

Life As It Is

Episode #10 with Shelly Tygielski

“The Radical Power of Just Showing Up with Shelly Tygielski”

May 25, 2022



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James Shaheen: Hello and welcome to *Life As It Is*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. On March 14, 2020, just after COVID was declared a national emergency, meditation teacher and activist Shelly Tygielski wanted to find a way to support her community in South Florida. She created two simple Google forms—one to give help and one to get help—and shared both on social media. The next morning, each form had over 500 responses from around the country, and the mutual aid organization Pandemic of Love was born. Since Pandemic of Love’s conception, the organization has connected over 2 million donors with individuals and families in need and has responded directly to global crises including hurricanes, mass shootings, and the ongoing war in Ukraine. Just this past month, Shelly returned from the Poland-Ukraine border, where she was supporting Ukrainian refugees displaced by war. In today’s episode of *Life As It Is*, my co-host Sharon Salzberg and I sit down with Shelly to discuss her work in Ukraine, the history of mutual aid movements, and the radical power of just showing up.

James Shaheen: So I’m here with self-care activist and trauma-informed mindfulness teacher Shelly Tygielski and my co-host, Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Shelly. Hi, Sharon.

Shelly Tygielski: Hi.

Sharon Salzberg: Hi.

James Shaheen: It’s great to be with you both. So Shelly, the last time we had you on the podcast, we spoke about your work in mutual aid and the organization you started at the

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beginning of the pandemic, which is called Pandemic of Love, and it got a lot of attention. Can you share a bit about how you came to be involved in mutual aid?

Shelly Tygielski: Sure. So I started getting involved in mutual aid incredibly informally. As a person who was a community organizer and a leader of a meditation community in South Florida, a community that was really pretty vibrant and growing by leaps and bounds week after week, I got to know a lot of the people that were in our community. I realized that a lot of these individuals have things that they need, sometimes financial, sometimes something as simple as a ride to meditation on Sunday mornings, and there were people in our community that were able to fill that need for them. What I realized was that if I could just be the matchmaker and then step out of the way, we could start to build and weave these beautiful tapestries of what I call communities of care, where we bring people together, create these safety nets, remove the stigma of asking for help, and build and live in a community where we recognize that every single person has something that they need, regardless of their socioeconomic status, and every person has something that they can give regardless of their socioeconomic status. So it was really incredibly informal at the time. And then, as the community continued to grow and I realized that I had a responsibility as well as a community organizer, our community in South Florida was hit by all sorts of things, from hurricanes to mass shootings, unfortunately, and our community was able to come together in that sense too just simply by creating these direct connections that did not require a nonprofit, that did not require a formal charity, but really just a way for people to connect, to have a conversation, and to help form those strong, sustainable methods of being in community.

James Shaheen: You’ve written about the origins of mutual aid, going back to the nineteenth-century anarchist, Peter Kropotkin, who was a very colorful character. I was just listening to a podcast on the BBC about him. Can you share a little bit about that history and how it guides your work?

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Shelly Tygielski: Yeah, it's so interesting, because I didn't really know about his work. Somebody mentioned him to me years ago. After the 2016 election, I got really involved in the Women's March. As I started learning more about Audre Lorde's work and about the concept of mutual aid and building mutual aid communities, things that have been going on for decades, things that have been really part of movements for a very long time, I was really intrigued by this notion that communities that thrive are those that work together and that move away from this concept of survival of the fittest, which is something that obviously we always attribute to Darwin. It's sad to me in a way because when you think about Darwin's work, his legacy often is that short catchphrase, which is survival of the fittest, that's been hijacked by capitalists, by social biologists or economists throughout history who've wanted to point to the fact that this happens in nature, so therefore, we're part of nature, and survival of the fittest is why there are these mega billionaires and trillionaires now that are around in the world, and it's just the way of the world, right? And so what Kropotkin really did was challenge that notion, and he said, wait a minute. If we go back and we look at Darwin's work and we just look at any type of an ecosystem, whether it's a coral reef system, whether it's a rainforest, in any type of an ecosystem, there's symbiosis. There's the fact that these organisms all need each other, not just merely to survive, but in fact to thrive. When they work together, when they cooperate, when they give and take, they actually do a lot better than merely just surviving. I think that points to a lot of what we can look to as human beings who are in a survival state at this point. We keep talking about thriving, but in this industrial wellness complex that we're living in, "thriving" is really meant for the few and not the many.

James Shaheen: You know, you quote Kropotkin, and I think he says it best: "The fittest are not the physically strongest nor the cunningest but those who learn to combine so as to mutually support each other, strong and weak alike, for the welfare of the community." I thought that was a great quote.

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Shelly Tygielski: Yeah, totally.

Sharon Salzberg: Hey, Shelly. When you were last on this podcast, Pandemic of Love was in its very early stages, and at this point, it's a global movement. I wonder if you can speak some about the organization's evolution, especially why you think it's resonating with people.

Shelly Tygielski: Pandemic of Love is still constantly evolving. I'll give you some stats first, and we'll work backwards. So today, as of the recording of this podcast, Pandemic of Love has over 4,000 volunteers across close to 300 communities across 20 countries, and we've connected over 2.2 million individuals who amongst them have transacted directly over \$62 million. So it's pretty incredible. It's a staggering number. But it's also something that reassures me in helping to remind me that a lot of people doing a little bit really makes a huge impact, that if we're all rowing in the same direction, if we're all on the same page, if we're all committed to doing that one thing, then it makes a really big difference in the world, and it makes a really big difference in people's lives. I think that Pandemic of Love has grown tremendously because I do think that people, especially during the time of the pandemic, recognize how important human connection really is. It's a necessity for our survival as human beings to be able to connect with others. And so I think the fact that at a time of forced physical disconnection, to have a way to connect with somebody in a really meaningful way was a very powerful thing because what I've heard time and again from donors is that yeah, they paid off somebody's, let's say, phone bill or utility bill, but what they got in return was much greater than just writing a check to a third-party organization and not actually having that connection with the individual that they're donating to. The power of being able to pick up a phone, which is what Pandemic of Love requires, and ask a person in need in your community that very well may just be living a few blocks away from you, somebody that you've never met before, somebody that is seemingly to you a stranger, and say, "What do you need? And how can I help you?" is such a gift for that person beyond you paying

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their bill. And the gifts that the donors reap in return is that they're basically able to walk a mile in somebody's shoes. They're able to really feel like they're making a huge difference in somebody's life just by making them feel seen and heard, which in these times is not something that we should take for granted. A lot of us don't feel that way.

James Shaheen: So along with your work in mutual aid, you also describe yourself as a self-care activist, and you've spoken about your belief that radical self-care can change the world. Can you speak to the relationship between self-care and social transformation?

Shelly Tygielski: There's an intricate and really undeniable connection between the inner work and the outer world and the way we show up in the outer world. I do believe that it's really important to start with the inner. It's very important for us to understand our origin story, understand our traumas, our trials, our tribulations, and get in there and do the dirty work, the hard work. But I fear, as somebody who has been in the wellness genre or the wellness space now for a while, I see a lot of people who are stuck in that inner work loop. It's like this hamster wheel. And they're failing to connect all of the certifications and the classes that they're taking and this work that they're doing on themselves with the way that they're showing up in the world or the world that they want to be living in, the community that they want to really thrive in. And so I'm a very big proponent of, even if you don't feel like you're ready, I always tell people, just show up anyways. Even if you feel like you're not fully healed or you don't have all the skill sets that you need to start something or you don't have the pedigree, whatever stories you're telling yourself about why you can't change something or why you can't do something, I actually think that the social movements and the work that we can do in the outer world, the work we can do in helping other people, actually will inform a lot of our inner work and help make it a lot easier for us to connect those dots. There really is an intricate connection between those two things.

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James Shaheen: Do you find there's a lot of resistance to self-care, and is there a gender difference there? Are men more resistant? Are women more resistant? What are you noticing?

Shelly Tygielski: Real self-care is actually not as rewarding immediately as people would want it to be. When you Google the term “self-care” or you Google the hashtag or look it up on your social accounts, the things that qualify for self-care today are actually not what self-care is. We're being sold that self-care is green juice and a \$30 spin class and \$110 yoga pants and a retreat. But that's not what self-care is. Self-care really is something that is free most of the time. It's something that's available to everybody. It's accessible. It's as beautiful as really, to me, like what meditation is. Sharon always says meditation is the most portable thing in the world. It's so great. You don't need to have an app to do it. You don't need to have a phone. You could be anywhere at any time, and you have your breath right there in your back pocket with you. And in that light, from a radical perspective, self-care is the same way. It's available to all of us. Now, a lot of people don't necessarily like to embark on consistent self-care because it is hard work. It means giving up some of our vices. It means having to go to sleep early and commit to a practice and be held accountable if we're in a self-care community or community of care that holds us to make sure that we are taking care of ourselves. I find that mostly it's women who are at this point really investing in themselves and in self-care, and I understand that women are historically mothers. We're nurturers, we're caretakers, and so I am celebrating the fact that now we're learning to be self-caretakers too. But I do think it's incredibly important that this is something that is done across all genders, that we talk about burnout and fatigue and asking for help, which can be incredibly hard. Women tend to flock to community and talk about their feelings more often than men do. And I feel from my experience that women are much better at asking and offering help to one another, whereas in a lot of our communities of care across the country that we've built, there are very few men involved unless their wife or their partner is dragging them into the mix.

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James Shaheen: You know, the reason I asked is that I read an essay by Laurie Penny. She’s a feminist and on the left, and she was writing about the left’s bias against self-care, particularly among men. She wrote this, and I thought it’s very funny, given what you just said. She writes, “I’ve heard men on the left write off anti-sexist, anti-racist politics as hopelessly individualistic whilst also refusing to do the basic work of self-care and mutual care that keeps hope alive and health possible because that work is women’s work, undignified in comparison to watching your life fall apart while you wait for the revolution or for some girl to pick up the pieces, whichever comes first.” That was very funny. So that’s very consistent with what you just said, and I had a feeling you’d say something like that. It always plays out that way. Sharon?

Sharon Salzberg: Yes, that was a great quotation. So Shelly, how early do we have to go to sleep in order for it to count as self-care?

Shelly Tygielski: I would say, Sharon, definitely earlier than you go to sleep every night.

Sharon Salzberg: So Shelly and I are friends, and every once in a while, one of my friends writes to me, “Go to bed. Why are you still texting at this hour?”

Shelly Tygielski: That’s right. I’m on the West Coast, and so sometimes I’ll send Sharon something without expecting a response back because she’s three hours ahead, and then I immediately got a response back. I just stopped sending her things late at night.

Sharon Salzberg: We have different biorhythms.

Shelly Tygielski: That’s true.

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Sharon Salzberg: I quote you a couple of times in my forthcoming book, one of which I'll get to a little later. But you've shared that an important mantra, so to speak, for you is “Enough is a feast.” Can you share what that means to you and how it guides your work in mutual aid and self-care?

Shelly Tygielski: I have no idea who to attribute this very loose quote to, but I've heard it said often in my life that you spend the first half of your life accumulating things and the second half of your life giving those things away. So I'm sort of in this second half of my life, closer to my second half of my life, depending how many years I get on this earth. But I've begun to shed physical things that I've accumulated. I spent two decades working in the corporate world, getting a bigger house, a bigger car, buying name-brand things, etc., etc., and then realizing when I finally decided two years ago, as you know, Sharon, to kind of move into a nomadic lifestyle. We sold our house, and we are now living on the road, and we got rid of like 80% of our belongings. It was really, I think, at that moment, and it's interesting, because there was a convergence between the pandemic starting, Pandemic of Love starting and taking off and my exposure to an overwhelming amount of stories of people who, if they just had enough, it would make a monumental difference in their world and in their day and in their life. So it was this convergence of us selling our house and deciding that we were going to live a nomadic life, and Pandemic of Love and the pandemic starting, I began to really feel this shame and guilt around having all this stuff. As you're purging, as you're going through boxes and boxes of things, you think, “Oh my God, why do I have all this stuff? Why do I even need it? Why did I purchase it? Why is it stuck in a box up in the corner in a closet that I haven't gone into in a year?”

So that's a long-winded way of saying that when I stumbled upon the mantra of “enough is a feast,” or “enough is as good as a feast” is really the original translation, I thought, “That's so curious.” It's so interesting because I've gotten to the point where now, I recognize that there's only so much, there's diminishing returns at some point. There's a lot of work, especially around the research done around empathy and kindness and giving and happiness that at some point, you

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hit a tipping point, and accumulating more stuff doesn't actually bring any more meaning into your life. And so I want to live in a world where every single person has enough, where every person in my community has enough. And the only way to achieve that I realized is by making sure that the people who have more than enough are actually lifting up and giving to the people that don't have enough, reaching out and making sure that we're not just telling people to pull themselves up, as Dr. King said, telling people to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, but actually being responsible for also giving them the boots in the first place. So this is the work that informs my life on a daily basis. This is the work that drives me to make sure that it keeps me in check so that I don't accumulate more stuff and to make sure that I can get people to the start line and to make sure that everybody has a fair chance and true equity at the start line.

James Shaheen: That's nice. I have a two-part question. The first is the relationship between self-care and community care, giving and receiving care. And second, you give so much, and you've done so much work. Do you feel held by the communities you've created? Do you receive care in that sense?

Shelly Tygielski: Yeah, absolutely. I definitely feel held. So we have a chapter leader community that is comprised of, not surprisingly, all women. It's not by design, just those are the ones who volunteered and said, "How can I help? How do I start a chapter in my community?" And so we are on an active WhatsApp chat group, and very few of us actually have ever met each other in person. Through my travels, I have made it a point to meet and go through towns where I would be able to meet our chapter leaders, but very few of them have ever met each other. And it's incredible the sisterhood that has formed between us, the fact that if we need to vent, if we've had a bad day, whether it's personal or related to a Pandemic of Love transaction, which happens sometimes, you get people who sometimes are ungrateful or can be really mean, you need somebody to turn to and to vent to because you're trying to make sense of it all. But we also share stories that uplift each other, and we root each other on and we're cheerleaders for each

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other. So I feel incredibly held by this community, for sure. I will say that there are a lot of days that I do feel like I'm just running around plugging holes in the dam, and I feel like is it ever going to be enough? Am I doing enough? Am I making a difference? I mean, those are really big questions that I really wrestle with on a daily basis because sometimes you accomplish this huge thing, or you reach this kind of milestone, but then there's this windfall of other people that need help, or there's a tornado or wildfire somewhere, or something happens, there's a war.

Sometimes you feel like it's all futile, like what am I doing? Am I even making a difference? And I'm always reminded by the people that surround me, not just the community of care, but people who are my friends who care about me, people like Sharon who constantly uplift me and remind me that, to quote the Talmud, which unfortunately uses the gender of he, "He who has saved one person, it is as if he has saved the world." I recently saw that quote when I was in Poland at the Oskar Schindler Museum. There's a statue of him, and right below it, there's that quote, and I was reminded that if I only save one person today, I save the world for that person in some way.

James Shaheen: Yeah, just listening to you, it's really clear what the relationship between self-care is, in other words, reaching out to people like Sharon, and community care, because it allows you to go back and continue that work.

Sharon Salzberg: I want to go back for a minute to what you talked about earlier in showing up, which is clearly a consistent theme in your life's work. You've shared that you view that as the secret of life, and this is a quotation from you. "Show up for yourself and for others. Show up physically to create sacred spaces. Show up consistently. Show up even when others don't show up. Show up in a way that makes every person feel held. Show up in a way that makes you feel held by others." So you're showing up in a big way in times of crisis, and I wonder if first, you could say something about that, and then I'm going to bring in the other quotation of yours that I quote.

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Shelly Tygielski: So I think that my tendency to show up for people and in times of crisis is because I feel like, and I don't know if this was embedded in me by my parents, by my community, but I feel like I have a moral obligation that if I am not completely consumed by a fire and I'm able to get out alive, so to speak, whatever that crisis, that fire is that's raging, then I have a responsibility to grab pails of water and to run back into the fire. And so it helps me to feel less hopeless and less helpless, and it makes me feel like rather than just sitting in my sorrows and complaining about the state of the world, I'm actually doing something to contribute towards that. And so my default mode, so to speak, has become that without asking many questions, sometimes too few questions, I immediately think about the action. What can I do in this moment that's tangible, that's actionable, something that can be of assistance? And it might be something really small. It might be something that I feel is small, I should say. Something like a kind word or picking up the phone or reaching out. But that could be a huge thing for somebody on the other side that's the recipient of that thing. But it could also be something that is like a Pandemic of Love that really was born out of this feeling of fear and at a time when, if you take yourself back to March 2020, we didn't have tests yet. We did not really have PPE in this country. We had a shortage of PPE. Things were starting to shut down. And I realized what that reality meant for a lot of people in my community. And so without really thinking much about it, I thought, I need to do something, and I have to do something tangible. What can I do? I didn't overthink it. I just showed up in that moment and figured it out later because I do think that everything is figure out-able eventually.

Sharon Salzberg: Another quotation that has moved me a lot given that as one is trying to repair the world or make a difference, and whether it's your friend's life or your community or your family or the world, there can also be some pretty perfectionistic standards that happen, which also feeds the hopelessness, a sense that I've got to get in control of this situation, I've got to make the difference, whatever. And you have a beautiful way of countering that. You say

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something like, “May I [whatever], if only for today,” which I just thought was fabulous. So I wonder if you could just say something about that because we may feel we didn’t show up that well this morning, so what do we do with that feeling of guilt?

Shelly Tygielski: That’s the phrase that I repeat to myself multiple times a day. So as you know, Sharon, my entire life was based very much around to-do lists and around goals, like big, lofty goals, like “I’m going to be the CEO of this company, I want to have a house by this age,” all of these things that we tell ourselves that we need to achieve or obtain in order to be happy, to be fulfilled. And it wasn’t until I was able to understand that if I start to shift from centering my life around goals to rather centering my life around specific intentions, connection, community, balance, kindness, patience, things like that, that I could really achieve the happiness and fulfillment that I was seeking. And so what I do is that every single day, I think about the intentions that informed my life. Sometimes, they’re the same words every day, and sometimes they’re the same word for a year. But I think about it from the second I wake up in the morning.

The very first thing that I do when I open up my eyes every morning is think, “What intention or intentions do I want to cultivate more of in my life today that will make a difference today, if only for today?” And at the end of the day, let’s say the word was patience. I love using this example. My mom hates when I use this example. But you know that my mom calls me multiple times a day, a lot. She really lives up to the neurotic Jewish mother stereotype. And so what happens is that I find that in this example, by the third or fourth phone call that day when she calls to tell me that tuna was on sale at Publix, and I’m in the middle of something, like I’m writing or I’m recording, but I always pick up for her. I find that I’m starting to lose patience. I’m not showing up with the same quality or joy when she calls me, and I feel very bad about that. So what I do is I remind myself, “OK, if only for today, Shelly was going to cultivate more patience in her life as it pertains to her mother’s phone calls, what would that look like?” And so the response to that might be if only for today, I’ll pretend that every time my mom calls me, whether it’s the first time or the 12th time, that it’s the first time I’ve heard her voice today, if

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only for today, and maybe I'll fail. Maybe by the eighth time, I'll lose my mind. But the reality is that it's only for today. Tomorrow's another day. Tomorrow, there might be a different intention. Maybe tomorrow's intention will be balance or boundaries, and I just don't pick up the phone when she calls on the eighth time. My point to you is at the end of every day, I reset. I sort of do a download as I'm brushing my teeth and I'm getting ready to go to bed at night. Before I just completely shut down, I think about the intentions that I wanted to cultivate in my life, and I think about my day. I think, Did Shelly do a good job today? Did I do a good job with cultivation of patience? And a lot of times I failed miserably, but rather than flagellating myself and rather than being down on myself and telling myself I'm worthless and I'm not capable of doing this, I actually just remind myself that tomorrow is another day, and I get to start this again. So it's really this beautiful ability to really remind yourself in a very tangible way that every single day is a new opportunity.

Sharon Salzberg: That's so great. This is why I feel free to be James's Jewish mother because I know he doesn't have one already, but with you, Shelly, I try to be very mindful.

James Shaheen: Well, Shelly, I would say I totally identify, but my mom listens to the podcast. So you recently returned from the Poland-Ukraine border, where you are partnering with Global Empowerment Mission to support Ukrainian refugees displaced by the war. Can you share how you became involved with this and what you were seeing and what you were doing day to day?

Shelly Tygielski: Yeah, Global Empowerment Movement is actually an organization that I've been involved in and with since 2008, which is when the really big earthquake hit Haiti. I was still living in Miami at the time, and the Miami community at large, having so many Haitian immigrants and a big Haitian American population, really rose up to assist and to help. My friend Michael Capponi, who is the founder of Global Empowerment Mission, was at the time the top nightclub promoter and knew all the who's who in Miami Beach. He used his platform to

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basically raise money on behalf of a big nonprofit, a global nonprofit organization that was going to be distributing this aid in Haiti. As part of that, he decided to go to Haiti with this organization and see how the funds, the millions of dollars that we raised, were being distributed. And he did not like what he saw. He felt like this is not efficient, we could be doing more, and there's just too much overhead and too much inconsistency. And so he started Global Empowerment Mission specifically at first to help with the issues that arose in Haiti out of that earthquake. Eventually, he wound up figuring a lot of things out through trial and error as he continued to raise money and provide aid and rebuild homes and communities and send kids to school and get infrastructure within specific communities. So he started to do this in other communities, when there was a huge hurricane somewhere or wildfires or tornadoes, mudslides in Central America, and so on. And so over the last several years, he's really learned a lot about how to really be the FEMA, if you will, globally in times of crisis and disaster.

After the Puerto Rico hurricane, he began to partner with a woman named Bethenny Frankel. Her claim to fame is actually being on *The Real Housewives of New York*. But I will say, don't judge her by that or by that show or her appearance on that show. She's a brilliant, brilliant businesswoman and self-made woman who is incredible at raising money and raising awareness and using her platform to really get things moving. So Global Empowerment Mission (GEM) started partnering with Bethenny Frankel's organization BStrong. When there are crises, like for example, the tornadoes that hit in Kentucky last year, and Pandemic of Love doesn't necessarily know what to do, like our organization and our local chapters are not really plugged in enough to be able to specifically help in really meaningful or tangible ways, we've partnered with GEM to help connect donors to people in need in those areas that are hardest hit because that's the area where Michael and his team are already on the ground establishing shelters and providing gift cards and other things to people in need transportation.

So Michael was already in Poland the day before the war officially broke out. He already knew that it was going to happen. I mean, I think the world at that point, things were being staged in such a way that you kind of figured it had to go this way or that way. And his original

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plan was that he was going to fly into Ukraine. He actually had a flight to fly from Warsaw into Ukraine. The airspace was closed as soon as he landed in Poland. So he got stuck in Poland, which was really such an interesting turn of events because that's exactly where he needed to be. Within a few days, he reached out to his network and started to set up these relocation tents, if you will, at the border, at all these different areas in the border as waves of people were coming in, people walking, people driving, who had literally uprooted their lives within a matter of an hour or two and started to head for whatever border was closest to them.

So where we are today in Pandemic of Love's involvement with GEM is that GEM has now over \$150 million worth of aid that's been committed. We have four major warehouses, and we've sort of become the Amazon, if you will, of distribution centers for grassroots and big organizations on the ground that are providing aid within Ukraine and to neighboring countries. We actually even have a warehouse in Ukraine proper in Lviv. And so what Pandemic of Love is doing is we're looking at very specific projects that our donors could wrap their heads around in a very tangible way and understand. So I'll give you a couple of examples. When I had arrived in Poland, the ongoing crisis with the African students that were stuck in Ukraine was still going on. There were many students that were marginalized. Unfortunately, they experienced really rampant and undeniable acts of racism that kept them on the other side of the border or did not allow them to access transportation, mass transportation in the same way that Ukrainian citizens, who happen to basically all be white, or mostly white, I should say. We started an African student fund that was part of the GEM overall umbrella fund because we wanted to highlight specifically the needs of African students, the fact that these students were not going to have access to the same aid that the EU was giving Ukrainian residents or passport holders and that we needed to specifically earmark funds to help them with transportation, relocation services, funding, and in many cases, now we're helping them with rematriculation into universities all around the world in Australia, in Canada, even here in the United States.

What we're also doing is we've partnered with amazon.com, both here in the US and in the EU. Our donors understand how to make wish lists because we do it all the time within

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communities. And so we basically tasked our donors and said, “Look, we’ve got a massive list. Every day that list changes based on what information we’re getting back from the field in Ukraine of what’s needed, everything from medical supplies to diapers to, believe it or not, even crayons and coloring books for kids. And so here’s the list of what’s needed on a daily basis. We’re empowering you to create a wish list and to go out and to send the link to your community, to your school, to your church or synagogue or whatever.” And what’s happened is that our community is responsible for the fact that the GEM warehouse is getting 2,500–5,000 boxes per day of Amazon deliveries, which is incredible. Again, it’s a testament to many people doing a little bit can make a difference. If you only bought a toothbrush, but imagine if 5,000 people bought a toothbrush. Now we have 5,000 toothbrushes. And so it’s just that testament of the fact that a lot of people doing a little bit makes a huge impact.

James Shaheen: You know, Shelly, my head is spinning. It stopped somewhere around 90 schools. I mean, you must have a remarkable to-do list. You’re wondering if you’re making a difference, I mean, I’m starting to sit here wondering what I’m doing. But that’s truly amazing. I was going to ask you since we’re not on the ground, since we’re not in Poland, it’s really hard to get a sense of what it’s like there. But I think you’ve given us that sense. I’m just stunned at how much actually gets done by your organization and the organizations you’re affiliated with. Wow.

Shelly Tygielski: So one of the areas of focus now is we’re working on Smart Schools. We’re working with another partner that works with GEM called Smart Aid International. Now that people are mostly in safety, not in ideal situations per se, a lot of people are still in shelters and sleeping on cots in mass rooms and community centers, but those school-aged children, and there are over two and a half million, close to 3 million Ukrainian refugees who are children and who have basically been pulled out of their school year. We are now committed to starting 300 schools, physical schools that have virtual capabilities, to make sure that we get all of these children exactly what they need so that they can start the school year off next year and not skip a

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beat and make sure that they have everything that they need. So we've got about 90 of them already up and running in different shelters across Poland and Moldova. and we're continuing to do more and more every single day. But for me, being in Poland, first of all, I went with my son Liam, who's 20 years old. He's a sophomore at UC Santa Cruz. So that was a really incredible experience to be able to share with him. But what I shared with Sharon when I came back is that I was really haunted by the sheer volume. The number of people was very hard for me to process still to this day when I think about it. The best metaphor that I could possibly give to have people try to wrap their heads around it is if you can imagine that there was a Super Bowl stadium, a Super Bowl stadium every 30 minutes that was being let out, that the game ended and people were being funneled through one or two gates every 30 minutes, that would maybe be the closest thing that I could imagine. And so it is overwhelming because you do feel like, Am I making a difference? Why am I even here? Am I making a difference? I'm relocating this one family, and it's taking me 20 minutes per family to do something. But again, I go back to it's as if you've saved the world because you're helping that family. And that makes such a huge difference to them.

James Shaheen: That's incredible.

Shelly Tygielski: It really is. It does take a village, and we're all part of that village. Even the smallest part. People who are listening to this might often wonder, "What can I do?" And you might dismiss a small thought that you have of something that you can do. I would strongly suggest that you do it anyway. Do it anyway and see what it leads to. You never know how throwing that one pebble in the pond could actually create these huge ripples that become tsunami.

Sharon Salzberg: It is stunning, and the thing I always say to Shelly and about Shelly is that something terrible happens and I kind of think maybe I should try to do something about that

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someday, or what can I offer in a while, and she's done it, and she's done it 50 times. Maybe I don't get enough sleep. That could be the problem. But it's extraordinary. And it's just inspiring to see what not falling into that sense of helplessness can do, even if it seems like you're doing very little. Maybe we'll close by bringing this back to meditation because it's tough. I've heard stories about some of those volunteers waiting in train stations for refugees. It's a lot of suffering to bear witness to. I'm wondering about the tools that they have, the tools you've offered, whether it's community or remembering the joy or some kind of meditation practice.

Shelly Tygielski: One of the other initiatives, Sharon, that you know that we've been working on is providing tangible tools, whether it's an app that can even be used offline if there's no internet access that has meditations and just breathing practices available translated into Ukrainian and Polish and Russian. I'm happy to say that we're actually this week launching the Moments of Refuge website in partnership with Dr. Amit Bernstein and several others as well, who have really just shown up to help get this together to provide it to our humanitarian aid workers, the people that are on the frontlines, and also to make sure that people in the shelters that we are providing food and other necessities to have access to this, because certainly mental health is a huge necessity. It's not something that can fall by the wayside. And I remember reading an interview, I think it was with Jack Kornfield, about the fact that he said something to the effect of, "If you show up at a refugee camp and you're depressed for these people, you're not doing them any favors. They're already depressed enough. They don't need you to show up with your sadness and just have a pity party with them. They want you to come in with joy. And they want you to come in with hope and with light." I really rest on that a lot. I would say that I don't defer my suffering or pain or sadness. If I have to cry, I cry. But I also don't feel that it's inappropriate to be joyful, to share a joke or to laugh or to try to bring and radiate happiness and hope into these spaces. And so the thing that I do most often when I'm face to face with a refugee, especially if we don't speak the same language, is I sit across from them and hold their hands and we look into each other's eyes, which is just such a beautiful practice in and of itself. But I have

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them put their hand on my heart, and I put my hand on their heart and we breathe together. We do a breathing practice together that helps to regulate our nervous system and get us to a point where we're just moved by being in the presence of one another and really physically connected, as well as spiritually connected.

Sharon Salzberg: Beautiful. Well, if only for today, may we each remember the inner resources and the outer work and join them together.

Shelly Tygielski: Amen.

James Shaheen: Speaking of the outer work for just a minute, about doing just one simple thing, your most recent work has been on the Polish border with Ukraine in the refugee camps, what is one thing our listeners can do now?

Shelly Tygielski: I'll sneak in two really quick things. The first is they can email pandemicoflove@gmail.com and in the subject write "Wish List Ambassador," and immediately, they'll get an auto-response with the list and directions on how to create their own Amazon wish list that goes directly to our Miami warehouse and gets sent to our Polish warehouses. The other thing they could do is send an email to pandemicoflove@gmail.com and in the subject write "Love Notes." If they have an organization or are a member of the Parent Teacher Association at their kids' school or a Girl Scout troop or a Boy Scout troop or what have you, they can create letters of hope cards, greeting cards, literally physically design, create, and write messages of hope, because in every single box, in every single delivery that we send into Ukraine and that goes into the shelters, we include those letters of hope. They are so meaningful for people who read them and recognize that someone somewhere across an ocean actually cares about them and is wishing them well. And that's such a beautiful thing.

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James Shaheen: Okay, so Shelly Tygielski, thanks so much for joining us, and thank you, Sharon, it's been a pleasure. We like to close these episodes with a short guided meditation, aka self-care, so I'll hand this over to Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Thank you. Why don't we sit together for a few minutes. You can close your eyes or not. The resting place for our attention is the breath, the feeling of the breath, the sensations of the normal breath, wherever you feel it most distinctly. That can be like a refuge. That's home base. And we just rest. Moving through us will be waves of joy and sorrow, eager anticipation and regret, everything. We can allow all this to come and go as we rest on just one breath. So thank you.

James Shaheen: Thank you, Sharon. And thank you, Shelly.

Shelly Tygielski: Thank you.

James Shaheen: Thank you for your wonderful work. You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Shelly Tygielski. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. *Life As It Is* and *Tricycle Talks* are produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!