

SEEDING SEED RELEAF: SHIFTING DOMINATOR CULTURE, ONE PLATE AT A TIME

Kris Malone Grossman BA, MFA

Abstract

How does a grassroots Covid-19 relief effort help to promote partnership culture? This article offers a first-person account of partnership values at work in Seed Releaf, a community-based organization co-founded by the author in response to local food inequity amplified by the coronavirus pandemic. Tracing the origin of Seed Releaf to partnership, Jewish, and Women's Spirituality precepts, the author describes how a single relief organization connects and supports multiple entities—restaurants, farms, community groups—while delivering nutritious meals to hungry neighbors. In addition to illustrating how Seed Releaf provides an example of everyday people working to care for one another during a global crisis, the article also addresses how Covid-19 exacerbates existing systems of oppression and further necessitates partnership in and across communities. A seven-point template offers readers a blueprint for how to replicate a Seed Releaf model in their own communities, and help to shift from a culture of domination to partnership, one plate at a time.

Keywords: partnership, partnerism; Women's Spirituality; *tikkun olam*; grassroots Covid-19 relief effort; community of care; mothers and children; care work; pandemic; food equity; systems of oppression; Seed Releaf; feminist spiritual activism

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The thought of engaging in relief work can feel downright overwhelming, especially during a global pandemic. This describes how I felt last spring, when the first Covid-19-related stay-at-home order was imposed across Northern California, where I live.

Overnight, countless people lost their jobs. Lines outside food pantries burgeoned, while across the country, hospitals and morgues overflowed. Schools and childcare centers closed, and families scrambled to respond. Businesses were shuttered, some for good, and essential workers ran a much greater risk of exposure to Covid than folks who could work from home. From accessibility issues to the disrupted food supply chain to mass sickness and death, the coronavirus and its repercussions not only amplified existing social inequities, they grievously impacted every facet of our daily lives.

At the time, I couldn't have imagined that we'd be living and dying with coronavirus well into 2021. Nor could I have imagined that a month after California's first lockdown, I would co-found Seed Releaf, a grassroots Covid-19 relief organization. A year later, we've delivered 7,000 meals and counting to hungry neighbors, and it's all thanks to partnership, which helped bring it into being.

CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

For me, March 2020 marked not only California's first lockdown, but also another milestone: the eighth and final week I'd care fulltime for my eldest son as he recovered from major spinal surgery. The work of nursing him as he healed mirrored the nonstop work of caring for an infant. Fortunately, I didn't have to choose between caring for my child and enduring economic catastrophe. I also had supportive family members, which helped ease the strain. As ever, this partnership model at work in my home, in valuing children and family (Eisler, 2002), exemplified the imperative of shifting our entire culture into one of partnerism (Eisler & Fry, 2019, p. 294), which values care work as work (Eisler, 2002), and as integral to a healthy society.

As Covid-19 began to spread across the globe, the pandemic, too, underscored the imperative to shift into partnership. The coronavirus has reified existing dominator

systems, with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, including paid care workers, experiencing the highest rates of infection and death, and women and mothers experiencing the most pandemic-related unemployment (Bernstein, 2020), along with rising rates of gender-based violence around the world (Benham, 2020). People everywhere are weathering pandemic fallout, all made worse by dominator culture, whose “free market” (Eisler, 2002, p. 222) values profit over people and their well-being.

This is apparent everywhere, including such affluent Bay Area counties as Marin, ten minutes north of San Francisco, which I call home. While Marin is one of the wealthiest counties in the U.S., 8% of its residents lived in poverty before Covid-19 (United Way Bay Area, 2017), and 24% of Marin’s children have limited access to nutrition (MarinHEAL, 2020). These numbers do not account for folks who live above poverty but in perpetual financial precarity, including women who perform both paid and unpaid care work. The pandemic has exponentially increased the strain on already taxed families, many of whom belong to communities of color. Marin’s Latinx community, for instance, comprises 16% of the county’s population, but accounted for nearly 90% of Covid-19 cases last summer (Schier, 2020). Covid-19 has also created new strains on individuals and families who had not previously been at risk for unemployment, houselessness, or food insecurity.

As the first lockdown took effect, and as food pantry lines burgeoned, I recalled the Black Panther’s Free Breakfast for Schoolchildren Program, as well as the food equity work of Canticle Farm in Fruitvale, Oakland. I wondered, How might my Reform temple community, Congregation Rodef Sholom, similarly activate to support those currently experiencing increased food insecurity? A Sanctuary Synagogue, Rodef Sholom, which translates as “pursuers of peace,” has long engaged in struggles for collective healing and liberation, forging collaborations across a range of social justice advocacy groups, from Marin’s immigrants’ rights groups to local faith- and community-based agencies countywide.

Rodef Sholom members also partner with one another to care for congregants. This includes our “Mitzvah Kitchen,” a program wherein congregants prepare hot meals and challah in our temple kitchen and deliver them to congregants in need. In fact, on the day of my son’s surgery, a Mitzvah Kitchen volunteer brought a homecooked family meal to my front door, and volunteers continued to do so for weeks. Meal by meal, community members nourished me and my family not only with food, but also with love—and the acknowledgement that parents performing care work need support—effecting Rodef Sholom’s core ethos of *tikkun olam*, or repair of the world, which is also predicated upon repair of self and community.

This theme of food, relationship, and direct action, like a challah, plaited together various strands of nourishment—practical, metaphoric, and spiritual: the heart-centered work of fortifying community. Thus, when COVID-19 hit, both spurring and amplifying hunger in both Rodef Sholom’s and the greater Marin population, it made good sense to try to put our partnerships to work by nourishing neighbors, especially when emergency food pantry lines extended for miles, and some foods distributed at pantries were often less than nutritious, often forcing hungry people to choose between eating unhealthful foods or not eating at all. The problem was, how could we safely cook meals? Between the lockdown and health protocols, Rodef Sholom could not safely operate its Mitzvah Kitchen.

As if on cue, activist-chef José Andrés, founder of World Central Kitchen (WCK), an emergency food relief organization, published an op-ed in *The New York Times* (Andrés, 2020). In the piece, Andrés describes how WCK mobilizes restaurants and their employees to get food to hungry neighbors during crises. The WCK blueprint seemed straightforward: raise money; use the funds raised to purchase meals from struggling restaurants, helping to keep their staff employed; deliver meals to where the need is most acute. It was a mutually supportive model that embodied partnership and effected

change. If we could rally folks to help raise funds, and then partner with local chefs to safely create meals in their restaurant kitchens, together we could help meet the need.

FROM SEEDS TO POSITIVE ACTION

With the WCK model in mind, and with an eye toward the burgeoning unemployment numbers in Marin, I started making calls. I already knew that many congregants were experiencing increasing need and could use nutritious meals; I learned the same was true for schoolkids at Venetia Valley School, a Rodef Sholom community partner comprised largely of immigrant families. With the help of Rodef Sholom's staff and members, I also got in touch with folks at our temple's partnering organizations—advocacy-, faith-, and community-based—as well as people working in city governments, not-for-profits, restaurants, and the food industry. With every call and every connection, I tried to learn as much as I could about how to best partner with existing entities to distribute meals to those who needed them most.

This was important, for while I actively engage in community service work, my skill set did not yet include organizing food relief efforts during pandemics, especially not with my partner and our three kids now working and schooling entirely from home. Fortunately, one item I did have in my toolkit was partnership, thanks to Riane Eisler's *The Power of Partnership: Seven Relationships that Will Change Your Life* (2002), which informs not only my doctoral research in Women's Spirituality and Social Justice, but also imbues all my work—professional, personal, spiritual—from community service to my writing to my mothering. In fact, I'd even taught a section on partnership in my doctoral program, and had also led a partnership workshop for Rodef Sholom's social justice committee, where I explicitly connected partnership with the Jewish precepts of *tikkun olam*—repair of self, community, and the world.

As such, while I laid the groundwork for what would become Seed Releaf, I approached my outreach as an endeavor in partnership. This meant partnering in order to support existing infrastructure, from local restaurant kitchens to community organizations already engaging in community care work, rather than to try to create something altogether new.

Throughout this time, I also kept in mind another partnership precept: the fact that I was already taking positive action, Eisler's prescription for handling feelings that might get us down (2002) and for making change. This was important, because endless calls, emails, and conversations often felt like they were leading to much discussion but no practicable action: all talk, no meals—and all the while, the coronavirus raged. Every day, I kept at it, tenaciously cold-calling people all around the Bay Area, from strangers to friends, inspired by the teachings and activism of such Women's Spirituality scholars as bell hooks, Jean Shinoda Bolen, and Layli Maparyan, who stress how everyday people, working together, can effect significant change. Finally, after three weeks of steady outreach, I'd lined up three community partners, in addition to Rodef Sholom, requesting meals. I had also gathered commitments from family and friends to help fund meals, and their promise to help spread the word.

Finding a restaurant partner, however, proved more difficult. While many chefs and restaurateurs I spoke with wished to collaborate, their businesses were struggling with closures, shifting safety protocols, and more. When I was finally able to partner with a chef, he called the next morning, having abruptly learned his restaurant had folded permanently. Then, one afternoon, almost a month into my effort to get a WCK model going, a Rodef Sholom friend called. She'd just spoken with a local nutritionist, another Jewish woman, Ilyse Wassermann Petter, who was also working to start up a WCK model in Marin. Ilyse, it turns out, had recently partnered with a local restaurant chef. What she hadn't yet made was a connection to an organization requesting meals. One phone

call later, and the two of us partnered to form Seed Releaf, guided by our shared commitment to *tikkun olam*. We made our first delivery of 20 meals the following week.

Since that first delivery, Seed Releaf has partnered with five local restaurants, six local food-and-meal pantries, two small farm collectives, and more than a dozen local not-for-profit organizations, as well as local and national advocacy groups, to get 7,000 meals and produce boxes to neighbors in need of support: Rodef Sholom congregants, undocumented and immigrant families, low-income and homebound elders, Marin City's majority Black and African-American community, food-insecure children, and folks across Marin. Ever since our initial delivery last spring, our core mission has continued to guide our work: partner to support hungry neighbors and local restaurants affected by Covid-19, and help to shift culture from domination to care and partnership, one bountiful plate at a time.

We do this by partnering with local farmers through F.E.E.D. Sonoma, California's first ever employee- and farmer-owned cooperative, which helps heal Earth and end harmful farming practices, including worker exploitation. We do this by partnering with the Canal Alliance, PlayMarin, and the Multicultural Center of Marin, which support Marin's communities of color. We do this by partnering with schools to get meals directly to schoolchildren, which supports families affected by school closures, which impact children's access to food. We do this by partnering with local restaurants, helping them keep their workers employed. We do this by partnering with the recipients of Seed Releaf meals, offering only freshly-made dishes prepared with care. We do this by partnering in the Jewish community, folks across a range of identities, from Jews of color to LGBTQ+ Jews to single Jews and more. We do this by partnering from a heart-centered place that aims not only to unravel dominator culture, but to forge a culture of care, which acknowledges the interconnectedness of all liberation struggles, from #MeToo to Black Lives Matter to the Global Indigenous Movement and more.

PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION: SEVEN STEPS TO IMPLEMENT A SEED RELEAF MODEL IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Seed Releaf, while an expression of partnership values, is also the product of the dominator culture it aims to help shift. After all, cultures of care see to it that people are fed, housed, and provided health care—especially during times of crisis. Until such time that we live in a culture of care, however, in which the philanthropic model is rendered obsolete, it is incumbent upon those who have access to resources to partner with self and community in order to forge social change. Replicable models like Seed Releaf make it easier for those with resources—money, time, community connections, and more—to do so, even during a pandemic. If you are looking for a way to make an impact, I invite you to consider starting a Seed Releaf effort, partnering with self, community, and the world. Here are seven ways to get started near you:

1. Partner with small, local restaurants. This helps small business stay open and keep workers employed through pandemic times, and ensures the safety of the meals, which chefs and their teams prepare in restaurant kitchens.
2. Partner with local farmers committed to sustainable practice, helping to shift dominator systems inherent in conventional farming, from employment to ecology, while bolstering farms devastated by restaurant and other business closures.
3. Partner with existing community-based organizations, which articulate need from within. This helps effect a hierarchy of actualization (Eisler, 2002, p. 70), wherein community leaders empower one another by facilitating care, rather than reproducing the helper-helped paradigm, which reinforces systems of domination, especially during crisis. This concept is also known as allyship and solidarity work, or working in relationship *with*, rather than *to*.

4. Partner with meal recipients. Offering freshly-made, nutrient-dense, and safely prepared meals conveys respect and care.

5. Partner with friends, family, and community. Encouraging folks to contribute their time and treasure, at any level, invites broader participation, cultivating opportunities for people across a range of social locations to co-create a community of care.

6. Partner with chefs to create plant-based dishes, so that no one receiving a meal must compromise her or his values in order to eat. In so doing, you are also partnering with non-human animals and Earth's ecology.

7. Partner with one another. Bring an openness and eagerness to listen and learn, and to remain self-reflexive. Call in people with diverse knowledges and skills, which is conducive to forging vital and generative collaboration. And remember, start small. Every meal makes an impact; every plate forges change.

CONCLUSIONS

Riane Eisler writes that small actions really can be a “pebble that sends ripples throughout humanity in greater waves” (Eisler, 2002, p. 208). My heart tells me that, like the pebble, every Seed Releaf meal makes an impact. Here's why: Last summer, a recipient of a Seed Releaf lunch shared that she looked forward to our meals, not only because they're hearty, but, as importantly, because they are also beautiful, which made her “feel seen” and “cared for.” The same day, one of our restaurant partners shared this: Owing to her Seed Releaf partnership, she was able to keep her business open and her employees paid. Together, we'd created a circle of care.

It is through community partnerships like Seed Releaf that we can all edge closer to a world in which everybody might feel similarly seen and cared for—a world wherein every

person, like every seed, has the opportunity not only to survive, but to grow, to flourish, and to thrive.

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Kris Malone Grossman holds a B.A in English from UC Berkeley and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Sarah Lawrence College, and is currently an advanced doctoral student of Women's Spirituality at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Her work has been anthologized in *The Maternal Is Political: Women Writers on the Intersection of Motherhood and Social Change* and *Dirt is Good for You*, and has appeared in *Re/Visionist* and the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, among other

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publications. She makes her home in Northern California, where in addition to managing Seed Releaf she researches women's art praxis, raises her kids, and writes feminist literary fiction.

Correspondence about this article should be addressed to Kris Malone Grossman at krismalonegrossman@gmail.com.