

La Vida Local

From biodiesel to slow food, change begins at home

by Alison Azer

Three years ago, Barter Bob turned an aging cockatiel into an African kudu, the kudu into a lava lamp, and then the lava lamp into some dinosaur fossils. And a little cash. No, Bob isn't travelling with the Barnum & Bailey circus; he's the top performer at Calgary Dollars—the best barter network in town.

"Barter" Bob Tomlinson comes by his skills honestly. "I grew up in the interior of B.C. in a large extended family that was forever trading goods and services, like a pair of pants for two hours of weeding the garden," he says. Today, Tomlinson relies on his bartering finesse to provide almost half of his basic needs—from organic food to a newly acquired queen size bed (a bargain at 130 Calgary Dollars). He also values the social connections he's made through bartering. "Bartering creates community," he says. "It facilitates the age-old tradition of trading—without the interference of the World Trade Organization or the New York Stock Exchange."

According to Robin Morrison, the business coordinator at Calgary Dollars (formerly called the Bow Chinook Barter Community), the network depends on enthusiasts like Tomlinson and his "barter buddies." Morrison wishes all members were as prolific with their Calgary Dollars transactions as Tomlinson, who averages 100 deals a month. "The network relies on the frequent turnover of the Calgary Dollars," she says. "If too many members stash their 'cash' instead of spending it, the network begins to lose momentum." Speaking from her office in Calgary's old "Y" building, Morrison talks about the logistics of creating one of Canada's fastest-growing barter networks "We have approximately \$34,000 in Calgary Dollars in circulation, with another \$34,000 in reserve," she says. "The scrip, in denominations of \$1, \$5 and \$10, has special markings to prevent counterfeiting."



Barter Bob Tomlinson and the Hempress of Clean, Kathy Stowell, at a Calgary Dollars potluck dinner. Barter Bob is Calgary Dollars top performer, and the Hempress handmakes hemp and herbal soaps.

JOHN SHARPE

Morrison organizes monthly potlucks, an opportunity for people to meet one another and share their wares over an eclectic menu of chickpea stews and tofu turkey. Held at the Carpenters' Union Hall, the potluck often draws unsuspecting onlookers. "Last month, two young men wandered into the hall and were welcomed with steaming bowls of chili," she says. "They had never heard of Calgary Dollars, but by the end of the night they had signed up [annual membership costs 12 Canadian dollars] and were eager to spend the 40 Calgary Dollars each new member receives."

Bernard Lietaer, a former Belgian banker and the original architect of the euro, explains the benefits of such complementary currencies in his book *The Future of Money*. He argues that unprecedented strain is being exerted on global monetary systems, with devastating consequences for society and the environment, and that alternative economic models make both social sense and business sense. "They contribute to making the local economy more self-reliant," he writes. "They're a modest but healthy counterweight to the relentless globalization of the economy."

According to Morrison's colleague, Gerald Wheatley, some governments not only tolerate local currencies, they actually help communities create them. "Governments in Japan, Australia and New Zealand view bartering as a way to facilitate alternative trading of goods and services, particularly in marginalized and vulnerable communities," says Wheatley. The City of Calgary, for its part, allows members to pay for such city services as transportation, recreation and select city housing projects using Calgary Dollars. And what about one of life's certainties? Joe Ceci, a city alderman and an active member, once mused that income taxes of the future could, in fact, be paid in Calgary Dollars.

Many activists are working to reinstate age-old forms of exchange: barter networks, community loan circles and even the honour system. For them, Alberta's alternatives are the Alberta Advantage. Also, they are voicing their social and environmental opinions at checkout counters across Alberta—and in doing so, they hope to convince corporations to trade more fairly, produce more cleanly and hire more equitably. It seems to be less about boycotting certain companies than about creating environmentally sound and socially sustainable lifestyle choices.

FOR DEBORAH ROBB, making the pilgrimage to Seattle in November of 1999 was nothing less than a response to a calling. "It was the most instinctive thing I've ever done," she says. "I just knew I had to go." She's referring, of course, to the "Battle of Seattle" that marked the epochal meeting of the global economic elite—otherwise known as the World Trade Organization—and the 50,000 or so uninited guests who attempted to ruin their party.

Four years later, the tear gas has faded but Robb's memories have not. Surrounded by worm composters and colourful cloth diapers at Earth's General Store in Edmonton, where she works as the general manager, Robb looks wistfully out the shop's window at the street below. It's not clear

whether she's seeing Edmonton's lively Whyte Avenue or imagining Seattle's streets bulging with protesters.

"The city centre was under lockdown and the National Guard was closing in," Robb recalls dramatically. "My affinity group and I were on the move. After an hour of manoeuvring through the blockades, we flanked the heart of the conflict between police and protesters. Suddenly, I had a panoramic view of the unimaginable social saga unfolding around us. Against an otherwise cosmopolitan skyline, Black Hawk helicopters hovered over impenetrable clouds of tear gas. The sights and sounds were like nothing I have ever experienced." She pauses and continues: "For me, Seattle was less about acknowledging the strength of the system and more about celebrating the power of the people. I never doubted the importance of being there."

Like many who experience transformative moments away from home, Robb's return to Edmonton was challenging. "Seattle was such an intense experience that I couldn't just pick up where I had left off," she says. Robb had seen the emperor without his clothes and was eager, if not a little impatient, for everyone else to see him that way, too.

Back at Earth's General Store, Robb continues to help people "think globally and act locally." She knows many customers whose small changes—such as drinking fair-trade coffee instead of Folgers or washing with biodegradable laundry soap instead of Tide—trigger discussions about the threat of genetically modified food or the privatization of public services. Admittedly, it's a very gradual undressing of the emperor, but it gives Robb hope nonetheless.

THIS MERGER OF PURCHASES AND POLITICS is not, of course, limited to one store. Another revolution is underway in the culinary world. Mary Bailey, editor of Edmonton's *City Palate*, has been passionate about food—particularly food that doesn't come out of a package or across a fast food counter—for as long as she can remember. Appropriately, Bailey is out tending her garden when I call, and unlike her nursery rhyme namesake, she's anything but contrary about the place her garden holds at the global dinner table.

As an advocate of the "Slow Food" movement, Bailey celebrates the journey of food—the path it takes from seed to table—and she's in no rush to get it there. Her ideas about food and eating look à la carte when compared to a culture that reveres food that's fast, convenient and predictable. "Costco is the worst thing that's happened to food in North America," she says. "Customers are first intoxicated with copious samples of pizza pops and nacho chips and then sold vast quantities of packaged preservatives. It is false economy at its finest."

Costco and other giant food retailers are enemy number one for the Slow Food movement, which began in Italy more than a decade ago and is slowly spreading across North America. With roughly 500 members in Canada, Slow Foodies believe that the finest food is grown locally, raised organically, eaten in season and washed down with good wine and good cheer. They also

add some culinary politics to the recipe. The Slow Food manifesto, aptly called "The Ark," calls upon food lovers everywhere to "protect the small purveyors of fine food from the deluge of industrial standardization, to ensure the survival of endangered animal breeds... to take a stand against the obsessive worrying about hygiene matters which kills the specific character of many kinds of production."

Bailey was introduced to Slow Food in the mid-1990s and liked it so much she started a chapter in Edmonton—the Edmonton/Northern Alberta Slow Food Convivium. Lately, the group has been taking field trips through rural Alberta. "Amazing things happen when city folk meet farm folk on their turf," says Bailey. "Out there, we shed our urban skin and bask in a culinary communion with the land."

Bailey and others are hoping to take a trip down to Highwood Crossing, a farm about 20 minutes south of Calgary on the Highwood river. There, owners Tony and Penny Marshall are squeezing out weekly 100-litre batches of cold-pressed canola oil—the latest rage in the kitchens of Calgary's top restaurants. "Cold-pressed canola is not a commodity," says Tony, the third-generation cultivator of his family's farm. "We consider each year a separate vintage. This year's oil has a uniquely nutty flavour, golden hue and memorable bouquet."

Everything old is new again at Highwood Crossing. "My great-grandfather grew everything organically—what other choice was there?" laughs Tony. For the first decade the land was under the Marshalls' stewardship, they farmed conventionally. Eventually, though, Tony and Penny decided they could no longer watch their pesticides seep into the river that runs along their property. Their switch to organic crops and sustainable production methods didn't happen overnight, but the Marshalls found a way to farm according to their principles.

And it's paying off. In 2003, sales of "Canada's olive oil" doubled the previous year's figures. "It is fantastic to see the growing interest in eating where you live," says Tony. "Sure it's great for business, but we're in it for much more than that."

LIKE THE MARSHALLS, James Edwards has a thing for canola oil. But the 25-year-old forestry graduate isn't sopping it up with French bread and balsamic vinegar. Edwards is part of the Boiled Frog Trading Cooperative, a Calgary-based, non-profit organization that tends a community garden, teaches people to make houses out of cob and straw, coordinates a bicycle commuting network and transforms waste canola oil into biodiesel which can be used to fuel cars, trucks, lawn mowers and snow blowers.

Unlike Edwards, however, many members of the co-op choose biodiesel more for economic reasons than to make a political statement. Still, he supports positive change, regardless of the motivation. "I always encourage people to take small steps toward social and environmental consciousness," says Edwards. "I say 'try it out, then see how

you feel.' Most times, they come back eager to try something more."

Edwards's philosophy sounds like an inversion of the boiling frog principle, after which the co-op was named. It goes something like this: A frog dropped in a pot of boiling water will flail frantically and try to get out. But if placed in a pot of tepid water with the heat increasing only gradually, the frog will sink into a tranquil stupor and allow itself to be boiled to death. The initiatives of the co-op are intended to help the frog in all of us resist the dominant culture of consumption.

Edwards was formally trained for biodiesel processing by a group called Solar Energy International. But it's the biodiesel bible, *From the Fryer to the Fuel Tank* (now in its third edition), upon which he relies most. The procedure

Increasingly, consumers are voicing their social and environmental opinions across Alberta, hoping to convince corporations to trade more fairly, produce more cleanly and hire more equitably.

requires a modified oil drum and filtering gear fitted on a two-wheeled trailer. Inside the 210-litre drum, a chemical process separates high-value biodiesel from low-value glycerin. The filtered biodiesel is then sold for 20¢/litre to the co-op's 100-plus members, while the glycerin—waste not, want not—is sent off to soap makers.

Edwards doesn't have big dreams for biodiesel, though; he's ever the purist. "I promote bikes over biodiesel any day," he says. "People would be amazed if they knew the benefits of cycling. It is much easier to get around downtown Calgary on two wheels—no one charges cyclists parking, it's great exercise and the environment doesn't suffer." For now, though, Edwards is satisfied by the growing number of drivers whose tailpipes emit that somewhat tempting scent of french fries and taco chips.

MYLES KITAGAWA TAKES A DIFFERENT APPROACH to alternative transportation. As associate director of Edmonton's Toxics Watch, he realized that changing our consumption patterns begins at home. "I gave up my car after the first Gulf War because, as a car owner, I felt complicit in a war that was all about securing the supply of oil to North America," he says. Kitagawa remained car-free until he got married a few years later and found that a vehicle came along with the vows. "I soon found myself taking unnecessary trips to unnecessary places to buy unnecessary things," he laughs.

So, four years ago, Kitagawa and his wife sold their vehicle and joined up with some other carless drivers to form



The Carsharing Cooperative of Edmonton owns a 1999 Toyota Tercel.

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the Carsharing Cooperative of Edmonton. Once they recruited 14 members—all with clean driving records—the co-op was ready to purchase its first car: a 1999 Toyota Tercel. The car is parked in the heart of Edmonton's Old Strathcona neighbourhood, within walking distance of the members' homes. At current membership, the likelihood the car is available at any given time is over 90 per cent. The Canadian Automobile Association estimates it costs more than \$8,000 a year to operate a new vehicle, which, given that the average vehicle sits unused for 23 hours each day, amounts to a hefty hourly rate of \$21.92. Compare that to the fee charged by the co-op—\$2 an hour plus 35¢ a kilometre—and it's easy to see why car sharing is gaining popularity throughout the world.

The co-op is now caught in a chicken-and-egg expansion plan. "We have maxed out our car-to-member ratio and are ready to buy a new vehicle," Kitagawa explains. "The challenge is that we need more members to get the funds for the vehicle and we need the vehicle to lure in more members." And while they aren't looking for a gas-guzzling SUV, Kitagawa admits that a lightweight pickup truck would add flexibility to the fleet. "Everyone needs a pickup at some point," he says, "and it would sure be handy to have access to one when you need it."

IT SOUNDS LIKE THE SHOPPING LIST for a left-wing scavenger hunt: barter your hemp shoes for a bag of organic potatoes while driving around on french-fry fuel. To some Albertans, these ideas are at the cutting edge of an alternative lifestyle. To others, though, these efforts seem like rearranging the furniture while the house burns down. (Especially if the house is made of cob or straw.)

Tim Weis and Howaida Hassan, both Edmonton-based activists, believe that local alternatives are important, but not at the expense of social and environmental consciousness. Weis, a PhD candidate in environmental science, warns that "the scientific community agrees that global warming poses a catastrophic threat to humanity. If we are to reverse this phenomenon before it's too late, it will require a radical shift in the levels of consumption of more than a few dedicated individuals." Hassan, a transportation engineer, agrees. "As citizens of the so-called first world, we need to understand how destructive our disposable lifestyle really is," she says. "Buying organic and fair-trade goods isn't enough."

As new parents, Weis and Hassan feel a heightened sense of social and environmental responsibility. "We curb the instinct to buy outfits for our daughter when the label reads 'Made in Indonesia,' 'China' or any country known for violating human rights," Hassan says. "Indeed, we often just borrow children's clothing from friends to avoid consumption of more goods altogether."

Last October, Weis and Hassan brought their socially clad daughter to the Alberta Social Forum held at the University of Alberta. The forum, organized under the banner "Another World is Possible—Another Alberta is Possible," brought together folks from all corners of the province interested in creating local change for global survival.

Colette Fluet-Howrsh, one of the forum organizers, represents life at the juncture of the local and the global. In the spring of 2001, she travelled to Quebec City to protest the Free Trade Area of the Americas. It was a humbling experience: "I remember crying out for social justice, living wages and human rights and realizing that, as a middle-class Albertan, I didn't really know about the injustices I was railing against." Fluet-Howrsh spent the next couple of years working with disadvantaged communities in Edmonton and was shocked by what she saw. "I could not reconcile the official government mantra of the Alberta Advantage," she says, "when everything I saw pointed to the Alberta Disadvantage."

FOR THOSE ALBERTANS who will accept nothing less than the great socio-economic revolution, the success of barter networks and biodiesel offers little comfort. Yet a glance back at the positive changes that *have* taken hold in our society—think seat belts, bike helmets and recycling—suggests that transformation is not only possible but inevitable. In the meantime, people like Deborah Robb hold on tight to their dreams of a better future for Alberta and for the rest of the world. Whether she's on the front lines of a protest or selling biodegradable laundry soap to an SUV owner living in suburbia, Robb takes heart. "Consciousness is a one-way journey," she says, "and once people start on it they rarely turn back. We create the path one step at a time." 🌱

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