We don’t borrow sugar as much as we used to. This is not just because it’s easier than ever to run to the 24-hour corner store. It’s because our social fabric has frayed. This isn’t to say that pockets of sugar sharers don’t exist, but most of us avoid asking. When was the last time you scurried over to a neighbor’s for an emergency egg?

Even though it’s easier and cheaper than ever to find what we need without borrowing, BORROW WE MUST. It’s a habit that builds community, fosters connection, counteracts loneliness. And incidentally saves planetary resources.

Can I borrow a cup of sugar? I’m trying to stave off loneliness, stop runaway climate change, and make bran muffins.
The average drill is used only for about 13 minutes in its lifetime. Even if the drill is on supersale at Walmart, don’t buy it. Ask your neighbor Jane if you can borrow hers. You may feel awkward doing this because asking to borrow something can feel vulnerable. It takes practice to create a culture of sharing.

Very important: you’re borrowing Jane’s drill, not just to up its rate of usage, but to get to know Jane.

In my free time I build mid-century modern birdhouses and sing in a barbershop quartet.

Research shows it’s these loose connections that make for happy communities—and less-lonely humans. “Small talk” used to have a bad rap, but the latest science tells us that talking about the weather with the crossing guard does make us happier.*

This seems trivial, but it’s really good for both of us.

Robert Putnam kicked off the discussion of Americans’ increasing isolation with his 2000 book, Bowling Alone, in which he argued that social capital was on the decline. He defines social capital as “norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement.”

I’m asking you for sugar so that you’ll ask me for sugar so that we’ll have lots of delicious baked goods and a robust civic life.

*Susan Anker, The Village Effect
Social capital is the measure of our connection to other humans. How much each of us has is directly responsible for our class mobility and success in life. The more people you feel comfortable asking to borrow sugar, the more likely you are to get the things you want and need out of life. In these increasingly unequal times, what many people lack is social capital.

Health practitioners are increasingly aware that loneliness and isolation affect our physical health. Perhaps they’ll start prescribing the borrowing of sugar.

Even people who think they don’t want to borrow the sugar report being much happier after doing so. Behavioral science professor Nicholas Epley conducted a study with Chicago commuters, assigning some to make small talk with their neighbors and others to not. Even those who say they don’t want to interact with others report being much happier when they do. Says Epley, “People could improve their own well-being—and that of others—by simply being more social with strangers, trying to create connections where one might otherwise choose isolation.”

That’s a lovely blouse. Do you have some sugar I can borrow?
It's a leap to say the fact that we've stopped borrowing sugar is responsible for the sorry state of our current democracy. Yet it makes some sense. In a 2010 census survey, just 11 percent of respondents said that they had served as an officer of a group or member on a committee in the previous year.

I was going to run for mayor, but I've decided to devote more time to improving my Instagram Stories.

We've drifted away from the neighborly activities that inculcate civic and democratic engagement and understanding. We're home alone, baking by ourselves. Go borrow some sugar.

I made you my famous Cauliflower Cake to thank you for giving me that sugar!