

Carpool (And Other Experiments In Community)

By Callie Dean

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We moved to the neighborhood in the heat of summer, unloading boxes with sweaty clothes plastered to our skin. As we stood in the living room, appraising our work, the doorbell rang: a family from down the street had come to welcome us.

To our surprise, we recognized our new neighbors. Their two girls attended the same preschool as our two boys. Until then, our relationship had consisted of hurried greetings in the hallway and clumsy small talk at birthday parties, but now that we lived on the same street, we began taking the first steps toward friendship. They stopped by from time to time to let their girls play in our driveway, and we exchanged phone numbers.

The first day of school was approaching, and our two older kids, soon-to-be-kindergarteners, were thrilled to learn they would be in the same class. Meanwhile, my head spun as I considered the logistics of the year ahead. The elementary school finished an hour before the preschool, and we hadn't found any viable options for after-school care. I wondered, from afar, if we could work out some kind of carpool system with our neighbors. How did such arrangements come into existence, anyway? Did they already have carpool buddies? Did they even *want* carpool buddies?

They apparently were having similar discussions at their house. While I struggled to figure out how to broach the subject, my normally shy husband surprised me and made the first move. He returned inside after mowing the yard one afternoon and updated me: "They're in. We're having dinner on Thursday night to work out the details."

Now, with a plate of brownies in hand, I rang their doorbell. "Come on in," Jessica said, opening the door wide. I followed her into the kitchen, where she cracked the oven open and peeked inside.

"Perfect timing," she declared. "The enchiladas will be ready in a few minutes."

Our families gathered around the table to eat, and John and Jessica invited everyone to add a line to the dinner prayer. Our kids declined, clearly unfamiliar with the practice. I stole a guilty glance at my husband. *Why hadn't we taught our children to pray before meals? Would we be disqualified from carpool before it had even started?*

Fortunately, no one seemed fazed, and we turned our attention to more important things, like the cheese-smothered enchiladas on our plates. I breathed a sigh of relief when my boys tasted their food without complaining or making faces.

After the kids disappeared to play, the grown-ups took out our calendars to discuss schedules. On paper, it looked complicated: the four of us would alternate picking up and dropping off from the two schools, and we would take turns watching the kids in the afternoons so the other three could keep working. We struggled to think of the questions we needed to ask. *Are your kids allergic to anything? How do you handle screen time? What about discipline?*

We scoped each other out, our conversation feeling like an awkward job interview. On the surface, at least, our parenting styles seemed similar enough that we decided to give it a shot.

Almost as soon as I gave birth, I became aware of that proverbial village I needed to help raise my children. Sometimes that awareness came because the village felt so present. I had never been more conscious of, or grateful for, the kindness of the people around me: the stranger who gave up her spot in the grocery line, the neighbor who soothed my child in the midst of a tantrum, and the grandparents who filled in the gaps when I found myself saddled with both a sick child and an important presentation at work.

Often, though, I became most aware of my need for a village when I couldn't find it: that struggle of juggling not-quite-enough childcare and slightly-too-much work; the surprising loneliness that came with each stage of childhood; the overwhelming exhaustion from taking everything one day at a time.

Our new arrangement with our neighbors, while far from formal, felt like a strangely intentional step toward building our own village. *What's the worst that could happen?* I thought. *It's just carpool, right?*

One week after our dinner, I found myself staring into a half-mile of standstill traffic: the dreaded car line. I had heard horror stories from more experienced parents about their own long waits each afternoon, and I can't say I was looking forward to this particular rite of passage.

I inched forward, hung my car tags in the window and waved to the on-duty music teacher. Another smiling teacher opened the door for the two kindergarteners: my son, Luke, and our neighbor, Emma. As they climbed in, they were careful to explain, "We're not brother and sister. We're just neighbors."

We pulled into a parking spot so I could fasten the five-point harnesses on their car seats. I pulled on Emma's straps gingerly. To my surprise, she burst into tears. "I don't like this car seat," she cried. "It's not like the one in *my* car."

No matter how much I adjusted the straps, Emma complained they were somehow both too loose *and* too tight. Perplexed, I took another look at the car seat that had served us so well for five years. Had we been doing it wrong all this time?

It wasn't just the car seat. When we arrived at home, I offered a smorgasbord of carefully curated snack options: yogurt, pretzels, cheese sticks, fruit. Emma wrinkled her nose and looked in our cabinet. "Can I please have some graham crackers instead?" she asked.

Opening our lives to carpool, I realized, had invited scrutiny into all our "normal" routines and habits.

On the other hand, it was reassuring to discover we were no longer parenting alone. My text threads with John and Jessica started out politely—full of deference and hesitations—but gradually grew more familiar. We became accustomed to each kid's quirks. The two kindergarteners, headstrong firstborns, possessed stubborn streaks that often clashed with one another. The preschoolers constructed elaborate imaginary worlds inside their bedroom closets. All four kids turned their noses up at roasted vegetables and sometimes forgot to say "please" and "thank you." No matter what issues arose in our lives, we had a built-in barometer down the street to help us understand what was happening and coordinate our responses.

I began to linger at their doorstep for a few extra minutes whenever I picked up my sons in the afternoon. And even on non-carpool days, their daughters often showed up in our front yard to play.

Then the pandemic hit. One Friday afternoon, our governor announced that all schools would close for four weeks.

Shell-shocked, I began making preparations to work from home and homeschool at the same time. But no matter how I did the math, there would not be enough hours to fit everything in.

The next day, Jessica joined me on my back porch. Just like at the beginning of the year, we talked through the logistics of what it might take to pivot into this new normal. Because our children were in the same classes, they would have the same assignments to complete. Couldn't we share the load somehow?

Even before our state's shelter-at-home order had been given—before “pod-schooling” had entered our vocabulary—we sketched out an arrangement that would come to define our pandemic experience: each household would lead two days of “school” per week for all four kids (with Fridays designated as “movie days” at home).

The night before our homeschool adventure began, I couldn't sleep. What if one of us had already contracted the coronavirus? What if one of us became sick despite our best precautions? Through the schedule we had rigged up, we had tied ourselves even more tightly together and, quite literally, put our lives into each other's hands.

I had always known that true community requires a certain level of authenticity and vulnerability. Usually this meant having deep conversations with friends, sharing secrets and fears and longings with each other. But now I realized there was a deeply physical component to the little community we had formed—a level of trust that could mean the difference between life and death.

I voiced my thoughts to John and Jessica when they came to pick up their daughters the next day. They neither dismissed nor minimized my fears. “Yes,” they agreed. “We know this arrangement has real risks. We're entrusting you with our children *anyway*.”

Over the next few months (because those first weeks stretched on far longer than we anticipated), we relied on each other in countless tangible ways. I kissed their daughter's knee and bandaged it up after she tripped on the concrete. They taught my son to tie his shoelaces. We shared herbs with each other when our gardens burst into bloom. We celebrated birthdays, Easter, Cinco de Mayo, and Mother's Day together.

And through the baking of bread and breaking of bread, the messy houses, the quirky kids, the imperfect parenting practices, we became each other's village.

What started as an experiment in carpool unfolded into a community that still sustains us. It is more complicated and vulnerable than I ever imagined.

It is also more beautiful and sacred than I ever dreamed.