

The Power of Barter in the Global Sisterhood[\[1\]](#)

By Carina Freitas

[\[Removal 1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

[\[Transposed from pages 5–8 in draft\]](#) [\[3\]](#)

The first time I went to a medical clinic in Zimbabwe, I saw a line of two hundred people waiting patiently in the sun. Some were dangling live chickens by their feet, others had scrawny goats on short leashes, but most arrived balancing huge sacks of peanuts on their heads. The clinics are especially happy to get peanuts because they add protein to their patients' meals of porridge and vegetables. If I had to walk ten miles with a sack like that on my head in order to get my high blood pressure medicine, game over.

In that line I met a young girl of nine named Rufaro. She was carrying her baby brother, Betserai, on one hip and had hauled a bucket of maize several miles in the other hand. Her lips were parched and cracked, and the way she ignored the baby's whimpering told me she was totally used to it. She told me—in English, which she'd learned at parochial school before her father's checks stopped coming through from the Marange diamond fields—that she was in line to retrieve more HIV medication for her mother, who was at home too weak to make the journey. I thought of myself back home in the waiting room of my local Kaiser pharmacy, in a cushioned chair and air-conditioning, and how upset I got if my number came up too slowly on the big digital display.

I waited three more hours with Rufaro and Betserai until she got the prescription filled, then drove her home in my rented jeep. The landscape was just like you'd picture:

dusty road, expanses of dry grassland, the random baobab tree appearing on the horizon like a tree out of *Harry Potter*. We saw cows and goats at muddy watering holes, a few jacaranda trees in bloom, and stands of the Msasa tree.,~~which looks more like a shrub and I've since learned is very important to the lives of the Zimbabwe people.~~ [4] There were outcroppings of the rocks that give Zimbabwe (translated “house of stone”) its name: they’re natural formations, but they look like human hands stacked them. The children were drinking from my canteen, and with their faces in the breeze they smiled.

In half an hour we reached the family’s homestead. It was a pitiful round hut with a dirt floor, walls of thin Msasa trunks, and a thatched roof. In back was a small stand of maize, and there were two anorexic goats tethered to keep them from eating the corn stalks. Rufaro led me by the hand through the hut’s entrance—no door—and presented me to her mother, Maiba, who was wasting away on a straw pallet. When she saw me, she made as if to get up, presumably to offer me some form of refreshment. I motioned for her to be still.,~~and with me asking questions and Rufaro translating I was able get some details of the family’s history.~~ [Removal 2] [5] On a rough plank along one side of the poorly lit hut, I could barely make out a collection of small stone carvings, displayed as if in a store window. They were miniature versions of the sculptures I was there to export.~~These days, Zimbabwe is known the world over for its sculptures. Although carving is a tradition of the Shona, the largest ethnic group in the country, Maiba had learned the art as a Ndebele—her tribe is really kind of a splinter group off the Shona anyway, and has only existed since the mid-1800s. The sculptures themselves are made of serpentine, verdite, or granite.~~ [6]

If I'm being honest, Maiba's pieces were not of the highest quality—I'm sure they were not her best work, sick as she was. But I offered to buy them all up and she took the dollars with gratitude. I went back to my jeep and pulled out some other supplies that I'd brought with me from California: toiletries, a first aid kit, flip flops. ~~Sometimes barter includes a gratuity.~~ [7] Then I said goodbye to the children and drove off toward the clinic blubbering, motivated by a new idea: to medicine for art across the Atlantic.

[The Roots of Barter \[8\]](#)

[My belief in the power of barter to change lives comes from my roots in a Portuguese farm community east of the San Francisco Bay Area. There, I saw how barter could provide economic stability, foster community, and enrich the personal lives of those around me. Once I moved away from home, it was natural for me to extend the principles of barter into my own career and home finances. Today, to my great surprise, I find myself a champion of barter solutions for women and their families on the world stage. My own story demonstrates how the core values of barter can enrich the lives of women in developed nations as well as provide crucial empowerment to women in developing nations.](#)[9]

[\[Transposed from pages 8–9 in draft\]](#)

~~I grew up in the hills east of the San Francisco Bay Area, in the fourth generation of a family of Portuguese farmers.~~

~~[10]~~-When my great-great-grandparents came over from the old country, a “port-chu-gee” (as we pronounce it) community had already been established on the eastern side of the

Diablo Range, probably because the climate allowed us to raise crops we already knew how to grow—olives, grapes, lemons, artichokes—along with some new ones like avocados. During the depression, the federal government dug a tunnel through the mountain, and the commuters from the city soon began to turn our region into a bedroom community. My father and mother were part of the last generation to grow up on farms, and I can just barely remember from my childhood how important barter was in that world. At my grandmother’s house, neighbors would drop off baskets of fresh produce (in summer) or jars of pickled delicacies (in winter), and she would do the same. If she needed something, instead of rushing out to the local Woolworth’s to buy one, she would call her friends to see what she could borrow.

[\[Transposed from pages 4–5 in draft\]](#)

[For all I know, the people of Zimbabwe may have had a long, agrarian history of barter themselves. What I do know is that the people of that nation turned to barter for survival when, after](#) ~~Now I’m not saying that barter should replace the monetary system.~~

~~You only have to look at Zimbabwe to see that barter alone is not enough. After~~ [\[11\]](#)

thirty years under Robert Mugabe, the Zimbabwe economy collapsed in 2008 and inflation increased by 500 *billion* percent. I’m a numbers lady, and I cannot *imagine* what 500 billion percent looks like. Overnight, billionaires were turned into homeless people, and the working poor—well, how much farther down could they go? Remember, this was a country where a quarter of the population was infected with the AIDS virus.

People started trading possessions for essential services. A farmer’s wife would get sick, so he’d trade an ox for medical treatment, but without that ox to pull the plow his land would yield less food for his family. In 2009, the country adopted the U.S. dollar

as its currency, and this has helped tremendously—now men can travel to the diamond fields or other places with employment opportunities and send back money via wire transfers to their family’s cell phones. ~~Barter is no substitute for money, but in struggling economies it’s a critical supplement.~~ But these remittances bring with them their own problems, as men often claim to have sent the money when they’ve already spent it. Barter remains a critical way for women to share food and goods with each other, reinforcing a tight-knit sense of community.[12]

Providing Stability[13]

[Transposed from page 18 of draft] [14]

After a century of experimentation, international aid organizations have begun to figure out which types of help are effective. Decades ago, we realized that doling out money was doing no good: each handout created a brief frenzy of corruption without altering the power dynamics in the society. Nowadays most relief organizations target simple, cost-effective measures focused on women and families. They work to reduce maternal mortality and illiteracy and to provide the building blocks of a healthy community—housing, electricity, sanitation, water, and credit. We recognize that, for a society to improve, it has to create its own solutions and take pride in its own achievements.

That’s where barter can play a key role. There are lots of worthy foreign aid efforts that fail because their backers come out of the financial markets and are looking for so-called “quick wins.” I won’t name names, but I’ve seen Hollywood celebrities hopscotch across the African continent from cause to cause as quickly as they change

spouses. Barter networks take time to build, and their core value is in relationships; their “capital” is tied up in tangible inventory, so it’s not so likely to be diverted to a new hare-brained scheme overnight. Barter is also less vulnerable to the graft of male-dominated political structures—corrupt officials tend to salivate over high-value commodities like oil and diamonds, not folk-art sculptures.

[\[Tranposed from page 9 of draft\]](#)

It was barter that allowed me to achieve stability in my own life. When I was ten,
~~But we were children of the sixties, and we grew up in one of the early subdivisions, where the old agricultural ways were quickly lost. My [my \[15\]](#) parents sold the farm to a developer who parceled it out into lots, and we moved into the model home of Olivas Estates, where we three kids promptly began our obligatory investigations into sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. When I think back, we just adapted the old Portuguese barter philosophy to our new interests, trading a tab of acid, say, for several doobies. Besides all the partying, those days were inspiring because we believed we were the first generation to evolve beyond the core problems of society: capitalism, greed, war, racism, sexism, homophobia. It’s like we were bartering with spiritual goods: you give me respect and I’ll repay you with kindness. [\[16\]](#)~~ Before long I was living in a communal farmhouse, managing the garden and pursuing my business degree at the local community college. ~~(Thirty years later, my daughter lives in a dilapidated Victorian in West Oakland that has the same grungy, fun-loving, hipster vibe.)~~ Most of my housemates considered themselves artists, even though all of them went on to be stockbrokers or dentists or something equally bourgeois. I felt drawn to art, too, but I never had the confidence to put myself forward as an artist—instead, I opted to become their supporter, their patron.

~~Some might say their enabler. My favorite times were Saturday nights, when we'd get pile into a car and speed through the Caldecott to downtown San Francisco to go club-hopping all night.~~[\[17\]](#)

[\[Transposed from page 10 of draft\]](#)

Eventually, I ended up pregnant. All of a sudden, it was time to grow up. Raising a child as a single mother in rural California was no easy way, as the blues song says, but my little Sophie made all the sacrifices worthwhile. I moved back in with my parents and became the Ledger Lady, traveling around in my beat-up VW bug to do the monthly payables and receivables for all of the little businesses whose owners knew me as Cat and Rafe's little girl: the hair dresser, the caterer, the lumber yard, the family doctor, the grocer, the bar and grille, the fancy restaurant. Before long I was trading my book-keeping services for hair cuts, a cast for my daughter's broken arm, a buffet for her birthday party. [Barter had become an essential part of my survival strategy, a means of gaining economic control over my life.](#)[\[18\]](#)

Fostering Community

[\[Transposed from page 10 of draft\]](#)

Some of my friends complain that I'm *too* barter centric. I have no ambitions as a matchmaker—I never try to set up my single friends with each other on blind dates—but I do send my friends to each other all the time as customers. Over the years, this has created a cat's cradle of relationships that mostly brings me great satisfaction and joy even though it occasionally gets tangled up. [If they're nurtured, such relationships can](#)

[eventually develop into a full-blown community: I have seen this happen here in America, in Africa, and around the world. \[19\]](#)

[\[Transposed from pages 10–11 of draft\]](#)

Where barter really began to pay off for me personally was when I reconnected with my hippie artist roots. ~~While I watched Sophie blossom from toddler into teenager, our local region was growing up, too. Whole new towns sprouted up out of nowhere — and because of the tunnel, the people in these towns were wealthy, with ties to the sophisticated city. With each new faux hamlet came a shopping center posing as a town square camouflaged in oaks and eucalyptus. Each of these hidden malls had a nouvelle cuisine restaurant, a high-end salon, and an art gallery.~~ As the Ledger Lady, I started hooking up my artist friends with the bare walls of ~~these fancy joints.~~ [the nouvelle cuisine restaurants, high-end salons, and art galleries that started popping up all over area where I grew up.](#)[\[20\]](#) Now you see this trend everywhere: if you go out for brunch, you can pretty much count on piercing the yolk of your poached egg under a painting, photograph, or bas-relief wearing a price tag the way Minnie Pearl wore them on her hats. But back then the concept was cutting edge, and I became the go-to gal for temporary art exhibits in East Bay retail establishments.

[\[Transposed from pages 11–12 of draft\]](#)

~~——— Soon I was part of the bridge and tunnel crowd, curating the walls of board rooms in the Financial District and bistros South of Market. [21]~~

[_____](#) I was at a trade show, scouring the booths for art that would go well in a new Ethiopian restaurant, when I came across my first Shona sculptures. They bowled me over. I picked up the laminated sheet explaining the origins of the pieces and read that the

first European traders in the Kingdom of Zimbabwe were the Portuguese, who along with the Arabs had established the gold routes that eventually left the empire in a state of near collapse. I instantly felt a deep connection to this place I had never been.

Seventeen years later they're calling me the Oprah of Barter, which I take as a compliment. I'm hella proud of what we've achieved with our show *The Barter Lady* on the Lifetime network, bringing to millions of Americans an awareness of the heroism of people in struggling economies around the world. For the dozen of you who haven't seen it, the show's format is equal parts QVC, *Antiques Roadshow*, and *60 Minutes*. First, we have fun guessing the value of the items offered for barter by (mostly small) American businesses and individuals. Next, we celebrate and appraise the folk art of a culturally rich but economically impoverished ethnic group, most of whom are harassed minorities in their country of residence. When the trade is made at the end of the hour, there is a Niagara of weeping on both sides of the exchange—including me, of course. I'm the only person on television who bawls more than John Boehner.

[\[Transposed from page 13 of draft\]](#)

Today, *The Barter Lady* traffics in all kinds of valuable goods and reaches ethnic groups all over the developing world. But I hadn't dreamed of having a television show when I set up House of Stone in 2006: my initial goal was simply to set up an antiretroviral drug exchange.[22] ~~The most important work we've done on *Barter Lady*, in my opinion, was set up the antiretroviral drug exchange. As my viewers know (because I've said so ad nauseum), the United States was wasting millions of dollars' worth of perfectly good HIV drugs every year because advances were constantly being made in treatment and our AIDS patients—unlike Africans at the poverty level—usually~~

~~had health insurance that allowed them to demand the newest standard of care.~~ [\[23\]](#) Back then, after decades of inactivity, the major pharmaceutical companies had finally started making HIV drugs available to Africa for free or at very low cost, and this effort had resulted in lowering the infection rate in Zimbabwe and several other African nations. But the drugs that Big Pharma was donating were usually several generations behind those currently in use in the U.S. and Europe, with the result that Africans [like Maiba, the mother of Rufaro and Betserai, \[24\]](#) suffered from the pronounced—and sometimes deadly—side effects of the out-of-date regimens.

[\[Removal 3\] \[25\]](#)

[\[Removal 4\] \[26\]](#)

[\[Transposed from pages 20–21 in the draft\]](#)

We started House of Stone with one volunteer collection station for the medications. It was a vacant storefront in the Castro that the landlord allowed me to rent at a reduced rate until his deal with a major clothing chain came through. For drugs representing a month’s worth of treatment, we offered a hand-sized Shona sculpture; for “donations” supplying a year’s worth of treatment, the client could receive either twelve small sculptures or a single large one. Initially, we could not guarantee specific animal shapes or human configurations, but our Barter Circle members embraced the element of surprise and set up a bulletin board for photos at the station that allowed them to trade a giraffe, say, for a woman nursing.

When we had enough drugs to fill an air freight container, I traveled with the shipment to Harare, where I had already cultivated connections with various sources of local art. I recruited the help of a respected woman elder, Akudzwe Mwoyo, to gather the

items on a schoolyard of red dirt on the outskirts of the city. Pickup trucks as rusted and clap-trap as any you'll see in the Central Valley pulled up with loose bales of Msasa leaves: these would serve as our bubble wrap. We spent an afternoon carefully packing the pieces, with the largest at the bottom and the smaller pieces on top. The airlines had given me a strict weight limit, so I allowed the women (and a few men) to fill the container only partway. As we entered each sculpture into the inventory, I wrote down the name of the artist and the person the medicine was intended for.

From this first “airlift,” the program grew. We opened up collection stations in Los Angeles and San Diego, then around the United States. Akudzwe expanded her network of stone smiths and started an apprenticeship program for young Zimbabweans. I spent three months in Harare with her niece, Tsitsi Twangerai, setting up a local co-op on the model of the one in my Oakland neighborhood: this was a critical development, because we could not get workers to devote themselves to making art full-time if our only currency was HIV drugs. To meet their needs for other treatments, we started a drug exchange with other humanitarian aid agencies. To meet their need for food, we helped women farmers—who struggle to survive in societies in which virtually all landowners are men—by beginning a campaign for donors to buy hectares and sign them over to women’s farming cooperatives.

[In one fell swoop, we had created two new communities: one in the U.S. devoted to collecting medications and swapping artworks; and another in Africa busily distributing those medications and making and shipping the art.](#) [27]

[*Enriching Lives*](#)

[\[Transposed from page 3 of draft\] \[28\]](#)

~~Barter throws some excitement into the mix.~~ [\[29\]](#) I show up every Saturday morning at my local co-op and never know what I'll discover. Recently, the tomatoes and corn have been especially good, but there was also some of the blue, fungus-covered corn that Mexicans turn into their salty delicacy called *huitlacoche* (which sounds tastier than the English name for it, "corn smut"). Not something you find at Whole Foods. Although the co-op mainly deals in produce and provisions, I've gotten lots of other goods there: antique cutlery, romance novels, clothing, a bicycle.

All week long I look forward to Saturday, when I tell my daughter I'm going on my "dumpster dive." As a little girl, she wasn't jazzed about having so many second-hand items: "Can't we just buy one at the mall?" she would say, like a broken record. But now that she's shape-shifted into this hipster artist type that I barely recognize, she's become quite the barter queen herself.

[\[Transposed from pages 7–8 in draft\]](#)

[Perhaps the most personally enriching discovery of my barter career has been stumbling on the marvelous ancient art of Shona sculpture.](#) [\[30\]](#) ~~Although carving is a tradition of the Shona, the largest ethnic group in the country, Maiba had learned the art as a Ndebele—her tribe is really kind of a splinter group off the Shona anyway, and has only existed since the mid-1800s. The sculptures themselves are~~ [\[31\]](#) [These days, Zimbabwe is known the world over for its sculptures—made of serpentine, verdite, or granite—with their highly](#) ~~Highly~~ polished faces, heads, and bodies wrestling free from the weathered surfaces of odd-shaped blocks. Some pieces are abstract, but even those pieces evoke for

me the human body dancing, squatting, or resting. When you first see a Shona sculpture, you think immediately of Picasso or Miro, with all of those oval faces and bodies escaping from abstract backgrounds. ~~I'm reminded of that scene in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* when Charlton Heston, as a handsome young pre-NRA Michelangelo, gradually rescues his *David* from a block of Carrera marble with hammer and chisel.~~ [32] But the Shona stone masters have never seen the work of Western artists, and their “modern” style goes back to the eleventh century.

[\[Transposed from pages 21–22 of draft\]](#)

[My latest discovery is traditional Zimbabwean music. The contemporary Zimbabwe music scene is](#) ~~Sounds simple, doesn't it? But so far we've encountered a whole lot of complications. Having multiple kinds of devices means that we need sophisticated technical support in school districts that are scattered across the veld. And the Zimbabwe music scene is hard to break into: it's vibrant but turbulent. We have signed up some successful bands from the different musical factions that incorporate traditional instruments into their essentially modern styles: *sungura*, *tuki*, *jit*, and *Bulawayo*, to name the most popular categories. But these~~ genres are dominated by male pop stars whose followings constantly heckle each other at concerts. ~~Several times now, artists who initially agreed to participate in our program have later refused to appear on the same album together.~~ [33] So we've taken a different approach by finding Zimbabwean women to record the more traditional forms of Shona music without the fusion of hip-hop, dancehall, or modern instruments. What stands out about this music is the joy it expresses. Despite all of the hardships and oppression in their lives, the Zimbabweans are known for their sunny dispositions and their appreciation of life's

simple pleasures. When you listen to this music, you can't help but smile and start tapping your foot—it is playful, cheerful, relentlessly upbeat.[34]

[\[Transposed from page 21 of draft\]](#)

For our next project, we want to trade this music for [digital devices that Zimbabwean children can use in their schools, following the lead of developing nations like Thailand and Brazil](#). ~~iPads. The introduction of cell phones on the African continent has already shown how powerful the new digital technologies can be in the hands of the poor. Cell phones allow migrant workers to send money back home; they also allow extended families dispersed by economic hardship and political persecution to pool their resources. Now we want Zimbabwe to follow the lead of developing nations like Thailand and Brazil by bringing education to children on digital devices. So~~ [35] I'm working with the Big Tech companies to trade shipments of cell phones and tablets for live performances by Zimbabwean artists at their industry events. Viewers of *Barter Lady* and customers of House of Stone can help sponsor the new program by downloading the music from our websites.[36]

[\[Transposed from page 22 of draft\]](#)

[Talk about enriching lives. Our work has brought as much joy to our American supporters as it has the women of Zimbabwe.](#) [37] When we've had live performances in the *Barter Lady* studio in Culver City, the audience instantly stands and even the grip and boom operators—who usually act bored with everything—have to fight the urge to dance along. There's not a diva among these ladies: what comes across is how the music is a purely collaborative communal experience. That's something we celebrity-obsessed

Americans hardly ever see, and I've had members of our studio audience tell me that these performances are a religious experience.

[Starting Locally](#)

[If you're thinking about starting your own local barter exchange, here are some basic steps that should not be skipped.](#) ~~If you're thinking about starting your own local barter exchange, here are some common mistakes to watch out for.~~

[Step 1: Determine Mutual Need](#)

[\[Transposed from pages 14–15 of draft\]](#)

[A barter exchange won't work unless each party truly wants what the other has.\[38\]](#) ~~You~~
~~*Both Gotta Want It.*~~ When *Barter Lady's* art-for-drugs program started to become successful, a Big Pharma company that shall remain nameless wanted to participate by swapping a large shipment of HIV drugs for a monumental Shona sculpture for display in their corporate lobby—for which there would be a well-publicized ribbon-cutting ceremony, of course. I visited the headquarters, photographed the space where they wanted the piece to go, and showed one of their executives some options from a portfolio. After we settled on a piece, he told me the names and amounts of the drugs he had available. He was promising truckloads of the stuff, but they were all outmoded regimens that we'd already stopped accepting from individual barterers. When I told him

which current treatments I wanted, the quantity he was willing to let go of became much smaller. Eventually, we worked out a deal that was much closer to the original quantity.

Step 2: Establish Value

[Transposed from page 15 of draft]

What's It Worth? [39] When you're first getting started, barter products or services that you already know well. It's better to start small and become known as a reliable source of a single type of commodity: in my neighborhood, everybody trusted me to do their books but nobody was going to hire me to sing at their wedding. And if you're thinking about branching out into something you don't have deep experience with, make sure you involve someone who does. If you're setting up a food co-op, enlist the help of a sympathetic farmer or grocer. We find that mid-level managers at local supermarkets can be great assets: they have the expertise you need to establish reliable value rates, but they don't make enough money that you have to worry about them "siding with the competition."

Step 3: Set Protocols for Deferred Payments

[Transposed from page 2 of draft]

One of the biggest challenges in setting up a barter business is dealing with deferred payments. ~~Another of the joys of barter is the element of trust.~~ [40] In the days before currency, both parties in an exchange would have approached each other with their goods

in hand and swapped them on the spot. But barter in the twenty-first century is mostly about providing services, and those exchanges cannot take place simultaneously in real time. Think about it: if a gardener and a barber have an arrangement to swap services, the gardener can't mow the barber's lawn while he's getting his hair cut. Postmodern barter has developed a number of conventions for getting around this problem. ~~These rules of the game create a kind of *community*, and once you've joined it you find yourself trusting strangers. In today's society, where parents don't allow their children out of their sight and most people have moved away from their hometowns, the experience of trusting a stranger is exciting, scary, and deeply liberating.~~^[41]

[\[Removal 5\]](#) ^[42]

[\[Transposed from pages 15–16 of draft\]](#)

~~*Deferred Payments.* One of the biggest challenges in setting up a barter business is dealing with deferred payments.~~^[43]

_____ At first, you'll be inclined to allow deals to be made on a handshake. This is only natural; part of the appeal of barter is that it builds a sense of community and trust among the participants. But it just takes one welcher to sabotage your fledgling co-op's reputation. So start off on the right foot: create an exchange ledger that records the names and contact information of both parties, notes the date of the deal, and specifies a date by which services will be rendered. Of course, folks will soon start planning exchanges with each other that they don't run by you: but if those deals go sour, they won't reflect poorly on your co-op; in fact, they will only underscore the value of your role as a middleman.

[Step 4: Prepare for Expansion](#)

[\[Transposed from page 16 of draft\]](#)

~~*Storage Addiction*~~. [\[44\]](#) If you're going to barter, you need a place to store the goods you intend to trade and receive. This might seem obvious, but the point was totally lost on me until I found myself unable to move around in my two-bedroom apartment in Oakland. Every inch of my wall space was covered in framed paintings and drawings; I've got smaller sculptures lining the baseboards of every room, and larger ones parked among the furniture. I loved living among my art like this, but the time came when I needed to expand into a storage rental unit. I started out with one 10 x 15 unit and now have three filled to capacity. And these are personal items only—my business has graduated to acres of warehouse space in Richmond.

[\[Removal 6\] \[45\]](#)

[\[Transposed from pages 17–18 of draft\]](#)

The Global Sisterhood

I am proud to be part of an emerging “global sisterhood” of successful women who are focusing their philanthropic efforts on women in developing nations. Now, I have nothing against men, as any viewer will tell you who has seen me host professional athletes on my show and squeeze their massive biceps admiringly. But empowering women is critical to any country's effort to raise its standard of living. To put it crassly, women are

a huge resource that is being wasted when they could be drivers of success for an entire economy.

The statistics are starting to improve, but they're still appalling. Almost half the work done globally is in the informal economy, which pays lower (or not at all), requires longer hours, and has no job security. In Africa, the informal sector is 80 percent of the economy, and 90 percent of those jobs are held by women. As if that weren't enough, women farmers produce about half of Africa's food yet are held back by laws and cultural attitudes from buying their own land, attaining their own credit, and adopting new technologies like seeds and fertilizers. All this while performing the housework, raising the children, hauling the water—you get the picture.

[\[Transposed from page 12 of draft\]](#)

When I was raising funds for the show's pilot, I often got asked, "Why not focus on local barter stories in the U.S.? Why do you insist on going global?" Now, let me be clear: I am as much an enthusiast of the local co-op as anyone . . . and that's saying something in the Bay Area. I get most of my food that way, and for years I also clothed myself and a growing daughter in vintage bartered items. People struggle economically in the U.S., too, and barter can be a valuable way to supplement a modest income. At our co-op, we've set up a recycling center mainly so that families with nothing else to barter can collect bottles and aluminum cans and swap them for essentials.[\[46\]](#)

[\[Transposed from pages 12–13 of draft\]](#)

But the international angle attracted me for two reasons. [The first was really a matter of scale, the number of lives we could touch.](#)[\[47\]](#) If we'd kept the show focused on American communities, we would have found plenty of local artists to barter with—I

already trafficked in local art all the time in the East Bay. But each time we discover a new form of folk art overseas, we bring to our viewers not just a unique artistic vision but awareness of a completely new, often neglected culture. Instead of helping an individual artist to launch her career, we help infuse whole regional economies with much-needed cash. And now that we've expanded the show's reach beyond art to include health care, sustainable agriculture, schools, and other critical needs of those societies, we're able to make a contribution much more directly—and with much less red tape—than anything we could have achieved in the U.S.

[\[Transposed from page 12 of draft\]](#)

[The second reason was microcredit.](#) ~~My other attraction to an international theme was the art.~~ Back in 1983, Muhammad Yunus created a bank in Bangladesh that gave very small loans at reasonable interest rates to the poor to allow them to start businesses. The idea was to provide an alternative to the loan sharks that dominate cash-strapped communities all over the world. The majority of microloan recipients were women, and their rate of default was extremely low. When Yunus won the Nobel Prize in 2006, I heard about this concept for the first time and was blown away by it. Surely, I thought, barter and microloans could work together beautifully—, [since both are perfectly suited to the needs of poor women who aspire to better their lives.](#)^[48]

[\[Transposed from page 19 of draft\]](#)

I'm often asked why I don't just restrict the activities of my tv show and foundation to women. The answer lies in another lesson that foreign aid organizations have learned over the years: excluding men from aid incites backlash against women. These days, there are some philanthropists who want to trumpet their programs as

promoting gender equality on moral grounds; I empathize with their point of view, but I think they're making a dangerous mistake. Forcing a man to sign a form that says he "does no harm" to women is not likely to change his mind and habits if he's a wife-beater. I say let's get him to realize that his wife is as precious as the diamonds he mines.

[\[Transposed from page 14 of draft\]](#)

What globalizing barter does is allow us to bring our own stories and passions to the problems facing the world. If we all live in a global village, why shouldn't this village have its own co-op? As the success of microcredit has shown, empowering ~~the poor; and especially~~-women; can reverse downward economic trends, [reduce conflicts over money](#), and build stable, healthy communities. [\[49\]](#)

[The Elder Commune](#) [\[50\]](#)

[\[Transposed from pages 3–4 of draft\]](#)

[Notwithstanding the importance of barter overseas, there's much more we could be doing with barter in this country, too.](#) ~~But barter—to me, and to others in the community—is more than just a way to spice up our lives.~~ [\[51\]](#) In a world that can no longer support the cushy retirement plans of the baby boom generation (*my* generation), barter can serve as a safety net for seniors. We barter advocates see ourselves building relationships that will be sustainable into our doddering old age. Barter helps us to redefine our wants and needs, to identify resources, and to maintain our own productivity while adapting to the changes in our aging bodies and minds.

In today's society, most retirement-age persons are already corralled into "assisted-living" complexes that provide the medical services critical to an aging population. ~~I have no beef with these places—I can't wait to get my mother into one (joking, Mom!)—and I totally recognize that they will continue to be necessary because they provide the medical services critical to an aging population.~~ [52] But lots of other services that these institutions provide—housekeeping, laundry, meals, social events, drug regimen adherence, etc.—could be delivered via barter at much lower cost. ~~With social security in jeopardy and the largest generation that has ever lived heading toward old age, America has reached a critical moment: it is time for us to start thinking about setting up "barter complexes."~~ [53] In fact, there's a movement afoot among my fellow ex-hippies to build retirement *communes*. In these small communities of 20 to 40 households, with names like ElderSpirit and ElderGrace, residents collaborate on decisions about landscaping, meal planning, and social event planning; they help each other shovel snow, install air conditioners, and mow lawns.

Even better, some communities—inspired by "cohousing" efforts pioneered in Denmark in the 1970s—are intergenerational, with small children growing up right next to their grandparents, and adult children able to keep an eye on their aging parents. As this movement grows, the techniques of barter—if used properly—can [revive the values of agrarian society by helping to](#) keep communal "sharing" fair and honest. [54]

[The Role of Creativity](#)

Whether your barter project is local or global, and whether your goal is to provide stability, foster community, enrich lives, or all of the above, there's one element of barter that cannot be underestimated: creativity.[55]

[Removal 7] [56]

[Transposed from page 23 of draft]

Sometimes I think barter is like the Shona process of making sculptures. The sculptor goes out into a field and returns with an ordinary piece of serpentine (a greenish rock that we also have in California). He or she will sit under an acacia tree and start daydreaming with files, hammers, chisels, and sandpaper nearby. Once the imagined shape starts to show through the rock, the sculptor builds a large fire and places the stone nearby, heating its surface until it is porous and steaming. The sculptor then pours over the piece a layer of melted beeswax, which gets into the stone's pores and brings its natural color to life. After it's cooled, the stone is buffed to a silky finish.

In barter, the rocks are the ordinary stuff of our lives—the things we forget to appreciate. The daydreams are the imagination we bring to reinvesting those items with value. And the fire and beeswax baptism are the transaction itself: hard meets soft, opposites meld, and the result is a beauty that fire and wax could not accomplish on their own.

Author Queries

Note: Deleted passages have been gathered at the back of this draft; deletions within passages are generally shown within the revised text.

[1] See cover memo for rationale for title change.

[2] Entire first paragraph has been deleted: among other problems, I wasn't convinced that barter gets a bad rap from anyone . . . from whom? Second paragraph cut as well: I love the UFC reference, but the essay doesn't go further into domestic politics.

[3] The passage below is one of your strongest in terms of evoking the drama of your work in Africa, so let's lead with it and draw the reader in right away.

[4] Okay to delete? You don't do anything further with this information, and it's a bit distracting here.

[5] Here I've omitted the paragraphs that use Maiba and Zuka's story to summarize recent Zimbabwean history. We want to keep this opening passage brief and immediate. Although the story of Maiba and Zuka is fascinating, I couldn't find a place for it among our restructured sections.

[6] Okay to delete? The relevance of Maiba being Ndebele, "a splinter group off of the Shona," isn't clear, especially now that we've removed much of Maiba's backstory.

[7] Okay to delete? Not sure if this mention of "gratuity" is intended as a joke or a real observation, but it distracts from dramatic of the moment.

[8] New subhead okay? Technically, this section does not give a history of barter. But it does link the roots of barter in your life with the roots of barter in contemporary Zimbabwe, so I think it's appropriate.

[9] Please recast this opening passage in your own voice. Note that this paragraph lays out (a) our thematic progression as embodied in our new subheadings (providing stability, fostering community, enriching lives); (b) our narrative progression from your roots to your current international role; and (c), in the last sentence, the Main Conclusion we agreed upon.

[10] Although this sentence worked in your original draft as a transition, it's no longer required.

[11] Please recast this transition—our goal here is to highlight the link between the agrarian roots of barter in your childhood and the same dynamic in Zimbabwe.

[12] Okay as revised? I found online this information about miners spending their remittances at the mine camp and then claiming to have sent the money home: I can share the link if the phenomenon isn't familiar. I've inserted it here because your original sentence seemed to give too much importance to money in an essay touting the centrality of barter.

[13] Subhead here, and those that follow, directly reflect our thematic progression; feel free to put in your own words.

[14] Transposed here, with new subhead, per our thematic progression. In the previous section, we begin with your story, then move to the international storyline; in this section, I suggest we do the reverse because this next passage flows readily from what precedes.

[15] Revision okay? The goal here is to highlight the section's theme while transitioning from the international storyline to your own.

[16] Deletion okay? I like this insight a lot, but it doesn't relate to our theme of stability.

[17] Okay to delete? These are colorful narrative details, but the reader will be wondering, "What does all of this have to do with stability?" We need to get the reader to your pregnancy quicker so that the connection can be established.

[18] Okay to add? Otherwise, the relevance to the theme of stability is only implied.

[19] Here's Conclusion 2, "Globalization," revised to prepare the reader for the fact that this section will address the theme of community both here and abroad. Please feel free to recast in your own words.

[20] I like the details above a lot, but again, they distract from our section theme, so I've encapsulated the critical information here. Okay?

[21] Okay to delete? San Francisco doesn't play a further role in the story . . .

[22] Because the preceding paragraph leaps ahead seventeen years to the present, we need a transition to the next passage, which describes what happened in those seventeen years.

[23] Okay to delete? Again, I'm trying to keep our brisk pace here, and "after decades of inactivity" brings the reader sufficiently up to speed, I think.

[24] Okay to add? Seems helpful to put a face on the crisis here.

[25] It is with hesitation that I have omitted this paragraph. I recognize how much this story means to you and how deeply your relationship with Andrew informs the focus of the House of Stone project. After great deliberation, I decided it was too much of a digression from the theme of the relevant section, “Fostering Community.” But if you feel strongly that it should be retained, let’s discuss how to make it work.

[26] This passage did not seem necessary to retain, though I would have liked to work the \$1.4 billion in somewhere . . .

[27] Please recast in your own voice. What we need here is a concluding statement that reinforces the theme of community-building both here and abroad.

[28] Here, we introduce the theme of enrichment with your own testimonial, which nicely demonstrates that barter is not just your business but remains a part of your personal life.

[29] Okay to delete? This transitional sentence made sense in your draft but no longer serves a purpose.

[30] I hope this connection doesn’t seem forced. Your material on Zimbabwean sculpture and music is fascinating, and this section’s theme seems the most relevant place for it.

[31] Okay to delete? Tribal politics distracts from the section’s theme.

[32] Okay to delete? The “pre-NRA Michelangelo” is cute and vintage Freitas humor, but the image repeats what you’ve already said twice now: “wrestling free from . . . odd-shaped blocks” and “bodies escaping from abstract backgrounds.” These phrases are more vivid and arresting.

[33] I’ve boiled this paragraph down to two sentences above. Getting into the categories of music seemed like too much detail, and the bit about heckling establishes the combative environment without the need for further elaboration. Okay?

[34] Here, I’ve collapsed your passage on Zimbabwean music into a single paragraph. Again, the goal is to stay with the theme: the resulting paragraph highlights the richness of women’s contributions. Okay?

[35] Okay to delete? Repeats what we’ve already learned about cell phones in Africa.

[36] The three sentences originally positioned here have been transposed above. They begin with “What stands out about this music is the joy it expresses.” This reordering places emphasis on the contributions of women to Zimbabwean music before getting into the details of your program. Okay as revised?

[37] Here's Conclusion 4, "Personal Success," recast to serve as a transition between your barter with Big Tech and the lovely description of the Zimbabwean women's performance in your Culver City studio. Okay as revised?

[38] Okay as revised? Your run-in heads in this section were fun (e.g., "You Both Gotta Want It"), but because this advice is in a sense the heart of your essay, it seems advisable to use a more serious tone.

[39] Revised for tone, as above.

[40] Transposed up from following paragraph.

[41] I've pulled this material in from your original opening passage. Okay to delete the last two sentences? The one about trusting strangers undermines your argument about the need to establish a ledger. And the one about feeling liberated seems out of place in a section that's focused on the business aspects of barter.

[42] Nice enough paragraph about the element of surprise, but it didn't contribute directly to any section's theme, so I've deleted.

[43] Transposed to above to lead off the discussion of Step 3.

[44] Revised for tone, as above.

[45] I like this passage about "barter versus gifting" a lot but could not find a place for it. It's not really a "step" toward getting started with barter, and it would have bogged down the narrative of barter in your hometown. Okay to delete?

[46] I've pulled this paragraph in from your draft section entitled "Globalizing Barter."

[47] Okay to switch the order of the two reasons you were attracted to foreign aid? The connection with microcredit is a bit less direct, so it seems better to lead with the more convincing argument, which is the number of lives touched.

[48] This paragraph leaves me unclear as to how microcredit and barter might work hand in hand. Expand on this a bit? I've tried to spackle the gap here . . .

[49] Here's Conclusion 1, "Women's Value," rephrased slightly so that "the success of microcredit" stands in as a real-world example of "when women's skills and labor are valued appropriately." Okay as revised?

[50] I wrestled with where to put this passage. Throughout the revised essay, we tend to move from the domestic to the international, and here we're going back to the domestic. I tried transposing it to earlier passages, but in each position it seemed like a digression. I don't want to cut it because it addresses an important aspect of our essay's theme: barter at the end of life. So I've placed it here, "end of essay." Does this work for you?

[51] New transition needed; please revise as you see fit.

[52] Okay to delete? Aside from the joke about Mom (which could strike some readers as less funny than your other humorous asides), this sentence pretty much restates the one before.

[53] Okay to delete? Since you wrote this, the latest threat to society security in Congress has been vanquished (at least for now). More to the point, while your essay champions barter effectively, addressing how it might supplement (replace?) social security is beyond its scope.

[54] Here's Conclusion 3, "Local Community," streamlined a bit to focus on the link between agrarian values and today's experiments in setting up barter communities. Okay?

[55] Here I retain your original ending and provide a bit of connective tissue. I'm of two minds about this strategy. Your extended analogy is lovely and in the spirit of the essay, but it doesn't present a strong thematic conclusion. Yet we can't simply end with the elder commune section. Your thoughts?

[56] The claim made in this paragraph seems overwrought. You seem to sense this, apologizing for the "overstatement." I looked for a way to work this into the section about providing security, but the tone here is a bit too ominous. Okay to leave out?

REMOVED MATERIAL

Why Barter?

Why Zimbabwe?

Why Me?

Globalizing Barter

Getting Started Locally

The Future of Global Barter

The Spirit of Barter

[Removal 1: from pages 1–2 of draft]

~~Barter gets a bad rap. Hell if I know why. It’s been around for millennia, and it’s seen whole societies through times of famine, war, and economic depression. Usually, while the men were fighting about money, the women were quietly bartering to keep food on the table. Right now, barter is what’s keeping the nation of Zimbabwe alive (if barely) through decades of dictatorship. It helped generations of immigrants find their footing in America, including my Portuguese great grandparents: they were the wetbacks of their day, but through hard work and trading services they managed to become real estate moguls in the hills east of San Francisco with property worth many millions. And barter, let me tell you, has saved my own skin too many times to mention. Without barter, I wouldn’t have my career, my art, or my precious daughter.~~

~~———The beauty of barter is what the politicians would call “universal access.” That is, they would call it that if any of them would back it. Lord knows for many years I tried to get some of our more likely members of Congress to fund modest barter co-ops in their states, with nothing to show for the effort, until I hit pay dirt with the House of Stone™ project. Now they all want in, liberals from my own neck of the woods, libertarians from the Midwest, even conservative Latinos in Florida. After years of twisting so many arms that I should have earned a UFC title, I finally have their attention—but for the wrong reason. Some would call what I’ve been doing “lobbying,” only with kilos of peanuts instead of money. Now that “real money” is involved, they’re all ears.~~

[Removal 2: from pages 6–7 of draft]

~~The mother, Maiba, had married Zuka when they were sixteen and eighteen. They were both members of the Ndebele tribe, which had been the reigning ethnic group in the old Zimbabwe Kingdom and during the colonial era, when the country was known as Rhodesia. As a small girl, Maiba barely remembered Bob Marley singing at the Independence Day celebrations in 1980, with Prince Charles bobbing his head herky-jerky to the reggae beat. A few years later, when Mugabe started his “pacification” against the Ndebele, which the people called Gukurahundi or “the strong wind,” Maiba lost her father and two uncles. Even so, Maiba considered her life with Zuka to be filled with blessings: they had plenty of children (Rufaro was the seventh), and they were able to feed themselves thanks to Zuka’s job working for a local white farmer.~~

~~Then, in 1997, came the Great General Strike, which paralyzed the country. The white farmers, who owned 70 percent of the country’s arable land, were forced to emigrate, the government seized the land, and food production halted, creating a crippling shortage. Zuka had no choice but to find work in the diamond fields. He came~~

home maybe once a year, and on one visit brought the HIV virus with him. Now he was back in Marange, along with tens of thousands of other illegal prospectors digging in the fields and risking injury or even death at the hands of the government's security details. Maiba hadn't heard from him in eight months.

[Removal 3: from pages 13–14 of draft]

This program really speaks to my heart because, like others of my generation, I lost many young friends to the epidemic. All through the seventies, the bars I frequented were full of sexy gay men dancing with their shirts off and welcoming us with open arms. Of course, it helped that we showed up in high heels and outrageous costumes: to them my girlfriend and I were just two more drag queens. I remember Andrew, a gentle soul who looked like the Marlboro Man: whenever we made our entry at the EndUp, he always walked up to Melanie and me with our first drinks, prepared just the way we liked them. When he got sick, he rarely left his apartment on Dolores Street; I visited and saw how much losing his looks had shaken and shamed him. Eventually, he stopped letting me in, so I left care packages outside the door. No one ever informed me of his death: I still wonder if he had any sort of memorial service.

[Removal 4: from page 19 of draft]

I started House of Stone Enterprises in 2006. Last year, we bartered an estimated \$1.4 billion in HIV medications and original Zimbabwe artwork. The question I ask myself every morning is, What's next? How else might we use barter to help the people of Africa find health, peace, and economic prosperity?

——— Of course, there are lots of Americans doing good work in Africa: the Gateses, Oprah, Bono, Alicia Keys, John Legend, the Clintons. And how they get that work done is none of my business. My aim is to sidestep politics and work directly with the African people. At a time when well-meaning humanitarian aid efforts can be co-opted by local governments or private enterprise because of the large sums of money involved, barter is an approach that keeps everyone honest: you only trade for goods or services if you intend to use them yourself, otherwise they're worthless to you.

[Removal 5: from page 2 of draft]

A third reason to barter is the element of *surprise*. Now, not everybody likes surprises: my mother is one of those who shakes her Christmas gifts demanding to know what's inside; when we threw her a surprise seventieth birthday party, she swore like a sailor and left the room. But for many of us, life doesn't have enough surprises: we get up in the morning, go to work, come home, pop dinner in the microwave, go to sleep, and haul ourselves out of bed again. Our paychecks are automatically deposited into our bank accounts—we pull the same amount of money out of the ATM every Monday morning and keep walking the treadmill of our routines.

[Removal 6: from pages 16–17 of draft]

Barter versus Gifting. I have learned the hard way to keep separate my gift and barter relationships. I don't barter with family, and I don't give gifts to members of my local co-op: mixing the two can cause hurt feelings, or even legal threats, on both sides.

———When I was growing up, the farmers didn't have a problem mixing barter with gifting. If you left a bushel of cherries on your neighbors' porch at harvest time, you knew that you'd soon find a bush of their peaches on your own stoop. If you helped a friend pump out a flooded basement, you knew you could call on him to help raise a new roof over your new garage. If you had people over for dinner, you expected to be invited to their home in return. Nobody was keeping a formal barter ledger, but folks knew the rules, and people who didn't "return favors" would find themselves quickly left out of the loop.

———Sad to say, during my lifetime the spirit of giving in my old neighborhood has vanished. That local "gift economy" only succeeded for as long as it did because the community was small and stable, with families that had known each other for generations and had long memories. When the *nouveau riche* types arrived, they were drawn to the romance of the small-town culture, but they didn't understand that everything we did for them was *quid pro quo*: they just thought, "Aren't these simple country folk so generous and nice!"

[\[Removal 7: removal from pages 22–23 of draft\]](#)

I said at the outset that I wouldn't have my beautiful daughter, Sophie, if it weren't for barter. That might be overstatement: now that I have her, I cannot imagine that I would ever have given her up regardless of any hardships I might have faced. But that's easy to say now, in hindsight. As a scared single 26-year-old who just found out she was pregnant by a man who was definitely not husband material, in the era of *Roe v. Wade*, I had a choice to make, and it was the support of the local co-op and those who encouraged my Ledger Lady business that gave me the strength and confidence to take on single motherhood. Today, I see it as my role to provide that sense of communal support to others.