On April 4, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a speech at Riverside Church, where he said, “On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act ... True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

Whether it is a function of faith, values, or belief that our rights and freedoms are inextricably tied with each other, King affirms our shared responsibility to creating a more just society. He challenges those engaged in social justice to push beyond the “initial act” of flinging the coin and balance addressing people’s immediate needs with tackling the root causes of those injustices. The process through which we do so must be rooted in compassion and empathy for others who share the road with us.

King’s strategy for change can be powerfully explored through the movement of food sovereignty. At its core, food sovereignty is based on the autonomy and self-sufficiency of marginalized communities within a local food system. It both addresses the immediate needs for healthy, culturally appropriate foods and aims to fundamentally change inequity in food systems. Within the context of volunteering, food sovereignty raises the following critical questions for us to wrestle with: How do we build relationships between communities rooted in accountability and trust through service? How does service operate in relationship to movements for systemic change?

APPETIZER

Instructions
Cultivating compassion is a mighty task. Listening is an important first step. Listening generously to the needs, strengths, and experiences of others can root volunteering in partnerships that follow the lead of people directly experiencing injustice. But, like many things in life, generous listening is a skill cultivated through practice. So let’s get started. Find someone in the room that you have not had the chance to connect with yet. Read together the following excerpt from Krista Tippett’s book, “Becoming Wise: An Inquiry Into the Art of Living.” Collectively define generous listening and practice it using the questions after the text.

Generous listening is powered by curiosity, a virtue we can invite and nurture in ourselves to render it instinctive. It involves a kind of vulnerability— a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity. The listener wants to understand the humanity behind the words of the other, and patiently summons one’s own best self and one’s own best words and questions...

If I’ve learned nothing else, I’ve learned this: a question is a powerful thing, a mighty use of words. Questions elicit answers in their likeness. Answers mirror the questions they rise, or fall, to meet. So while a simple question can be precisely what’s needed to drive to the heart of the matter, it’s hard to meet a simplistic question with anything but a simplistic answer. It’s hard to transcend a combative question. But it’s hard to resist a generous question. We all have it in us to formulate questions that invite honesty, dignity, and revelation. There is something redemptive and life-giving about asking a better question.

Questions
As you answer the following questions, we encourage you to practice generous listening.

- Describe a time when you did not feel heard. How did that experience impact you?
- Describe a time when you listened to someone but did not make them feel heard. What could you have changed about that interaction?
- What are some things you can do to move beyond the listening stage?
Framing

Food sovereignty is about creating a system and process around self-determination and ownership. To support food sovereignty, service programs that address hunger, fresh food availability, nutritional education, and so on, must operate in close relationship with and accountability to the community. Today, we’ll explore the practice of generous listening that builds those relationships and allows us to follow the lead of Black, Latinx, and indigenous communities on the front lines of the fight for food justice.

Instructions

As a whole group, watch and read the following approaches to food sovereignty by Black food justice leaders Devita Davison, Malik Yakini, and Leah Penniman. Then get into pairs to discuss the guiding questions. Practice generous listening- "a willingness to be surprised, to let go of assumptions and take in ambiguity"- with both the texts and your partner.

Let’s start with establishing shared language around the concept. Read out loud this working definition of food sovereignty.

The right of peoples – especially farmers – to define their own agricultural and food systems. Food sovereignty demands that the policies and mechanisms involved in production, distribution, and consumption of food focus on creating ecologically sustainable systems and healthy lives for people, rather than profits for corporations.

We encourage you to continue to build on this definition throughout your discussion this evening.

Guiding Questions

- Which of these texts resonate with you and your experiences? Which of them challenge you?
- What are obstacles to practicing generous listening when volunteering in communities that may lack food sovereignty?
- How does generous listening create space for building relationships between communities through service?
- How can we follow the lead of community members that are directly affected by issues of food injustice?

ENTREE

Adapted from the 2007 Nyeleni Declaration of Food Sovereignty.

Latinx is a gender neutral alternative to Latina and Latino.
Devita Davison of FoodLab Detroit, “Nothing about us, without us, is for us”

Devita Davison is the director of FoodLab Detroit, a community of food entrepreneurs committed to making the possibility of good food in Detroit a sustainable reality. FoodLab designs, builds, and maintains systems to grow a diverse ecosystem of triple-bottom-line food businesses as part of a good food movement that is accountable to all Detroiters.

WATCH AND LISTEN: “Nothing about us, without us, is for us” from the start of the clip to minute 5:15.

Malik Yakini, “Working in Communities as Partners, not Missionaries”

Malik Yakini is a founder and the Interim Executive Director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, which operates a four acre farm in Detroit, and spearheaded efforts to establish the Detroit Food Policy Council, which he chairs.

WATCH AND LISTEN: “Working in communities as partners, not missionaries”
"4 Not-So-Easy Ways to Dismantle Racism in the Food System" by Leah Penniman

1. Discriminatory Policies Stripped Black Farmers of Their Land

The amount of farmland controlled by African Americans has consistently declined from a high point around the turn of the 20th century.

Uphold everyone's right to land
After decades of discrimination by the federal government, Black farmers have lost almost all of our land. Reparations for past harm are the first step to justice.

2. We’re Exploiting the People Who Feed Us

While those who run U.S. farms are overwhelmingly white, the roughly 3.5 million people who do the day-to-day work of growing and harvesting food are not.

Honor the people who grow our food
The U.S. does not provide a living wage, health care, or labor protections to the farmworkers who feed us. It’s time to update the law and stop exploiting agricultural workers.

3. People of Color Tend to Lack Access to Healthy Food

The problem doesn't stay on the farm, but extends into the stores where Americans buy our food.

Eliminate Food Apartheid
Communities of color have less access to life-giving, healthy food, resulting in high rates of obesity and diabetes. Policies and actions that boost community control are part of the answer.

4. Federal Farm-Support Policies Still Leave Out People of Color

Even today, U.S. government policies designed to ease the difficulties of farming disproportionately benefit whites.

Take the $2 billion-a-year Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers to let some land go unplanted.

Many farmers of color are excluded because they don’t grow “commodity crops” like corn, wheat, and barley—and only land formerly planted with such crops is eligible.

Support Farmers of Color
Access to education and start-up funding remain barriers for aspiring farmers of color. Some federal programs have made progress, but need more funding to meet the scale of the challenge.

Leah Penniman is a farmer and educator at Soul Fire Farm in the Albany, New York area, a farm committed to ending racism and injustice in the food system. In her article, Leah Penniman analyzes how racism manifests in the United States’ food system. Through the following excerpt and four infographics, she:

1. Identifies one aspect of this larger systemic issue
2. Shares data further illustrates how communities of color are being impacted.
3. Offers a solution.

Our food system needs a redesign if it’s to feed us without perpetuating racism and oppression. The communities at the frontlines of food justice are composed of Black, Latinx, and indigenous people, refugees and immigrants, and people criminalized by the penal system. We need to listen before we speak and follow the lead of those directly affected by the issues.
As we started with the practice of listening externally, let’s conclude with listening internally. The following piece by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Britain, looks at the role of listening in Jewish tradition:

“Judaism is a religion of listening, not seeing. That is not to say there are no visual elements in Judaism. There are, but they are not primary. Listening is the sacred task. The most famous command in Judaism is Shema Yisrael, ‘Listen, Israel.’

It takes training, focus, and the ability to create silence in the soul to learn how to listen, whether to God or to a fellow human being. Seeing shows us the beauty of the created world, but listening connects us to the soul of another, and sometimes to the soul of the Other, God as [God] speaks to us, calls to us, summoning us to our task in the world. The Shema invites us to listen to the voice within ourselves and within our neighbors.”

Write an intention for either of the following questions:

- How will you cultivate a posture of generous listening as you serve in communities?
- How will you explore what it means to serve in solidarity?

Share your intention with the table.