

ABOUT TIME

More than 30 years after he first created the concept, **Edgar Cahn** believes the world is finally waking up to the possibilities offered by timebanking. **Clare Goff** meets him

Now aged 77, Edgar Cahn – or ‘Father Time’ as he is known – is showing no signs of slowing down. The US-born inventor of timebanking is at the end of a trip to the UK, during which he has been a guest at 10 Downing Street and had his views sought after by a stream of policymakers.

‘We’re in serious danger of becoming respectable,’ he tells an audience of UK timebankers as he muses on his early visits to the UK when words like ‘reciprocity’ and ‘co-production’ were unheard of.

Timebanking has recently made it to the pages of the New York Times and the Washington Post, and Cahn believes it’s not co-incidental that at a time when the market economy is experiencing a crisis, alternative currencies are enjoying a resurgence.

‘I think we’re learning that money isn’t what we thought it was, that bankers aren’t what we thought they were, and that the monetary system is not enabling us to get to where we need to get to,’ he says. ‘Money that depends upon repayment of interest requires that we have to keep producing more and more in a world that’s having to learn how to become sustainable.’

While money reinforces privilege and scarcity, time levels hierarchies and values everyone equally. Mr Cahn came up with the idea of timebanking while recovering

from a major heart attack at the age of 44 as he contemplated how his increased neediness changed the way in which he was viewed by society.

For while the market economy locks out those not capable of contributing financially – e.g. through lack of employment or illness – and charity and the benefits system define people by what they can’t do, timebanking says that everyone is an asset.

It builds up the ‘core economy’ of family and community, and redefines work to include activities that often have no value in the market economy, such as caring for children and vulnerable people and making communities stronger, by inviting people to share their skills and time, in return for another’s time or, increasingly, for ‘goodies’.

It’s a tool that unlocks connectivity and trust and can be applied to each and every social problem, says Cahn. The concept is already used in prisons and to help improve health and deal with ageing populations. It has been applied to child

development, to healthcare education and to the running of community gardens.

‘It’s a medium of exchange that invites creativity, invites the creation of new enterprises and new organisations and a fundamentally different relationship between community and government and between the community and public professionals.’

At this year’s Timebanking UK conference in Nottingham the range of ways in which timebanking is now used was on full display. From Holy Cross Trust Centre, a homeless charity in London, which has used timebanking to run its services along co-production lines, to the Rushey Green Time Bank, based in a GPs’ practice in South London, and Wigan Plus, a town-wide scheme which rewards locals for the time they put in their communities, timebanking is enjoying a resurgence.

Cahn says the UK is leading the way in terms of experimentation and willingness to share ideas. When he first came to Britain to explain timebanking, he says he only had to mention the Second World War and people understood the concept. ‘Your history and culture and conditions, the idea of

sharing and knowing how to do that doesn’t make it feel like a strange thing. It’s a natural extension of that.’

Despite the high level of statutory benefits in the UK compared to the US, timebanking reinforces the fact that welfare can’t do everything, he says. For despite the money spent on social programmes, much of it either fails to work or to reach the right people.

‘The money we spend on programmes for the poor, only about a third of that gets to poor people. This isn’t to devalue specialised services but to say that even those services with all that expertise won’t work if we can’t enlist the people we’re helping as partners.’

The values of reciprocity and interdependence are core to timebanking, but they are values that have become increasingly lost or misunderstood through the rise of the dominance of the market economy. Cahn says he had a genetic advantage in learning interdependence, having being born alongside a twin sister. ‘The world never revolved around me. The notion of interdependence was a core message I got.’



In today’s society, however, dependency has become associated with those unable to help themselves. Cahn has noticed how difficult it often is for people to take as well as to give. ‘I’ve yet to meet any community where people like to ask for help. There’s the concept of rugged individualism in the States, that you make it on your own. We have this weird notion that we are omniscient. I think it’s part of growing up, we project our parents’ outrageous expectations that they don’t have. The process of trying to live up to that makes it hard to ask for help.’

But the power of a reciprocal approach in solving entrenched social issues is gaining ground, not least in the concept of co-production, which invites users of services to be equal partners in their design. Cahn is keen to ensure that as the timebanking tool attempts to go to scale, it holds onto the values on which it is based.

‘We are creating new kinds of connectivity in a world where we don’t know trust, where we live as strangers, a mobile society, with a struggling economy and increasing demands. It’s a difficult world to maintain that trust but our strength is in the values.’

A onetime scriptwriter for Bobby Kennedy, Cahn has been

at the forefront of social change for decades. He helped script a video Bobby Kennedy made back in the 60s on how GDP values the wrong things and has witnessed the values enshrined in timebanking rise up the agenda at the same time as the market economy has spiralled out of control.

Cahn insists that timebanking is not about returning to a previous golden era of trust and community but of forging a new understanding of humanity.

‘I think in the past the world we romantically recreate exacted all kinds of seemingly free labour, including the subordination of women, the exploitation of ethnic minorities and immigrants and in some countries of children. I think as we move towards a world which begins to respect every human being’s opportunity to create and develop, we needed a different medium of exchange.’

And as the market economy reveals its limits, timebanking’s message has never been more powerful.

‘Timebanking says that we start by being okay and you can prove you’re okay by helping another human being that needs you – so that we start from a premise of value that’s different from that which says that only if you buy you’ll be okay.’