

Mutual Aid Dispatch

July 2, 2020

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I got a Signal message. It's a link to John Prine's obituary in *Rolling Stone*. My lover's favorite musician. I call him. He yells in rage at the president, "You killed him, you shit head! He was a legend, and you're a shit head."

I chime in unhelpfully, "It looks like he actually caught it on tour in Europe."

Silence.

"But yeah. A lot of people are going to die because of Trump though. A lot of people."

"Yeah."

I know his thoughts go to all the unhoused folks he has gotten close to over the years serving in the park, some of whom are leaning on him more heavily than ever, some of whom will likely fall off the edge. I feel like an idiot. "I'm sorry he died."

"He was a legend."

The new dispatcher looks frustrated. "I can't figure this out. I just can't find it. I'm sorry."

I screen share to help walk them through our system which has been thrown together, torn apart, and patched up again.

"No worries at all, it's confusing. We were originally on Google Voice but the account got frozen because it got flagged as spam for sending out too many texts, so now we're on text it, but that one doesn't accept phone calls, so we're moving the requests that have higher accessibility needs back to the advocacy team that will be working in google voice again... we need to set up a voicemail still... let me just show you..."

I haven't bookmarked Google Voice yet so I start to type it into the search bar and my history pops up "8 phone sex tips if you're shy..." *Fuck*. I checked the tabs but didn't clear the history. *Fuckity fuck fuck*. We both pretend they didn't see that.

I pull up to the apartment complex on the edge of a suburb, not the kind of suburb that people have escaped to, but the kind that people have been shoved out into. Tension filled food deserts. I park in front of the neighbor's house behind a truck with stickers that say "Fight Fascism" & "RESIST," I feel a little taken aback. *This* is their neighbor? When I get out of the car the conversation with the woman in the yard makes it clear that despite all the radical slogans in her windows she does not consider her developmentally disabled neighbors to be her problem. The people I am delivering food and cleaning supplies to had told me as much but I had somehow expected more "Blue Lives Matter" and less rainbow flags. First abandoned by their property manager and then unable to get any sympathy from anyone around, someone finally gave them our number. Fuck this individualistic ableist piece of shit country. Who else is being missed? I'm haunted by the thought of all the people being left to die twenty feet away from another human so impregnated by the unexamined callousness and inhumanity of our systems that they have lost all sense of responsibility for their community. I try to put the brakes on my self-righteousness. She's trapped in this dystopian hell-hole too. There is so much need and so little support. I don't know her story. Everyone is trapped. But I am angry. I want to rip that "Fight Fascism" sticker off her car. What does she think fighting fascism is?

Burger window is still open and I want a burger. Wondering if I'm cut out for this. Mutual aid takes a different kind of resilience than rally security. "Ugly bitch." "Terrorist." "What are you afraid of, take off your mask, what are you afraid of." Batons and fists and adrenaline. Fever pitch, danger, excitement. That's all well and good, but now there's this; "I'm sorry, we're prioritizing people who haven't received any aid yet.... I understand your frustration, we're doing the best we can.... Food bank boxes are only meant to be a stop gap, we'll set you up with a volunteer grocery shopper as soon as we can... I'm so sorry to hear that..." and the long, long list of desperate people in need I'm letting down...

I'm pulled out of my reverie by the guy behind the counter ringing me up who looks dazed, like he's been hit by a 2x4.

"This is just all so weird ...," he says.

Is it? We all should have seen this coming. Many people did. But here we are. He signs the receipt for me and I take the bag, wondering if it will kill me. I'm asthmatic, I shouldn't be taking the risk. But fuck me, I want a burger. I've risked tear gas and jail. I'm following good protocol, hand washing and hand sanitizer and distancing and face masks. And the burger window was still open. I feel guilty that he's even having to work and leave a \$5 tip. He says thanks and sounds grateful but also sad. It's better than nothing, but not enough.

I'm standing over my sink with tears running down my cheeks because of a meme. Little fuckers are potent sometimes. My sister sent it to me, a reminder that we don't have to be productive in the middle of a GODDAMN GLOBAL PANDEMIC (emphasis from the meme). But I'm not doing this out of a capitalist sensibility. There's just so much need. But she's right. We don't need any martyrs. I breathe and do my dishes. I feel a little better. I try not to compare my limits with others. Nurses working twelve hour days without protective gear. Oh. I feel tired.

"Where are you? I don't see you. Turn your camera on."

His face appears and we both smile big smiles.

"Hey beautiful."

"Hi handsome."

"How was dispatch?"

"I feel like I worked all day and got nothing done."

"Is that true?"

"Well, I got three people groceries. But I was just so slow today. There's so many logistics to figure out. There are hundreds of requests. We're really behind. I'm feeling really overwhelmed."

He looks at me with those big brown eyes and in that smooth southern drawl he says, "There's a Jewish saying, 'If you've saved one life you've saved the world.'"

I burst into tears again and he holds me from thousands of miles away. We spend the next few hours killing the nazis in our heads by loving each other's imperfect bodies and neurodivergent brains. We are interrupted intermittently by technological difficulties and the accompanying paranoia when the encrypted video app acts funky. I guess this is the anxious equivalent in this intense new reality to farting or hearing a roommate; sometimes it results in giggles, sometimes

frustration, sometimes fear. I wish I could kiss him goodnight. We were supposed to see each other again in a couple months at a friend's wedding, but it's been postponed. I sleep well for the first time in days but dream of state repression and converted food trucks full of bodies.

I take the following day off. I sit on the bench in the backyard and play with a slug on a mossy stick. I sleep. I take a walk around my neighborhood looking at all the shuttered businesses. I read a poem posted on a telephone pole. I vacuum. I stare into space. I stim. I update my to-do list. I check in with friends. The next morning before starting my shift I go back and peruse all of the gratitude that the team has been collecting. "I'll always remember this." "THANK YOU AND GOD BLESS" "You're angels."

I check to see what the goals are for the day. I pet my cat and drink my tea.

"Hi _____, this is _____ with the mutual aid network. We apologize for the delay! You requested aid, are you still in need?"

Post-script

This was written after the first week of the "mutual aid" project I was working with, and reading it over a few months later many of the impending issues are already apparent. These issues were not dealt with and eventually led to my resignation from working with them. In the COVID-19 moment, "mutual aid" became a buzz word adopted by many well-intentioned folks often with no real meaningful anarchist analysis, experience, or understanding of the term. I myself had only done occasional food security work (which is often being mistakenly seen as interchangeable with "mutual aid") as need arose with comrades, so, I was learning along with everyone else.

In my piece you can see all the ways that solidarity had not really superseded charity as the driving force of the work and how an air of martyrdom and white saviorism hangs over it. There are also deeply problematic ableist and capitalist underpinnings apparent in the way the project felt like it wanted to be big and impressive, and was unyielding to the human demands for rest and personal attention and support. There was a dehumanizing attitude of grinding to get the numbers when we should have immediately stopped everything to reconsider our working model when it became clear that we were overwhelmed and it was causing harm both to me, the other people I was working with, and many of the people we were supposed to be helping.

As of this writing, that project is still mired in conflict as these underlying issues were not addressed with an analysis of how systemic problems require a radical rethinking, but rather with small internal reforms that left the major issues unchanged. Certainly, some really good things came from that project, and some wonderful people are working on it, but it could have been so much better.

For me, it was another lesson in why we are trying to abolish racist, ableist capitalism; all the ways that our oppressive societal conditioning aren't addressed are poison to anything we try to accomplish. Simply put, we want to tear down this system, not just for moral or ethical reasons, but because it just doesn't work and does harm. Moving forward, I hope we all can learn from our mistakes and keep improving ourselves and our projects so we can do meaningful work that doesn't

also cause damage. Real mutual aid is a balm on the brokenness of this world and a knife that excises oppression, not a vanity project or an exercise in soothing colonizer guilt. If your project is breaking you down instead of building you up, something is wrong!

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