

THE DIME

One day I visited a businessman's office, and while we talked, I noticed that he constantly twirled a small paperweight with a dime in it. Curious, I asked him about it.

He said, "When I was in college, my roommate and I were down to our last dime. He was on a scholarship, while I had earned my tuition by working in the cotton field and a grocer store. We were the first two members of our families to ever attend college, and our parents were extremely proud of us. Each month they sent us a small allowance to buy food, but that month our checks hadn't arrived. It was a Sunday, the fifth of the month, and between us we had one dime left.

"We used the solitary dime to place a collect call to my home five hundred miles away. My mother answered. I could tell from her voice that something was wrong. She said that my father had been ill and out of work, so there was simply no way they could send any money that month. I asked if my roommate's check was in the mail. She said that she had talked with his mother. They also couldn't raise the extra money that month either. They were sorry, but it looked like we'd have to come home. They had put off telling us, hoping for some solution."

"Were you disappointed?" I asked.

"Devastated. We both were. We had one month remaining to finish the year, then we could work all summer to earn our expenses. My grades were excellent, so I had been guaranteed a scholarship for the next term."

"What did you do?"

"When I hung up the telephone, we heard a noise and dimes started pouring out of the pay phone. We were laughing and holding out our hands to catch the money. Students walking down the hall thought we were crazy. We discussed taking the money and using it. Nobody would know what happened. But then we realized we couldn't do that. It wouldn't be honest. You understand?"

"Yes, but it would have been tough to return it."

"Well, we tried. I called the operator back and told her what had happened." He smiled, remembering. "She said that the money belonged to the telephone company, so to replace it in the machine. We did, over and over again, but the machine wouldn't accept the dimes.

"I finally told the operator that the dimes kept falling back out. She said that she didn't know what else to do, but she'd talk to her supervisor. When she returned she said that

we'd have to keep the money, because the company wasn't going to send a man all the way out to the school just to collect a few dollars."

He looked at me and chuckled, but there was emotion in his voice. "We laughed all the way back to our dorm room. After counting the money, we had \$7.20. We decided to use the money to buy food from a nearby grocery store and we went job hunting after class."

"Did you find a job?"

"Yes, we told the manager of the grocery store what had happened as we paid for our purchases with our dimes. He offered us both jobs beginning next day. Our money bought enough supplies to last until our first paycheck."

"You were both able to finish college?"

"Yes, we worked for that man until we graduated. My friend went on to eventually become a lawyer." He looked around him and said, "I graduated in business, then went on to start this company which today is a multi-million dollar corporation. My own children have attended college, as have my roommate's, but we were the first."

"Is that one of your original dimes?"

He shook his head. "No, we had to use those, but when I got my first paycheck I saved a dime, which I carried all the way through college. I've kept it to remind me where I came from. When I count my blessings, I remember that once in my life, a single thin dime stood between me and the poverty my parents faced every day of their lives."

"Did you ever meet the telephone operator or tell her how much that money meant to you?"

"No, but when we graduated, my roommate and I wrote a letter to the local telephone company and asked if they wanted their money back.

"The president of the company wrote us a letter of congratulations and told us that he'd never felt the company's money was better spent."

"Do you think this was a fluke or meant to be?"

"I've thought about it often over the years. I wondered if the operator might have heard the fear in my voice; perhaps she prevented the machine from accepting the coins. Or maybe...it was an act of God."

"You'll never know for sure, will you?"

He shook his head, touching the paperweight as if he drew strength from it. "No, but I'll always remember that moment and that dime. I have repaid that debt many times over the years. I hope that I have helped someone else as much as a dime helped me."