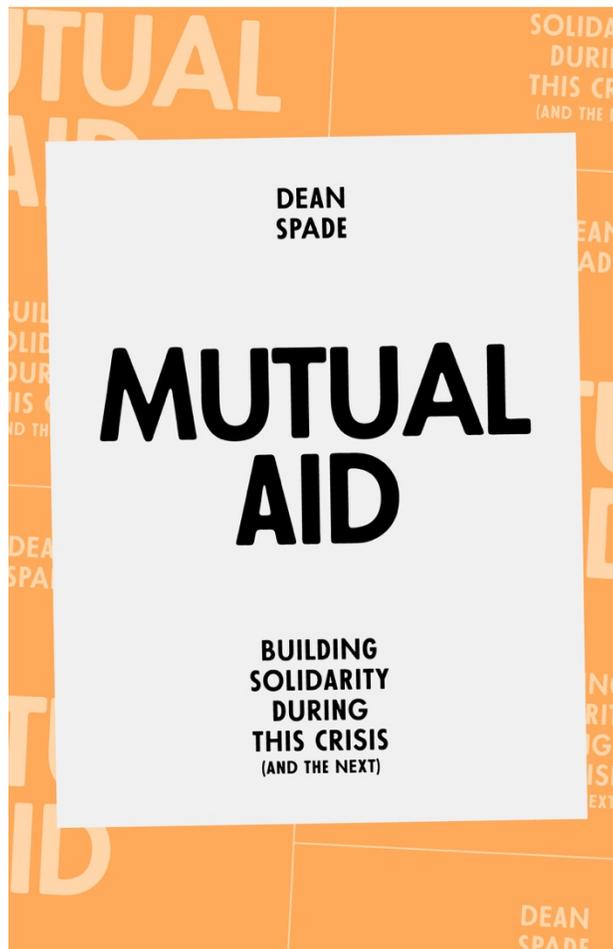


STUDY GUIDE FOR PRISON READING GROUPS AND CLASSROOMS



by Dean Spade
Verso, 2020



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Introduction and Chapter 1: Three Key Elements of Mutual Aid

1. Why is the story of the protest movement in Hong Kong's response to the COVID-19 pandemic significant to Spade's argument about mutual aid?
2. What did you learn about the Black Panther Party's survival programs? Why were they such an important part of the Party's work?
3. What other mutual aid projects, besides the ones discussed here, have you heard of or participated in?
4. Why is mutual aid so significant during disasters? Have you seen any mutual aid organizing in your lifetime, or are there historical examples you know about?
5. What does it mean to "mobilize" people? How do mutual aid projects help achieve this? What are examples of people in prisons being "mobilized" historically or in current times?
6. Spade gives the example of his experience at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. What do people learn—about themselves, about each other, about society—from working in mutual aid projects? What has your experience been like working together with others on something you all cared about?
7. Spade says that mutual aid is "inherently anti-authoritarian" and participatory. What does this mean? What kinds of actions could this lead to in the future?

Chapter 2: Solidarity Not Charity!

1. What characterizes the dominant model of "charity"? What does the charity model say about people who receive charity and people who give charity? Where and when did you learn about these ideas growing up?
2. How is mutual aid different from charity?
3. What are Spade's concerns with the non-profit system?

4. What kinds of outside organizations that engage with prisoners would you consider “charity” groups, and what kinds would you say are working on a mutual aid model?

Chapter 3: We Get More When We Demand More

1. Spade argues that governments respond to mutual aid in three ways. What are they, and how did they play out in the example he gives of Hurricane Sandy? Can you see any of these government responses in another current or recent disaster you are aware of?
2. What is the difference between Spade’s idea of mutual aid and organizing for limited reforms? What is the difference between Spade’s vision of mutual aid and community service?
3. Why would movements want to both celebrate concessions from the government and be cautious about them?
4. Spade questions whether the government can do a good job meeting people’s needs and solving problems. Do you agree? How much faith do you think social movements should have in the governments they live under? How should that shape their actions?
5. Spade suggests that people are not naturally greedy, even though many people believe that. What do you think about this question?

Chapter 4: Some Dangers and Pitfalls of Mutual Aid

1. What is an example of how social service programs, and sometimes even mutual aid projects, divide people into “deserving” and “undeserving” categories? What is the problem with that, according to Spade? How does that problem play out in the criminal punishment system?
2. Have you seen saviorism and paternalism applied to situations where people are in need? What does Spade argue is harmful about these approaches? Do you agree?
3. Spade describes how the feminist movement against domestic and sexual violence experienced co-optation that shifted many of its mutual aid projects into more traditional social services. How did that happen, and what effect did it have on the movement’s goals?
4. Why is it important to have mutual aid groups refuse to work with law enforcement?

5. What kinds of “strings” are attached to funding, and how can it create problems for mutual aid projects? Do you receiving funding is always harmful to mutual aid groups, or can there be ways to address the problems it might create?
6. Does the “Characteristics of Mutual Aid vs. Characteristics of Charity” chart remind you of real-world experiences you have had? Are there any items on the chart that don’t make sense to you or that you disagree with? What is missing from this chart?

Chapter 5: No Masters, No Flakes!

1. When you look at the “Qualities of Group Culture” chart, what looks familiar? Do you recognize some of those qualities in groups you have been in, such as schools, faith groups, family groups, friend groups, student organizations, or other groups?
2. What makes it hard to create group cultures based on mutual aid values inside prisons?
3. Why does group culture matter?
4. Why does it matter how groups make decisions together?
5. Why does Spade think that consensus decision-making is superior to hierarchical decision-making?
What seems difficult about consensus decision-making?
6. Have you ever been part of something—a friendship or a group, where you practiced consensus decision-making? What was it like?
7. Have you been to meetings that you thought were well-facilitated? What do you think makes for good facilitation?
8. What did you learn about leadership and “being a good leader” growing up? Do you agree with what you were taught?
9. When you look at the “Qualities of Leadership” chart, what qualities do you already see in yourself? What qualities would you like to cultivate? What other qualities of leadership would you add to this chart?
10. What leadership qualities are prevalent in groups you are or have been part of at school, at work, in faith communities, in prison, or in your family? What

could help cultivate qualities you think are beneficial and reduce ones that are harmful in the groups you are in?

11. What dilemmas do mutual aid groups face about raising money for their work?
12. What can help address the potential problems that handling money raises for groups?
13. When you read the section on burnout, was any of it familiar to you from your own experience, or from things you have seen in others? How does this relate to cultural messages about work, leadership, and worth?
14. What does Spade think can be harmful about burnout for both individuals and groups? What does he think can help? Do you agree? What is missing?
15. Why do you think Spade included a section on conflict in this book?
16. Did any of the tools suggested for addressing conflict stand out to you? Are there other tools you think could help groups prevent and address conflict well?
17. Why do you think Spade included a section on perfectionism in this book?
18. Do you identify with any of the behaviors associated with perfectionism? Which ones? Does anything help you when perfectionism comes up?

GROUP EXERCISES

For Individuals

1. Using the Mad Mapping materials provided by Spade in Chapter 5, make your own Mad Map for something stressful or disorienting that you have to go through regularly. Examples might include: lockdowns, the holidays, having a family member or friend in crisis, preparing for release, preparing for a parole hearing or court.
2. Write a one-minute “elevator pitch” about what mutual aid is and why it’s so important. Imagine you are explaining this to a person who has never heard of the idea before.
3. Write a two-minute “elevator pitch” explaining the difference between charity and mutual aid. Imagine you are explaining this to a person who has never heard of the idea before.
4. Write a two-sentence description of co-optation. Next, list three dangers that co-optation could pose to an organization’s starting goals. Finally, list three ways that participants can guard against these dangers using ideas from Spade’s text or your own ideas.
5. Using an example from Spade’s book, your own experience, or your knowledge of past social movements, describe one example of how mutual aid has been important to a social movement or during a crisis. How did mutual aid help communities in crisis or enable protesters? Do you think it changed how people thought about the issue or crisis? Are there ways it could have been more effective?
6. Looking at the “Working Joyfully” chart, what aspects of your own working style or work habits did you recognize? Are there areas where you would like to move toward working joyfully? How do you think you might do that? Journal for seven minutes about this and then we will discuss our impressions voluntarily as a group.

For Small Groups

1. Mutual Aid and Eligibility Criteria

We are part of a group that is organizing for release of prisoners during COVID-19. We are working with people inside the prisons in our state and with organizers outside prisons. Some people in our group think that our platform should argue for the release of prisoners only if they are not sex offenders. They think this will help avoid some of the bad media coverage that could hurt our campaign, and help politicians be more willing to take up our cause. Other people in the group think it is a problem to exclude people on this basis.

Make a list of the pros and cons of excluding people in this way. Then, discuss what alternatives might exist to excluding people that might still address the conflict and safety concerns.

2. Work Overload

We are in a group made up of people inside our prison who are working on getting a degree. At first, we primarily met for study sessions and some tutoring. However, lots of people have asked for help and now we hold regular tutoring sessions in math and science, run an informal “writing center” to help people improve writing skills, and tutor people taking the GED.

Our work grew organically, but now it’s starting to be too much for the number of group members and the time that we all have available for group work. Brainstorm together what we can do. How might we limit the work? How can we make good decisions about our limits? How could we bring in new people? What might be hard about that and how could we do it well?

3. Group Dynamics

We are in a group that is organizing to change the laws in our state that apply fees for using the courts to people who are convicted and then charge interest on those fees while they are locked up. Many people get released only to be locked up again when they fail to make the payments. We are working to change this system. Lately, there has been conflict in the group. There is lots of gossip. When people think someone is being flakey, or too bossy, or otherwise difficult, they tend to tell each other instead of the person with whom there is a problem. There is a culture of distrust growing between group members and it seems like it might blow up soon with bigger accusations. Somebody suggested we have a workshop about giving and receiving feedback directly. How would you design that workshop? What

would you want it to include? What would be a good way to make it interactive so people can learn and practice new skills? How would we get group members to want to participate when people are feeling so distrustful of each other?

4. Welcoming New People

We are part of a mutual aid group in the prison where we are. Some people in who started the group and do a lot of the work are being released soon, and we worry the project will fall apart if we don't get more people involved. Make a plan for attracting more people to this group. How would you get people to come to a meeting? How would you plan that meeting to make it welcoming and make them likely to stay for the long haul? What else would you want to do to help attract new people and prepare them to do the work well? How would you help them feel they get to co-govern the group instead of always feeling like the new people or taking on less responsibility than people who have been in the group longer?