
LEARNING TO LIVE WITH LESS¹

Sarah Byrnes[©]

When peals of laughter floated up the stairs, the librarian asked Connie Allen what her group was laughing about. After all, hadn't they formed to deal with the restrictions of living on limited income? What makes that any fun? The group was based on an insight of Connie's, who started a "Resource Sharing Group" in South Paris, Maine. "I knew several people who were living with limited income either because of unemployment, under-employment, retirement, or voluntary simplicity," she says. "And I thought, if we put this group together, we could all benefit from it. It would make life easier for all of us."

She was right. But what she didn't expect was how much fun they would have. "We used to meet in the basement of the local library, about twelve of us, each week," explains Connie. "The librarian was always asking us what we were laughing at. Somehow we just always had a lot of fun when we met. And we helped each other in all kinds of ways." At each meeting, members of the group said what they needed, and what they could offer. "Usually by the time we got around the circle, the needs had been addressed, or at least ideas had been shared about how to address them," says Connie. "We also talked about things we had done during the week that saved money or time, and we listed the sharing that had occurred during the week—the things we had exchanged with each other," she adds.

That listing must have taken a while, given how much the group members helped each other. They shared lawn mowers, books, and tools; helped one member set up her new office; organized a yard and craft sale for forty people; set up a website to share information and list items to sell; offered tutorials in a variety of subjects; brainstormed job possibilities; met for potlucks; and shared inexpensive recipe ideas and savings tips. "We would bulk shop together," Connie says. "And we'd tell each other about sales."

One woman started teaching exercise classes after the group helped her get started, and a few others published books using suggestions and expertise from the group. They even kept an "emergency jar" at the center of the table. People would often put 50 cents or a dollar into it at meetings, though it wasn't required. The money didn't get used very often, but much like the group itself, it "provided a sense of security just in knowing it was there." Instead of hoarding their possessions or knowledge during a time of vulnerability, the participants opened themselves up and discovered a new source of abundance in each other.

Across the country, people are discovering this new type of security and abundance as they meet in small groups. Some call themselves Common Security Clubs (CSC) and use the tools provided by the CSC Network. Other groups, like Connie's, have happened spontaneously. These groups may be under the mainstream radar, but their accomplishments are real and powerful nonetheless. They're part of the movement toward a new economy based on local connections and exchanges. After a successful run, Connie's resource group has disbanded, but many members continue to share. Connie and some of the members have now formed another group, guided by the "Transition Town" concepts. The new group's accomplishments include organizing a large green-energy fair at the local high-school, and a project that has mapped out all the arable land in their community where people can grow their own food. And, I'm willing to bet, they've had some good laughs together.

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