

Community Action



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Can You Do Me A Favor?

by Gail Bangert



How CAN TRANSFORM OUR COMMUNITY

The Cape Cod Time Bank has been launched, and it's getting people's attention. The idea is simple: members give an hour of service to someone else and are entitled to receive an hour of service from another member in return. If you're new to the concept, you might be wondering, "What's the big deal? Countless organizations already enlist volunteers or even pay people to do the right thing."

The difference between time banking and many other ways of helping people is subtle, but profound. Time banking works because everyone involved is valued. Consider for a moment the way we usually think about giving. "It's better to give than to receive," our simple mantra for teaching compassion, inadvertently sums up how demeaning it can be to need help. Whether the receiver is a senior citizen asking for help with home repairs or a poor person in need of free professional services, when only one person has the opportunity to give, the other feels useless or less valued. People want to give back.

This is the insight that Edgar Cahn, creator of time banking, gained lying in a coronary care unit. In his book, *No More Throw-Away People*, he explains that before the heart attack that landed him in the hospital in 1980, he had proudly spent his life helping others by fighting for justice.

Cahn worked with Robert Kennedy at the Justice Department and Sargent Shriver in the War on Poverty. He challenged the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the hunger and injustice faced by Native Americans. With his wife, he created the Antioch School of Law with a unique teaching law firm that represented thousands of poor people. Cahn realized in his hospital bed that being a person who could do things that other people needed was central to his self-worth, and he didn't like feeling useless.

Cahn's other key insight was about money. Perhaps you're content in the knowledge that you have the means to buy the services that you need, that the economic market values your contribution, and that you can value others by paying them in turn.

The catch is that in the economic realm, not only commodities but also human abilities are valued based on their scarcity. Scarce items have a high value. Abundant items have a low value. When judged against this standard, the most common human capacities, like caring for each other, are devalued.

In the economic marketplace, values are assigned in a hierarchy, and everyone is well aware of how high or low they fall on the ladder. In a time bank, an hour of service given by one person is equal to an hour of service given by any other person. The hierarchy is gone.



The Five Core Values of Time Banking

- We can all be valued contributors
- Honor real work that is beyond price
- Helping works better as a two-way street
- Networks make individuals stronger
- Respect demands accountability

John and I share deeply held values, but he's the one with the zeal for outreach, always out front with a new idea. I listen, steer, edit, sort, and carry boxes. I have been known to try to stifle his irrepressible urge to act, if only to dig out the office from the last adventure. Our home is strewn with flyers, contact lists, and life-sized candidate cutouts, and there is always a project afoot.

I work 75 hours a week at my paid job and come home to a buzzing community headquarters. I'm not even sure how I'll find hours to give. And yet I'm excited and energized by this simple idea. I should be balking at the prospect of more to do, but time banking sounds more rewarding than burdensome.

An amazing thing happens when people fill out the membership form. As they begin to list services they want to offer, there's often a wonderful moment when they realize how capable they really are and how much they have to contribute.

Looking outward, members have the chance to see others with new eyes. A quiet woman you've seen around town turns out to be a retired physical therapist and personal trainer. The IT person that you plague with computer questions at work is also a banjo teacher. There are actually people who love to weed!

The financial cost of living on Cape Cod is high, and it requires many of us to work more hours than we wish, leaving too little time to focus on our families and friends. But the price we pay is not just time. The real cost, says Edgar Cahn in his book *No More Throw Away People*, "is the hold that money has on our sense of what is possible, the prison it builds for our imagination."

The vision of Cape Cod Time Bank is to help people break free of this yoke and weave a new kind of community. The "free market" may say that you can't afford a gardener. Time banking says you can. The recession threatens to close the door to home ownership, higher education, and other pieces of the American dream to a growing segment of our population. Maybe the America dream just needs a new definition.

For me, the truly fascinating element of time banking is this reshuffling of the social deck. We trudge or glide through our days, the heaviness of our steps determined to some degree by our status and the amount of money in our pockets. Our assigned rankings inevitably color our interactions, in spite of egalitarian myths.

That a time bank member, perhaps previously unknown to another, can step into that other person's life and be judged by a single act of kindness (and maybe how the recipient's garden looks without weeds) seems to me an amazing gift of fresh perspective.

When my husband, John Bangert, first shared the time banking concept with me, and announced his determination to start a time bank on Cape Cod, I found the idea immediately appealing. This is a remarkable statement for me to make after living with a community organizer for thirty four years.

Gail Bangert is a community activist and member of the Cape Cod Time Bank. She lives with her husband in Harwich.

TIME BANKING CONTACT INFORMATION

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For more information about the CC Time Bank
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