

Stay While We Fix It

In a church basement in New Paltz, in New York's Hudson Valley, a woman in her late seventies handed a clock from the 1930s to a man she had never met. He was in his eighties, a retired engineer, and he leaned over the clock's insides for the better part of an hour while she waited beside him. When the hands finally began to move again, she shouted with delight. The two of them had been strangers when the morning started. Now they had a working clock between them, and something else that was harder to name.

The clock was one of about eighty broken things people carried into that basement on a rainy Saturday. There were lamps and jackets and stuffed animals, an old fan that needed rewiring, jewelry waiting for new clasps. Volunteers fixed most of them. A few were past help. Nobody paid a cent.

This is a Repair Cafe, and there are thousands of them now. The idea began in Amsterdam in 2009, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, when a single event invited people to mend their broken belongings rather than throw them out. It has since grown into a global movement with more than 59,000 members and around 4,000 cafes worldwide, a number that has nearly doubled in the past year. Together they rescue something like 850,000 objects from the garbage every year.

The timing is not an accident. Buying a replacement has never been easier, but prices have been climbing. In the United States, consumer prices rose more than four percent over the past year, the sharpest jump since 2023, and a repair that costs nothing begins to look appealing. The environmental case is harder to wave away. The world buries roughly 2.6 billion tons of waste in its landfills every year, and the World Bank expects that figure to rise by half before 2050. Every jacket restituted and every lamp rewired is one less object in the ground.

Here is the uncomfortable part. Set against that mountain of garbage, 850,000 rescued objects is almost nothing. A fair skeptic could dismiss the whole movement as a feel-good gesture, a way to feel responsible while the real machinery of consumption rolls on untouched. The movement's own founder seems to grant the point: Repair Cafes cannot fix the economy alone, she has said, but they stand as a visible sign that change has to come from much higher up.

So if the arithmetic does not really add up, why are these cafes multiplying? The answer has less to do with math than with everything the math leaves out.

The usual explanation is that we forgot. An engineer in England who studies the movement says the skills are simply no longer handed down: when something breaks, it is almost always cheaper to buy new than to repair the old. The cafes, in this telling, are an effort to teach the lost knowledge back.

But forgetting is too gentle a word for what happened, and too flattering. People did not repair things in the past because they were patient or virtuous. They repaired because replacement

was expensive, and throwing something out was not a choice most families had. Then mass production drove the price of nearly everything down, and the arithmetic flipped. Why spend an afternoon on a broken kettle when a new one costs less than the missing part? Repair did not fade because people grew careless. It faded because abundance made it irrational. The current revival, then, is driven less by a change of heart than by a change of price. When mending is free and replacing no longer feels free, the old logic starts to reverse.

Nowhere did that shift happen faster than in South Korea. Within a single lifetime the country moved from real poverty to abundance, and the repair habits that scarcity once forced were dropped almost as fast as they had formed. A torn jacket is rarely worth mending when Dongdaemun sells a new one for almost nothing, and a broken appliance can arrive from Coupang by the next morning. The convenience is genuine and hard to resent. Korea simply reached the destination by the express route: once replacing everything becomes this effortless, what happens to the part of us that used to know how to fix it?

That question is where the Repair Cafe makes its real argument, hidden inside a rule that seems trivial at first. You are not allowed to drop your broken thing off and come back later. You have to stay, sit beside the volunteer, and keep your hands on the object while it is opened up. Partly this is so you might learn the repair. But it is also a refusal of the way nearly everything else now works. For two decades we have been removing ourselves from the maintenance that daily life used to require, one convenience at a time. The meal arrives at the door without a word, a stranger drives the car, and the unwanted package is collected from the porch before we are even awake. Each trade is reasonable on its own. Together they have handed an enormous amount of ordinary competence over to other people and machines. The Repair Cafe asks for a little of it back. It will not fix the toaster for you. It insists that the toaster is still yours, and that you stay and watch where it went wrong.

What that rule produces, almost as a side effect, is the part nobody prints on the flyer. One organizer started her cafe in the middle of a painful divorce, hauling her sewing machine in to mend other people's torn clothes. The founder of a related giving network, which now links more than twelve million people, noticed that something happens when two people bend over the same broken object. A conversation starts, almost against the will of the people having it. What looked from the outside like a movement about objects turned out, she said, to be a safety net woven out of people.

One volunteer, a programmer who fixes things on weekends, said the surprising thing was how little was ever really wrong. More than half the time, he said, the trouble is nothing worse than a loose wire, a bit of dirt, or a part that just needs a firm tug. Almost none of it is as broken as it looks.

The clock in the church basement had stopped sometime around the middle of the last century. It took a stranger and most of a morning to start it again. The hands are moving now.

- 1) When something you own breaks, what is your first instinct: fix it, or replace it?
- 2) What is the oldest thing you still own and use?
- 3) Are there any skills your parents or grandparents knew that you never learned?
- 4) When something breaks, what decides whether people repair or replace it: cost, attachment, or whether it can be replaced at all?
- 5) Has the ease of purchasing things changed the way you think about your possessions?
- 6) Why do you think Repair Cafes make you stay and help with the repair, instead of letting you drop the item off and come back later?
- 7) Do you think learning to repair your own belongings actually matters in a modern economy, or is it mostly nostalgia?
- 8) Have you ever connected with someone unexpectedly while working on a shared task?
- 9) A volunteer in the article said most broken things just need a small fix, not replacing. Do you think the same is true of other things in life, not just objects?

The better part of (sth)	(exp)	most of something, especially a period of time	We spent the better part of the weekend assembling the furniture, and it still wobbled.
Rewire	(v)	to replace or repair the electrical wiring inside a device or building	The electrician said the old house would need to be completely rewired before it was safe to live in.
Clasp	(n)	a small fastener used to hold two parts of something together, as on jewelry or a bag	The clasp on her necklace had broken, so the pendant kept slipping off.
Aftermath	(n)	the period or situation that follows an important and usually unpleasant event	In the aftermath of the storm, volunteers spent weeks clearing fallen trees from the roads.
Mend	(v)	to repair something that is broken, torn, or no longer working	My grandmother could mend almost any piece of clothing with just a needle and thread.
Wave (sth) away	(phr v)	to dismiss an idea, concern, or argument as unimportant	He waved away their safety concerns and insisted the old bridge was perfectly fine.
Landfill	(n)	a large area where waste is buried under the ground	Most of the plastic we throw out ends up in a landfill, where it can take centuries to break down.
Restitch	(v)	to sew something again, especially to repair a seam that has come apart	The tailor restitched the torn pocket so neatly that you could not tell it had ever ripped.
Set against (sth)	(phr v)	to consider or judge something in comparison with something else	Set against the scale of the problem, a single donation can feel almost meaningless.

Skeptic	(n)	a person who doubts whether a claim, idea, or movement is true or worthwhile	Even the skeptics in the room were impressed once they saw the results for themselves.
Feel-good	(adj)	producing a pleasant sense of happiness or satisfaction, sometimes without real substance	The campaign was mostly a feel-good gesture that let people feel helpful without changing much.
Roll on	(phr v)	to continue steadily without stopping or being affected by anything	Whatever problems the company faced inside, its advertising just rolled on as if nothing were wrong.
Grant	(v)	to admit that a point is true, often before making a different one	I grant that the plan is expensive, but doing nothing would cost us far more in the long run.
Add up	(phr v)	to make sense when all the details are considered together	His story kept changing, and the more he explained, the less it added up.
Hand down	(phr v)	to pass something such as knowledge or property from older people to younger ones	The recipe had been handed down through four generations before anyone wrote it on paper.
Virtuous	(adj)	behaving in a morally good and honorable way	She did not see recycling as virtuous, just as the obvious thing any reasonable person would do.
Flip	(v)	to change suddenly to the opposite state or position	Public opinion can flip overnight once a scandal reaches the news.
Abundance	(n)	a very large quantity of something; more than enough	After years of shortages, the sudden abundance of cheap goods changed how people shopped.
Revival	(n)	the process of becoming popular, active, or strong again after a decline	The neighborhood is enjoying a revival, with new cafes opening in shops that had sat empty for years.
Change of heart	(idm)	a change in one's opinion, feeling, or attitude toward something	He had planned to quit, but a conversation with his mentor gave him a change of heart.
Resent	(v)	to feel angry or bitter about something you think is unfair	Many employees resented being asked to work weekends without any extra pay.
Trivial	(adj)	having little importance or value; not worth worrying about	What seemed like a trivial spelling mistake ended up costing the company a major contract.
Porch	(n)	a covered area at the entrance of a house, often where deliveries are left	She left the package on the porch so it would stay out of the rain until I got home.

Competence	(n)	the ability to do something successfully and efficiently	Years of practice gave him a quiet competence that made even difficult repairs look easy.
Side effect	(n)	an additional, often unintended, result of an action or situation	One side effect of working from home is that people tend to exercise less than they used to.
Haul	(v)	to pull or carry something heavy with a lot of effort	They hauled the old sofa down three flights of stairs and out to the curb.
Bend over	(phr v)	to lean the upper body forward and downward	He bent over the engine for an hour, trying to work out why the car would not start.
Against one's will	(exp)	without wanting to; despite not choosing to	Almost against her will, she began to enjoy the very job she had complained about for months.
Safety net	(idm)	something that provides protection or support if things go wrong	Savings act as a safety net, giving you something to fall back on if you suddenly lose your job.
Weave	(v)	to form something complex by combining many separate parts, often used figuratively	The novel weaves several family stories together into a single, surprising ending.
Firm	(adj)	strong and steady; applying steady pressure	A firm handshake can leave a stronger impression than anything you actually say.
Tug	(n)	a quick, strong pull	The child gave the rope a sharp tug, and the whole tent collapsed.