

**Charity starts with a nickel**

**By Curtis Seltzer**

**BLUE GRASS, Va.**—I bought a Washington Post for \$1.05 in a Sheetz gas station in Harrisonburg, Va., on Monday. It was not as simple as it sounds.

As I stood at the counter with a half-dozen customers behind me, I put down a dollar bill and reached into my jeans' pocket. I fished out two washers from a recent engine repair, one illegible note to myself, one slightly used STIM-U-DENT and no coins.

I had a couple of 20s in my wallet, which I didn't want to break for five cents. So I pinched five pennies from the seven in the penny cup to cover Virginia's sales tax.

I avoid penny cups. I may have dipped into these kitties twice during the last 40 years. It never seems quite right to me.

I went back to my truck, got a nickel from the spare-change holder and returned to the front of the line. I pitched it into the cup. I turned to walk out.

"What are you doing?" the female clerk asked.

I knew she recognized me, because I had not been out of her sight for more than 30 seconds.

"I'm repaying the five cents that I took for the paper I just bought."

"Are you weird or what?"

Now...in all honesty...I could answer her question affirmatively on many levels. Negatively, maybe, only on one or two.

People in line started shifting their feet and switching their coffee from one hand to another. No one looked at me directly, though everyone was looking at me. I seemed to be brewing a scene.

"Have I done something wrong?" I asked.

"You repaid the cup," she said. "No one does that right away. And you took out pennies and put a nickel back."

The crowd seemed to understand why this was weird behavior, bordering on the criminal and un-American.

"What kind of dork are you?" a guy in line asked in a tone that suggested he'd answered his own question before asking it.

I felt my testosterone rising. This still happens occasionally.

It was one thing to be called "weird" by a check-out clerk who was acting in her official capacity and rendering an official opinion based on

thousands of official customer transactions. But it was different to be called a “dork” by some guy buying a container of chocolate milk and a box of Animal Crackers.

I felt war antlers sprouting from my forehead...in a manner of speaking.

Maybe, I thought, I am being filmed by “Candid Camera.”

I decided not to respond to the chocolate-milk guy. What could I say after all?—“No, I am not a dork.” An accusation’s taint always lingers; denials never reestablish the *status quo ante*.

“I didn’t steal anything,” I said lamely.

“Someone is just going to pocket that nickel,” the clerk said.

“So what,” I said. I had the distinct feeling that they were looking at one very small tree while I was looking at a very large forest on a very distant planet.

“So,” Mr. Animal Crackers said, “someone who doesn’t need it is going to take it. It’s like you just robbed five cents from the cup.”

Huh?

Some Nineteenth Century socialist utopians thought that in a perfect communal society both work and its benefits would be divided on the basis of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Karl Marx stole this line from earlier radicals in his Critique of the Gotha Program (1875), whose sales are languishing in Blue Grass, even in the English translation.

No Marxist regime ever came close to this utopian goal. Now it was here in front of me -- to each according to his need -- at the Sheetz, in Harrisonburg, in the penny cup. Except The People didn’t trust The People to regulate themselves.

Utopia seems to work with pennies but not nickels. How do I get into quandaries like this?

Had I repaid with pennies, I would not, apparently, have created the opportunity for assumed future dishonesty—at least in the minds of those who were disposed to think the worst of their fellow citizens.

I’ll show them!

I returned to the truck and rooted around the console where we hide emergency folding money, because we believe that no thief would ever look there.

I marched back to the counter and put a \$5 bill into the cup. “It’s there for anyone who needs it.”

I was willing to make a point for five bucks, but not for 20. I’m a stingy moralist.

Several bystanders quickly joined the checkout line.

“Merry Christmas,” I said.

The clerk began ringing up sales while keeping an unblinking eye on the cup. Each customer became fixed on the bill as he or she stepped forward and faced the question of need. Free though it was, no one reached for the money.

I left after five minutes. I was disappointed. I wanted someone to take it. Somebody has to start spending if the economy is to recover.

This episode stirred my thought pot about the subject of gifts.

I don't like being told what to give, even though it's what someone wants to get. A gift has to be more than simply getting.

I don't like giving charity or receiving it.

As a 15-year-old junior in 1961, I was part of a small, homeroom delegation that delivered a Christmas dinner to a single mother and three kids in a back-alley tenement in Lawrenceville, a cramped, blue-collar Pittsburgh neighborhood along the Allegheny River.

(William Foster, father of songwriter Stephen Foster, founded the community in 1814 and named it after Captain James Lawrence who had died early in a losing sea battle with the British in 1813 after exhorting his crew, “Don't give up the ship. Fight her till she sinks.” Nevertheless, the British boat captured the *USS Chesapeake* in 15 minutes. Its timbers ended up in Wickham, Hampshire, England as a watermill, which today grinds out sales of antiques.)

My two classmates and I were only a year or two older than the mother's oldest girl who tried her best to disappear into a wall. She was mortified that we were standing in her tiny living room on this mission. I was mortified because she was mortified.

I've never felt comfortable around well-meaning charity since, though I understand its benefits. It would have been better had we left the meal on their doorstep, knocked and run away.

I guess that's why I put \$5 in the Sheetz cup for anyone to take, according to sekf-determined need.

I got out of having to wrap this gift in festive paper, which is a good thing because my wrapping jobs look worse than any completed by a dimwitted chimpanzee that decided against using its opposable thumbs.

We could give our struggling economy a shot in its rear end if everyone put \$5 in the nearest penny cup. We'd just have to encourage people to spend what they take.

That shouldn't be too hard for a country that has made trillions available to a handful of big banks to stay the way they are.

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-11-28/secret-fed-loans-undisclosed-to-congress-gave-banks-13-billion-in-income.html>)

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