



JIM CALDERSTON PHOTOS

FAIR COMMENT

CHEAP RADICALS

Belinda Bruce joins an ideological free-for-all

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MAYBE IT'S A GENERATIONAL THING, an inherited trait passed down from my Baba (great-grandmother), who lived through the Great Depression. She swore never to accept welfare or charity, and impressed upon her children the need to reuse and refurbish everything possible. During the Second World War, my granny saved buttons, thread, old envelopes, and scraps of rubber and steel to earn a few coins while helping the war effort. Her thriftiness reached the point of fanaticism; on weekends, she'd rope my granddad into taking her yardsaling, embarrassing him by haggling over the price of an old teacup.

This ingrained penny-pinching can perhaps explain the obsession my mother and I share for cruising fluorescent-lit dollar-store aisles, as well as my frequent trips to thrift shops and garage sales. It's a quest for the ultimate bargain on a necessary or desired item, the discovery of a treasure hidden beneath an incredibly cheap price tag. I also happen to prefer vintage character to the blandness of the

new—goods with a little history and mystery.

So you can imagine my glee upon discovering the Freecycle Network™, a kind of online garage sale where everything—you guessed it—is free. Married to an environmentally conscious mission and a sense of community spirit, this hub for the giving and taking of stuff satisfied my yen to find cool little treasures while contributing to the welfare of the planet. The goal of the network is to reduce the flow of trash into landfills by connecting people who want to unload or receive goods for free. Anyone looking to give away or acquire an item can join a local website, run by a volunteer moderator. Most groups invite charitable organizations to list requests, and the moderators stay on alert for collectors, pranksters, or anyone acting outside the gifting ideology. It's not bartering or a flea market, but the free flow of material goods. It's communication.

I've been a Vancouver Freecycle member for over a year. It's been an education in altruism, oddness and wonder. Among items I've seen offered or re-

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quested: couches, chairs, wood scraps, computers, toys, modems, bottle caps for art, a mannequin, raspberry bushes, a dildo, honey. While I believe in the maxim, "It is better to give than to receive," I admit I have received more than I have given, including a television, plant, barbecue, wine rack, scanner, cell phone, cat scratching post, books and rugs.

The experience has reoriented my thinking from "throw it away" or "give it to charity" to "give it to someone who can really use it." Gifts range from small to huge. A typical e-post looks something like this: "Offer: dresser, large, with six drawers. Dark wood finish with brass handles. Finish is chipped in places but generally in excellent structural condition." Another ad by a local charity: "Wanted: a truck for Vancouver non-profit. We move furniture to furnish homes for people in need." A Mississippi family that lost everything to Hurricane Katrina set up a new life in Orlando, Florida, with the help of the local Freecycle gang, including the donation of a house for temporary shelter.

So, can a small group of people with a little generosity and environmental awareness subvert the consumer economy? I had already bookmarked the online "free" sections of the *Buy and Sell* and the fabulously successful craigslist (locally based classified ads that people post and read for free), but join-

ing Vancouver Freecycle feels more like an engagement in activism. It's exciting to belong to a grassroots network that extends across the globe, with a vision to create a worldwide gifting movement.

The idea was started by Deron Beal in Tucson, Arizona. Witness to an astonishing number of usable items being thrown away, he decided to set up a non-profit web organization as a means to instead facilitate their exchange. Since the concept was launched in 2003, it has spread to more than 50 countries and attracted more than two million members. In Canada, more than 80,000 people participate in local groups.

But, like any ideologically driven organization, the Freecycle Network is not without controversy. Last year, Beal trademarked the name, and his website insists that people use the word only as an adjective—never a noun, verb, or any other part of speech. Freecycling, freecycler or "freecycle it" are no-nos, for fear they will become generic terms. Well, boo. Also, in 2005 Beal accepted a \$130,000 grant from a waste-management garbage-collection company, the largest such business in the United States. Unfortunately, it has a poor environmental record. Many Freecycle members and moderators felt this sponsorship didn't click with the spirit of the organization, and

also took issue with Beal's micro-management when he demanded access to local member information and transactions.

These control measures caused an exodus of people, some of whom started their own gifting outfits. FreeSharing.org is one of the more prominent spinoffs, which uses the term "free-recycling" to describe its activities. Others are SharingIsGiving.org, FreeUsables.com, Freesources Recycling Network, Altruists International and FreeCycleAmerica.org. (If I were to start a group, I'd call it Free-For-All.) This kind of outgrowth can only be a good thing, but for me, there's still enough spirit of giving in the Freecycle movement to retain my membership.

Think about it. If you want to dispose of an old couch, unused oil paints, or any other household item, you could go old-school and leave it in the alley. With luck, it won't be ravaged by animals or the weather before someone hauls it away. Or you can list it on a free recycling online network and know who ends up with your castoffs. Warning: It can be addictive. For a while, you might say I was a Freecycleoholic, but I've calmed my habits. Today was a quiet day of gifting. I picked up a cordless phone from someone whose ad read: "I have some phones to give away and they want a new home to hear all that gossip again." Then I gave away two pairs of fashionable boots with a note on the red pair: "Click your heels three times and say 'There's no place like home.' You never know what might happen." ❧

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FAIR COMMENT

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GAMES WITHOUT FRONTIERS

Kris Nelson gets strategic about his social calendar

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MY PARENTS' GENERATION PLAYED BRIDGE. Sunburned after a day on the lake, my folks would even play in the nude. They religiously held family bridge nights with friends, bringing the kids along for fun. Age divisions were clear. Adults played bridge in densely smoked-up rooms, each hand punctuated by blasts of laughter and the rattle of one more rum-and-coke. Banished to the basement, we kids played board games, toiling away over campaigns of Risk and Monopoly. Stuffed with pretzels, sugar-high on soda pop, I despaired as the older kids trampled my flimsy strategies and stole my money, turn after turn after turn. Bullies with hotels on Boardwalk, they squeezed the wimpy one out first.

With memories like these, you'd think that we grown-up members of Generation Y would shun board games. It's an oft-touted claim that twenty-somethings spend their leisure time on virtual interactions: blogging, web surfing, downloading. The

only game-playing we are known for is an addiction to bloodthirsty, violent video games. From listening in on Main Street coffee-shop conversations, our public obsessions, it would seem, are haircuts, indie bands, laptops, and little else. In private, we hipsters couldn't possibly be doing something as unanimously lame as rejecting computers to play the latest board games, could we?

Actually, we could. And I'm one of them.

The culprit is a new breed of designer board game, and it has taken over my social calendar. Also called European or German strategy games, they've replaced the old guard. Gone are Monopoly's draining hours of slow-mortgage death and Risk's brain-frying, 4 a.m. takeover bids. Quick to learn and quicker to play (about 45 to 90 minutes), these new

games combine just the right amount of luck with multiple winning strategies. No players get eliminated and game ploys can be kept secret until the end, so you never know who will win.

Through a plugged-in friend, my roommate and I became regulars in a circle devoted to Settlers to Catan, a resource-management game. A multiple award-winner that's been translated into 22 languages since its 1995 premiere, the game lets players score points by building roads, settlements, and cities while earning and trading materials like bricks, wheat and wool in order to expand their civilizations and conquer the island of Catan. With a board made up of randomly arranged tiles, the playing style shifts with every game; there's always a new way to win. It's a conceit so refreshing, it nullified any fear

It's a conceit so refreshing, it nullified any fear that we were doing something way too obscure to be cool.