

The Power of Barter in the Global Sisterhood

By Carina Freitas

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. 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. 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.

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. 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

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.

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.

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 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. 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.

Providing Stability

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.

It was barter that allowed me to achieve stability in my own life. When I was ten, my 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. Before long I was living in a communal farmhouse, managing the garden and pursuing my business degree at the local community college.

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.

Fostering Community

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.

Where barter really began to pay off for me personally was when I reconnected with my hippie artist roots. As the Ledger Lady, I started hooking up my artist friends with the bare walls of the nouvelle cuisine restaurants, high-end salons, and art galleries that started popping up all over area where I grew up. 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.

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.

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. 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, suffered from the pronounced—and sometimes deadly—side effects of the out-of-date regimens.

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.

Enriching Lives

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.

Perhaps the most personally enriching discovery of my barter career has been stumbling on the marvelous ancient art of Shona sculpture. These days, Zimbabwe is known the world over for its sculptures—made of serpentine, verdite, or granite—with their 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. But the Shona stone masters have never seen the work of Western artists, and their "modern" style goes back to the eleventh century.

My latest discovery is traditional Zimbabwean music. The contemporary Zimbabwe music scene is vibrant but turbulent: genres are dominated by male pop stars whose followings constantly heckle each other at concerts. 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.

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. 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.

Talk about enriching lives. Our work has brought as much joy to our American supporters as it has the women of Zimbabwe. 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.

Step 1: Determine Mutual Need

A barter exchange won't work unless each party truly wants what the other has. 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

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

One of the biggest challenges in setting up a barter business is dealing with deferred payments. 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.

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

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.

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.

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.

But the international angle attracted me for two reasons. The first was really a matter of scale, the number of lives we could touch. 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.

The second reason was microcredit. 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.

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.

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 poor women can reverse downward economic trends, reduce conflicts over money, and build stable, healthy communities.

The Elder Commune

Notwithstanding the importance of barter overseas, there's much more we could be doing with barter in this country, too. 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. 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. 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.

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.

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.