

The Participant: Scenes from Time Banking

By Elana Mann

(Editorial Note: The following is a reflection by Elana Mann on her engagement with the Echo Park Time Bank.)

From their website, the Time Bank is "is a collective whose purpose is to facilitate the cooperative exchange of goods and services among its members. It is a pay it forward system that connects unmet needs with untapped resources." It is one of the more than 68 Time Banks operating in the United States of America today.

Prologue:

I have become a perpetual participant. This happened gradually, like when you take the time to grow out a bad haircut or try to make your hands touch your toes. Now I bring vegan blueberry crumble to my friend's potluck, I organize an exchange between artists from Brazil and the USA, I ask friends and family to record sounds from their commutes for an art piece, I sign an electronic petition on sperm whales and forward it to my email contacts.

Although I am unsure how this will impact my art and life, I am now feeling intrigued about how it is to circulate the currency of time. My curiosity in participating, gifting, and receiving has led me to become the one hundred and fifteenth member of the Echo Park Time Bank.

Act 1: "Plant my steps."

Scene 1: The setting is my new apartment, which is sparse, but dusty, a big folding desk with piles of papers and computers. I am aching for tomato plants, fresh herbs, the slow creep of green beans.

I sit at the folding table surfing the time bank website. The "companionship" section is especially bare, so I add an offer under "dining." I email Kim who will "design, install, and/or consult for edible garden." Kim's middle name is "Serene." She responds immediately asking for pictures of the concrete steps where the garden would grow. We are going to meet on Friday after her dentist appointment.

Act 2: "Family and clothes: a brutal combination"

Scene 1: It is the next day and I am trying to solve other problems. I need a dress for my brother's wedding. Costumes have historically been a bruise in my family's body politic; the 1920's salmon colored flapper dress my mom wore to her sister's wedding inspired a three-year silence between them.

Enter Janet Planet, a time bank stylist. Janet is tall, slim, seemingly ageless with straight black hair. There is a peculiar thrill of intimacy when I tell her my waist, hip and bra size.

Scene 2: Three days later. It is the time bank potluck at an industrial kitchen. Janet pulls out seven dresses from her car in the parking lot, which feels slightly illicit. I try them on in the bathroom amidst cries of: “an exchange is happening right now!” Together we decide on the flowing pink and white number with a beaded belt, on sale for \$60. By the time we finish all that’s left of the potluck are empty plates of crumbs and traces of blueberry sauce.

Act 3: “Lighting the cave”

Scene 1: Kim emails me canceling our meeting, as her mouth is infected following her dentist appointment and she feels gravely ill. No garden until the end of the summer.

Scene 2: The setting is my dark, crowded studio and I am back on the time bank website. No one has contacted me about my dining offer I posted weeks ago! The studio is starting to feel like a cave and I am too stubborn to pay an electrician. I decide to email Mike who can help with electrical work and is also requesting existential tutoring.

Scene 3: Enter Mike wearing a vest and shiny shoes. He charges me half a time hour and tells me he is going to Mexico the next week for a vacation.

Epilogue:

The exchanges have made me somewhat euphoric, but my time bank account is now negative five. I post offers for invitation design and yogic breathing lessons, hoping to entice more action...