the day shelter, Turning Point, is staffed by about a dozen volunteers who work regular weekly shifts; a mobile care collective, originated by Mid-MO JBGC but spun off to an incredibly vigorous and vital team of mostly women and now called Como Mobile Aid Collective (CoMac), serves hundreds of the unsheltered each week, but is literally staffed by under a dozen people (including a nursing team). Importantly, when it comes to the cumulative workload, there is overlap among all these groups; that is, many of the same people who volunteer for Turning Point and Room At The Inn also volunteer for CoMac and/or as Doorkeepers for Loaves and Fishes, etc. Although I could be missing some volunteers associated with additional homeless-oriented service organizations in Columbia, I figure that our pool of regular non-paid volunteer people doing this work on a weekly (sometimes daily) basis is thus around 70 people… but perhaps as few as 50.

One can certainly think, as I often do, of our homeless as the leading edge of a slow societal decline, like internally-displaced refugees, and for those of us lucky to be housed as only a few degrees of freedom or a few hundred dollars or a few decades away from not having places to live; but while this big-picture view provides a nice community perspective about the work, the "charity" look and feel of our work still nags. "Solidarity, not charity," we proclaim about our mutual aid, but the thing some of us ask ourselves is: is our mutual aid really just service under a better-sounding name? Are volunteers from privileged

backgrounds, who have warm houses and hot showers to come home to, really engaging in "solidarity" or "mutuality" by giving rides and serving food to individuals whose life belongings are contained in a few heavy-duty trash bags?

In a compelling blog piece titled *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Liberalism*,[1] Gus Breslauer, a former member of the Redneck Revolt network (to which Mid-MO JBGC also once belonged), asks just this question, saying that what we call mutual aid today is better termed "service work" instead.

"The appeal is hard to disagree with," he says, but "the truth is, mutual aid isn't a challenge or threat to the social order which produced hunger and precarity. The state is largely indifferent or even welcoming to it" – something we've certainly seen locally when Columbia city officials remark that our mutual aid group(s) can happily staff the warming centers and shower stations (which are beyond the current means of the city government, as presently construed, to manage). To me, this split between the city and the people shows an inherent dichotomous error in our notions of what citizenry and government should be… but more on that later.

Breslauer goes further to list examples of service work done by the fashy Identity Evropa, (now American Identity Movement), a rightist group that picks up trash and feeds the homeless in locations from places ranging to Orlando FL to Fort Lee NJ. "Solidarity isn't about service," says Breslauer, "it's about reciprocal defense of each other because we are in the same social position." From Breslauer's piece: "by conflating "solidarity" with service work, we risk impoverishing what solidarity actually means and feels like. It's a serious problem when we're perplexed when a worker is having a conflict with their boss/landlord over stolen wages and rent, and the best thing we think we can do is start a GoFundMe for them. If your work is visibly indistinguishable from NGOs, capitalist firms,

[1] Kropotkin's seminal 1902 work on mutual aid is titled: *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*

100,000 gave time as part of being members in an invigorated and caring mutual aid community?

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well-meaning religious groups, and even fascists, you cannot expect the political content to actually be different." Breslauer's tenet is that mutual aid projects, as presently configured, may alleviate conditions on an individual basis "many times over" – bringing to mind our own work in Columbia in repeatedly providing hundreds of individual meals each week – but that they don't build fighting organizations that challenge the source of these conditions.

It's hard to argue with these criticisms, but we don't have to look far back in time for an example of what a more solidarity-based notion of mutual aid might look like. Covid provided a window into a more grounded notion of the possibilities of mutual aid, as the centralized state, weakened under pandemic conditions, offered us a brief glimpse of the "mutuality" of things. In many US cities in 2020, including Columbia, mutual aid groups sprung up block by block; in 2020 a brief initiative called CoMo Mutual Aid and staffed by a variety of community members, worked not just with homeless and food-insecure families, but with people of means but who could not risk going out for groceries or who were not able to do their own yard work or house care. As the year went on we extended this work into an even shorter-lived effort called the Community Block Initiative – an attempt to build neighborhood pods without using the cocoonish "pod" word in the name. But as things started to settle and supply lines resumed, interest and need waned, the power of the economy and of the state seemingly lessened our need to be our own caretakers, and Como Mutual Aid and the Community Block Initiative went into dormancy. For the time being.

And that gets to the dilemma, or maybe it's a paradox, about mutual aid under capitalism: while the "we take care of us" sensibility of a mutual aid community is ever so much more nurturing than elected representatives and city councils, the power of community seems to rise only in times of necessity– in times of pandemics or natural disasters, or in locations like North and East Syria or Chiapas, when centralized systems are weak. The rest of the time, the

powers that be – of the state, of capitalism, of institutions – are so prominent that most of us can get by without working to build community. Which is better after a tiring 40+ hour workweek? Watching Netflix, or attending a weekly meeting to see which neighbor needs their lawn mowed? Sadly, it seems that the much of the time most of us are covering our heads after work, taking relief in TV or social media or gaming – understandable after working 8 hours of sometimes soul-drenching labor.

And yet, as social animals, we humans crave community. How often do we hear, after natural disasters, about how wonderful it was that people "came together" while checking in on neighbors and shoveling others' walks during an epic snowstorm. We are vitalized by helping one another! Yet the rest of the time you'd almost think that capitalism likes the bread-and-circuses way that we are sidelined and flabby and distracted from the work of taking care of each other. The libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin, who grew up in the heady street life of the Lower East Side of 1920s and 1930s New York, spent most of his life bemoaning the decline of citizenship in modern society. Describing a nightly atmosphere of meetings, protests, street fights, and public speaking on literal soapboxes in places like the Tompkins Square Park of his youth, Bookchin talked about speakers, including himself, who had to know all the nuances of thinkers like Rosa Luxemburg or risk ridicule from an inspired and knowledgeable working-class audience: "Emma Goldman lived in the neighborhood and spoke frequently in meeting halls. Eugene V. Debs, Bill Haywood of the IWW, and less luminous figures came around when they were in New York. Everyone lived on a rich diet of public lectures and meetings." One sees in Bookchin's writings how he tried to recover in (western) history the moments of community invigoration he grew up with in childhood. In what I think of as his most important work, *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship*, he traced models of decentralized community solidarity from the Greek polis to medieval Italian city states to the German and Swiss confederations of the 1200's and the 1300's to the *Comuneros* of 1520's Spain to the Paris Commune. These vital, citizen-based initiatives receded or failed as other forces became predominant, and he observed that "centralization becomes most acute when deterioration occurs at the base of society. Divested of culture as a political realm, society becomes an ensemble of bureaucratic agencies that bind monadic individuals and family units into strictly administrative structure… the city, in turn is no longer united by any sort of ethical bond." It's hard to argue right now that modern American society is not similarly in deterioration.

Does this resonate for my fellow volunteer types who brave 4-hour city council meetings or who serve on powerless citizen advisory boards? The city, we sometimes protest, should be doing more – so we might demand of them at city council meetings – but in Bookchin's view of citizenship, we ***are*** the city… we are the ones who should be doing the work… the problem is that right now there are so few of us doing it.

While those of us in the work may often feel gratified after a given shift at Loaves & Fishes or a morning soup run, for many of us the cumulative experience remains one of exhaustion… because, instead of an involved citizenry of 100,000, there's only about 70 of us. But even that doesn't really cover it, because the real problem is lack of a vigorous community-oriented society. Bookchin's point, one that I believed he gained from his childhood in the climate of New York's activism, was that participating in citizenship and community should be invigorating and connective; they should be means for us to feel more alive. Citizenship and aid that are truly mutual – not just service – are certainly a way for us to give, but should be a way for us to receive energy as well, thereby keeping the spirit of citizenship and community going instead of depleting its workers.

How do we achieve that under capitalism? I have no ideas at the moment. But how great could things be if every one of Columbia's