



Narrative

The community food centre: Using relational spaces to transform deep stories and shift public will

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Abstract

COVID-19 has revealed deep inequities in our food system. As goodwill and charity from this crisis disappears, and emergency supports begin to dwindle, we can anticipate increased food insecurity amongst Canadians. Rising food prices and unemployment will drive a lack of access to fresh nutritious foods for already stressed and vulnerable individuals.

As a community organizer who has advocated for poverty reduction and food justice over my lifetime, I understand the short-lived nature of change that occurs without public will and engagement - policy wins end up being removed in the next election cycle. My experience with party-dependent advocacy projects has led me to ask the question: how do we build the kind of public will that demands access to healthy and nutritious food as not an individual responsibility but a public duty, much like universal healthcare?

In writing this paper I intend to draw upon my experiences in organizing to explore the deeper cultural and internal shifts that may need to occur to inspire public will and create change that lasts beyond a single election cycle, and the opportunity that COVID-19 presents as Canadians grapple with questions about food security and poverty in an unprecedented time. I will connect with three community members I advocated with in my time doing placebased community organizing, all with different experiences of food insecurity, and use a storytelling approach to imagine a more effective way of advocating for just food futures.

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Introduction

To tell a story appropriately, my Indigenous friends and elders have taught me to always ground the reader or listener in the reality I emerge from. *Salam* (peace), my name is Syma. I am Punjabi, descended from ancestors who lived in agriculturally-based communities in the Indian sub-continent, in an area located in what is now known as Pakistan. I was born and raised on Treaty 6—the traditional lands of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people in what is now known as Edmonton, Canada. For my entire life, I have had one foot planted in the radical collectivism that my ancestral culture fosters and the other in the expressive individualism of the dominant culture. This bi-cultural experience has long fostered my curiosity about deep stories: the metaphors and assumed truths that shape how people view relationships, accountability, and responsibility.

For many years now, food has been at the center of my exploration of deep stories, and I come by my activism in this realm honestly. Growing up, good food was valued above all else in my home. I was raised on a traditional diet of foods that were slow-cooked, sprouted, fermented, and made from scratch. I now know what an immense privilege that was (although back then I would have traded anything for the popular cookie and frosting recess snack of Dunkaroos to fit in with my peers)! I helped butcher my first chicken when I was eight, happily grew carrots to share with our neighbours, and helped my mother as she prepared delicious dinners for family friends. Even though family health crises shifted us from being a working-class home to one that often struggled to make ends meet, my mother always knew how to feed a crowd and build a community around nourishment. My father would often proudly declare, “you might not have toys or nice shoes, but I will always make sure you’ve got good food in your bellies.”

In my late teens, I found myself living alone, going to university full time while working thirty hours a week at a minimum wage job and scraping by. I turned to cheap subsistence foods to make up for the time poverty and temporary financial poverty I was experiencing, and in the years that followed I was diagnosed with a chronic illness. My pathway back to health was grounded in turning back to my traditional foods—cooking with nutrient-dense ingredients, soaking and sprouting grains and lentils, using all parts of the animal, and using plenty of warming spices. My body healed, my mental health improved, and I was shocked at how these changes so quickly impacted my ability to thrive. As I was clumsily learning to cook the foods my mother prepared so effortlessly, I worked with marginalized youth who faced their own mental and physical health challenges. With the hubris that only a young woman in her early 20s

could have, I set out to “save” these youth, believing that if only they knew how to eat well all their problems would be solved.

This was my first foray into the complex intersectional experience of food insecurity. My experience as a broke university student from a family that fell onto hard times was very different than the intergenerational poverty of a young Indigenous trans man I worked with, who was living in care on a fixed income, disconnected from his food traditions and sense of autonomy. As I worked over the years with many different communities considered “barriered,” I came to realize that the people I supported had similar relationships to food as many of my friends, mentors, and the general population. Most people I knew were disconnected from food sources, lacked basic food preparation skills, and had a palate geared toward ultra-processed foods, even if they were not considered marginalized. More often, it seemed that what really kept the people I worked with from being able to access nourishing food was income and barriers related to income. A person living on disability benefits might know how to make a smoothie, but how can they make that smoothie at home when the nearest grocery store is a forty-five minute bus ride away, they can’t afford transit, a bulk bag of frozen berries costs a quarter of their grocery budget for the month, and seventy percent of their monthly income is spent on rent so that they can’t afford a blender?

My work in community has taught me two things; first, food is a profound modality for whole health and belonging that every person deserves to have full access to, regardless of income. Second, a charitable approach to food insecurity is insufficient without a commitment to economic justice. As an advocate and community organizer, I believe that policy change focused on poverty reduction is fundamental to create thriving, food-secure communities. I have supported policy initiatives connected to tax reform, social assistance indexing, and Universal Basic Income. However, policy without public will is subject to the whims of the party in power, as I have learned by witnessing the success and subsequent removal, without any uproar, of many initiatives that put food on people’s tables. Public will, as I understand it, is the way individuals in a nation or community perceive an idea that impacts them collectively, and their sense of agency in being able to affect the realization of that idea. These ideas could be as simple as reducing the speed limit on a street where children play, or as complex as universal healthcare. Public will has the potential to radically inform political will. It requires citizens to feel that they are valuable in a democratic system, to be able to imagine possibilities beyond the realm of their current reality, and to have the tools to actively participate in advocating for the realization of their vision. My experiences witnessing policy initiatives so blithely removed at the turn of an election cycle has led me to ask the question: what does it take to build the kind of public will that holds that every person is entitled to good food in the same way that they are entitled to universal healthcare here in Canada?

In the remainder of this paper, I propose two methods for creating this public will: first, to fundamentally shift a deep story of how we understand food insecurity and to move from a transactional charitable model to one that is rooted in community, solidarity, relationship, and equity. The second method is to create spaces for this deep story to flourish through relational

activism. I use a storytelling approach and draw upon my experiences doing this kind of relational work in a progressive food movement that strives for economic justice. I also offer the perspectives of three visionary activists I worked alongside during that time. They have consented to their names and words being used. From their stories emerge an ethos of mutual aid and interconnectedness that shapes their bigger-picture activism, and it is this relationality that I believe is key to transforming our food systems from the bottom up.

From 2016 to 2019 I had the great pleasure of being on the founding team of The Alex Community Food Centre (CFC) in Calgary, Canada. It is part of a growing network of community food centres across the country, and it is a beautiful and dignified space that focuses on increasing access to nutritious food, providing cooking and gardening classes for people to learn and share their skills, and advocating for change at a systems level to make good food easily available for all. The Alex CFC is unique in its approach—every aspect of the space was designed first and foremost with dignity, belonging, and community in mind. From the welcoming Nordic-inspired design of the building to the seated meal service, or the bright coffee station where neighbours can fill up one of the many charming, mismatched mugs, it is a place that encourages people to sit down, slow down, and connect. Volunteers and people accessing services are all called community members, and a concerted effort is made to level the power dynamic between these groups.

The deep stories about food insecurity in this culture are often embedded within the responsibility and moral failure of a person living at or below the poverty line. We are often able to pass judgement from afar on people experiencing poverty, or, if we feel compelled to help in some way, it is often through a lens of charity. At The Alex CFC, I watched as the design of the space and programming transformed many people who came in as volunteers, intent on “helping,” into allies focused on understanding and solidarity. This is not to romanticize or gloss over the very real power dynamics that still existed—economic privilege, colonialism, racism, heteronormativity, and patriarchal values were things we struggled with every day—but, as volunteers and community members built relationships that were grounded in sharing meals and stories together, it became harder for those who were more economically privileged in our community to see people experiencing poverty as moral failures. Instead, I watched as honest conversations led to volunteers going on the very same journey that I had in my own understanding of food justice—realizing that for many the road to eating well is fraught with unimaginable obstacles, and that not being able to easily access nutritious food further entrenches these obstacles. This understanding was fundamental in facilitating a major paradigm shift for many of these volunteers, increasing their desire to support advocacy initiatives that focused on income security rather than merely a charitable approach to food security.

The community I worked alongside frequently commented on the stark contrast between their experiences in traditional food charity spaces and their experience at a food centre. Poverty can be a deeply isolating experience, and in that isolation some people internalized the idea that their food insecurity was a shameful personal defect, rather than a structural failure. Many times over, I witnessed how community, camaraderie, and conversation supported movement out of

that shame, sometimes resulting in a desire to take part in community advocacy. For some, disempowerment and shame about their own experience of poverty stifled their sense of agency around shifting systems. Sharing meals and building relationships with peers who were activists working on poverty reduction initiatives facilitated a shift in that story, and supported them in recognizing that their lived experiences were vitally important in shaping and forming government policy.

To enter a community food centre is to momentarily live in a reality that values dignified nutritious food access as a basic human right, without the humiliating dance of means-testing, lines, dented cans, and wilted produce. I believe this embodied experience of a different way of approaching food has the power to change a person's deep story about the food system, as people begin to recognize the power of food to transform community health. Their story about the food system changes, and, as it does, the idea that every person deserves equitable access to food in the same way that every person deserves equitable access to healthcare begins to germinate.

I have rarely encountered a Canadian who believes that universal healthcare is unnecessary. It is a source of pride for people who live here. The belief that people deserve adequate, free access to quality healthcare emerges from a deep story our culture holds about the collective good that such a service provides. Our ability to recognize healthcare as a basic human right means that, regardless of where people sit on the political spectrum, we have collectively agreed to resource this basic human right in order to ensure the health of everyone. In my time at The Alex CFC, I witnessed many community members recognize the collective good that access to fresh, nourishing food provides, and, in turn, I saw the public will of our tiny community shift toward the belief that food should be a basic human right. Participating in this different reality allowed all community members to understand why the current system is failing us, and to feel emboldened to believe in a different vision. I believe that facilitating spaces to create these shifts in public will across income levels and lived experiences is a powerful way to build a sustainable movement. When a critical mass of people can see how and why food security and economic justice are beneficial, not just to individuals but also to our collective well-being, our public will has the power to shape political will to create long-term change that does not shift based on the party in power.

This perspective, focused on community, solidarity, relationship, and equity, was embodied by many community leaders and advocates in the space. Tracy Ray, Dion, and Julie are some of those leaders. I connected with them during two separate conversations in 2020 to talk about how to shift public will around complex policy issues. We connected over our shared deep stories and how we believe those deep stories shape public will. They all stressed that what we do matters much less than the why and the how. The following is what they offered.

The Story of the Circle: Interviewee #1 and Interviewee #2

“There’s a point at which, from a poverty angle, eating “bad food” becomes a huge distal stressor – by [distal] I mean people know they should eat healthier and can’t buy good food, so they settle for less. It’s in your mind and it’s a constant worry, and you have to live in poverty to understand what that worry feels like. You’re constantly rationalizing the choices you’re making. If the general public understood that these were the mental processes people go through every day, they would never put up with this shit. They would never allow governments to not help people.” Tracy Ray

Tracy Ray and Dion are both committed to empowering their communities with traditional Blackfoot, Metis, and Cree teachings. Tracy Ray is a fierce community advocate, with lived experience of poverty and a keen sense of justice and intellect. Her levity and gentle sense of humor make her a powerful activist. Dion is a skilled facilitator, who brings care and compassion to her work with Indigenous mothers and community members as the Indigenous Program Coordinator at The Alex CFC.

My conversation with these two community leaders was grounded in the deep story of their traditions of radical interconnectedness, where food possesses life force and humans are not separate from this life force when consuming it. Instead, we are part of a circle, a cycle of life that continues to perpetuate abundance. This circle is baked into the ontological design of traditional communities—from the medicine wheel to the way that people feast together, in a large circle, hearts to the fire. The circle speaks to the value of removing hierarchy—there is no head in a circle, and instead respect and priority are focused upon the knowledge keepers and the elders. To this day, Dion and Tracy Ray keep the tradition of the circle alive when they gather with others.

The circle is grounded in values of, as Dion put it, “kindness, caring, and sharing”—a view of the world that is fundamentally based upon living relationally rather than in transaction with one another. This was the point that Dion and Tracy Ray stressed to me repeatedly as we discussed advocacy. Unless we retrain our minds and hearts to view life’s work as connection in relation to others, we will not make progress on any pressing social issues, least of all hunger. Both were hesitant to name any singular root cause of an unjust food system—their worldview is based in complexity rather than in black and white thinking—but both also agreed that, if pressed to name one root cause in our current context, it would be the disintegration of relationship.

As our conversation turned to advocacy and systems level changes, Tracy Ray offered this reflection:

Everybody needs food every day. When you start having an issue with this necessity, this is where isolation begins. Now you’ve gotta find food instead of participating, or you gotta stay home because you don’t have enough energy or enough food to share. When you’re isolated, people start speaking for you, you automatically start losing your voice right

there from the first time you are a little bit food insecure. You start not being able to do what other people can do, who have had their basic right of being fed met. We have to at least start to solve at the basic needs level, especially food – it’s one of the most unnecessary problems in society, and it could barely even exist in a traditional Indigenous society unless there was a great natural disaster. And even if there was, people would share harder.

As we discussed proposed poverty-reduction policy solutions, such as Universal Basic Income, adjustments to income support, or tax reform (which Dion and Tracy Ray are both familiar with and have advocated for), there was agreement that Indigenous worldviews support and encourage a robust social safety net. Resources were never meant to be hoarded, and anything that serves as medicine for a people, whether it be food, housing, or money, is always meant to flow freely. This mindset of abundance and trust is part of the story of the circle. Our challenge, they said, was honoring these tried and tested ways of being and offering abundance to everyone.

The Story of *Barangay* and *Kapwa*: Interviewee #3

“*Kapwa* is how we relate to each other. Tagalog is contextual, the “thing” is defined by others surrounding “it.” English is individualistic, the opposite. *Kapwa* is what we call each other but we are not ever alone, we are always together with others. *Kapwa* are folks in our community who are also part of our closer community circles. *Kapwa* is a concept that we use to describe our community’s unique virtues, I guess. It is part of mutual obligation of togetherness.” (Julie)

Julie’s Filipinx roots profoundly inform her involvement in social causes. She is a powerful advocate for food justice in this city, and when I first met her we bonded over our shared desire to leverage the buying power of communities to purchase nutritious whole foods in bulk. When we connected to chat, it was not surprising that there was a deep story of the notion of mutuality in our conversation; as she mentions above, the linguistics of her traditional culture make it difficult for her to conceive of the world in any other way. From the deep story of *Kapwa* emerges the model of *Barangay*, a social structure that fosters a sense of accountability to one another by creating small, interdependent units of community.

Although the notion of *Kapwa* runs strong even among the diaspora, Julie reflected that the Filipinx relationship with food has been profoundly impacted by Spanish colonization. The majority of the Filipinx diaspora is twice removed from the land—first through urbanization in their home country, and then through the process of migration. When people gather, it is not so much about the food traditions as it is about the spirit of togetherness and community that persists in spite of colonization and displacement.

An avid urban vegetable gardener, Julie grew an abundance of produce in her front yard in the summer of 2020. When her community group came to visit outdoors, she would educate them on how to use greens that grow in this climate in traditional dishes. She reflected with laughter that, when she sent people home with these greens, they would proceed to split the bounty with their own friends and family. In her community, nothing is “mine,” and this philosophy extends to more than just food—goods flow freely between households within the social contract of *Barangay*.

As a person who has been a passionate advocate for food and income security, Julie reflects that something feels fundamentally missing from the fabric of the broader Canadian support system:

You go here for your food, you go here for your clothing, let's spend all day travelling to go talk to someone else about this. You don't know any of the people you encountered and spend so much time trying to meet your needs that you don't have time or energy for anything else.... In *Barangay*, everyone has a role and takes care of each other. We ask ourselves: who's not here? Who's not eating? Whose kid needs shoes? Then we invite them over, we feed them, we give their kid a pair of shoes...and we never expect anything in return. There is no tit-for-tat.

For Julie, *Barangay* relieves the crushing pressure of individualism in the dominant culture, and it is a value she tries to foster not just in her ethnocultural community, but in her neighbourhood as well. Success, for her, looks like creating opportunities for generosity with her neighbours, where the stress of keeping score is removed, and people share without pressure.

Barangay and its fundamental principle of *Kapwa* have been critical in mobilizing Julie's Filipinx community on a number of crucial advocacy issues, and have supported complex community conversations about LGBTQ+ rights, youth mental health, and so much more. The value of mutuality has allowed for the complexity and messiness of being in relationship. When I asked Julie what role her traditional deep stories have to play in advocacy, she reflected to me that advocacy work in many activist circles often seems transactional: people are asked to sign a petition, come to this rally, or write to their MLA. There is a quality of relationship that she observes as missing from civic engagement and advocacy work. What would happen, she wonders, if we started first with a meal shared or a garden grown together? Julie believes that the very nature of civic engagement would change if the value of *Kapwa* was the soil from which public will grew.

Conclusion

In speaking with Julie, Dion, and Tracy Ray, I was struck by the commonalities in both conversations, especially the call for doing advocacy work from a foundation of trust and relationship and moving away from transaction. I can attest to the power of this relational method. When I worked at The Alex CFC, much of my work was focused on community advocacy, and for three years I worked alongside community members and facilitated training for community organizing with people who had lived experience of poverty. We worked to strengthen a network of basic income advocacy in our province, increase voter turnout in the community, and engage local politicians around the issue of food insecurity. We built relationships with each other and did the work while laughing over a meal or digging up carrots in the garden. If I had been an outsider, bringing in petitions or proposing letter-writing campaigns without first getting to know the community, I would have been laughed out the door!

Our activism at The Alex CFC was rooted in relationship. Because of this, we knew what made it difficult for people to participate in advocacy work, and we worked to alleviate those barriers. Children were welcome, and there was a room for them to play and often a volunteer to provide childcare, bus tickets were available for those who needed them, and there was always a warm meal to eat as we worked on community action. This accessible, relational way of doing activism work meant that the community could work on advocacy related to food and economic justice through more traditional activism, as well as through artistic endeavors like spoken word poetry, visual art, storytelling, and, in the case of a very motivated group of teenagers, a hip hop music video that demonstrated the power of solidarity over charity (What Feeds Us YYC, 2017). I learned through my work that, as a person's deep story about food justice changes, it's important to have a place and a plan to channel the energy that comes with that paradigm shift. Facilitating a space that focuses on building a community of people intent on creating change did two things: it created an infectious energy that more people wanted to be a part of, and it built relationships and peer support that helped people realize that they were not alone in wanting these changes. This was the foundation of our justice work, and although I no longer work at The Alex CFC it delights me to see that the relationships and spirit of activism are still strong in community members, who call to check in and offer each other mutual aid as the COVID-19 pandemic rages on. I am confident that, as the urgency of this crisis abates, this community of activists will continue their big-picture poverty reduction work.

The isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us about what happens when our notion of community disintegrates, and we are left to handle crisis alone. However, having worked for so many years to facilitate communities of radical belonging, I see opportunity in this crisis. We are being forced to confront the myth of extreme individualism, recognizing the interconnectedness of our health as we try to fight a virus that thrives on the inequity of our structures. The deep stories that we hold as a culture are capable of shifting and changing. My conversations with Julie, Dion, and Tracy Ray reflected a hopefulness that COVID-19's

magnifying glass on the ramifications of structural inequalities will change our deep stories about collective responsibility and mutuality. As food insecurity continues to grow because of increased income insecurity, we simply no longer have a choice. We also have a long road ahead of us. Charitable food systems make for more heartwarming news stories than activism around tax credits, indexing income support to inflation, and adequately resourcing people so that they can feed each other instead of relying on food banks. Over the course of this pandemic, increased reliance on emergency food access, while important, has been a distraction from the greater inequities that foster this reliance to begin with. It is more important now than ever to build relationships in spaces that challenge the charitable paradigm and shift our deep story about food systems to one of solidarity—one where a person's ability to eat is not predicated upon the mercy of another.

As we work towards a just food future, whether we are academics, frontline workers, farmers, researchers, chefs, or advocates, I believe we need to start asking ourselves: how might we facilitate a shift in the deep stories about food insecurity that we hold in ourselves and allow to exist in our institutions? How do we create relational activist spaces that allow for our work to come from a place of radical solidarity, mutuality, interconnectedness, and care? How do we learn from the traditions and cultures that still hold onto these values so that we can move beyond our own cultural paradigm of transaction?

Dion, Julie, and Tracy Ray might argue that the entire structural transformation starts and ends with food. It starts with sharing meals in a circle, building relationships with people we view as other, and finding our sense of togetherness—the *Kapwa*. It continues in our social contract of community care—growing and cooking food to share and building strong and robust ways of checking in on each other that reduce dependence on charity and create a sense of collective duty and responsibility for each other. It ends with diverse communities of people of all socioeconomic backgrounds recognizing that a robust and dignified food system is not just nice to have, it is necessary for public health, and we are obligated to invest in and support every community in building the appropriate structures for this to happen. My experiences of what Dion, Julie, and Tracy Ray offered to the community at The Alex CFC affirms this approach. Public will shifts as we are able to see and imagine a different way of being in the world. Places like The Alex CFC, that both embody a vision of a food system rooted in justice and solidarity and provide space to bring more people into the vision through activism and advocacy, will lead the transformation of the food system that we seek.

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