

The Gift of Understanding

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The confidence of childhood is a fragile thing. It can be preserved or destroyed in an instant...

I must have been about four years old when I first entered Mr. Wigden's sweet shop, but the smell of that wonderful world of penny treasures still comes back to me clearly more than half a century later. Whenever he heard the tiny tinkle of the bell attached to the front door, Mr. Wigden quietly appeared to take his stand behind the counter, he was very old, and his head was topped with a cloud of fine, snow-white hair.

Never was such an array of delicious temptations spread before a child. It was almost painful to make a choice. Each kind had first to be savoured in the imagination before passing on to the next. There was always a short pang of regret as the selection was dropped into a little white paper bag. Perhaps another kind would taste better? Or last longer? Mr. Wigden had a trick of scooping your selection into the bag, then pausing. Not a word was spoken, but every child understood that Mr. Wigden's raised eyebrows constituted a last-minute opportunity to make an exchange. Only after payment was laid upon the counter was the bag irrevocably twisted shut and the moment of indecision ended. Our house was two streets away from the tram-line, and you had to pass the shop going to and from the trams. Mother had taken me into town on some forgotten errand, and as we walked home from the tram she turned into Mr. Wigden's. "Let's see if we can find something good," she said, leading me up to the long glass case as the old man approached from behind a curtained aperture. My mother stood talking to him for a few minutes as I gazed rapturously at the display before my eyes. Then mother chose something for me and paid Mr. Wigden. Mother went into town once or twice a week, and, since in those days baby-sitters were almost unheard-of, I usually accompanied her. It became a regular routine for her to take me into the sweet shop for some special treat, and after that first visit I was always allowed to make my own choice.

I knew nothing of money at that time. I would watch my mother hand something to people, who would then hand her a package or a bag, and slowly the idea of exchange percolated into my mind. Some time about then I reached a decision. I would travel the interminable two streets to Mr. Wigden's all alone. I remember the tinkle of the bell as I managed, after some considerable effort, to push open the big door.

Enthralled, I worked my way slowly down the display counter. Here were spearmint leaves with a fresh minty fragrance. There, gumdrops – the great big ones, so tender to bite into, all crusty with crystals of sugar. I couldn't pass by the satin cushions, little hard squares filled with sherbet. In the next tray were coloured jelly-babies.

The box behind them held gobstoppers which were enormous, made a most satisfying

bulge in your cheek, and lasted at least an hour if you didn't roll them round in your mouth too much, or take them out too often to see what colour layer was exposed at the moment. The hard, shiny, dark-brown-covered nuts Mr. Wigden dished out with a little wooden scoop – two scoops for a penny. And, of course, there were liquorice all sorts. These lasted a longtime. too, if you nibbled them slowly, and let the bites dissolve instead of chewing them up. When I had picked out a promising assortment and several little white paper bags were standing on top of the counter. Mr. Wigden leaned over and asked. "You have the money to pay for all these?"

"Oh, yes," I replied, "I have lots of money." I reached out my fist, and into Mr. Wigden's open hand I dumped half a dozen cherry-stones carefully wrapped in silver paper. Mr. Wigden stood gazing at the palm of his hand: then he looked searchingly at me for a long moment.

"Isn't it enough?" I asked him anxiously.

He sighed gently. "I think it is a bit too much," he answered.

"You've got some change to come." He walked over to his old-fashioned cash register and cranked open the drawer. Returning to the counter, he leaned over and dropped two pennies into my outstretched hand.

My mother scolded me about going all that way alone when she found me out. I don't think it ever occurred to her to ask about the Financial arrangement. I was simply cautioned not to go again unless I asked first. I must have obeyed, and evidently, when permission was granted for me to go again, a penny or two was given to me for my purchases, since I don't remember using cherry-stones a second time.

In fact, the affair, insignificant to me then, was soon forgotten in the busy occupation of growing up. When I was six or seven years old my family moved to another town, where I grew up, eventually married and established my own family. My wife and I opened a shop where we bred and sold tropical fish. The aquarium trade was then still in its infancy, and most of the fish were imported from Africa and South America. Few species sold for less than five dollars a pair.

One sunny afternoon a little girl came in accompanied by her brother. They were perhaps five and six years old. I was busy cleaning the tanks. The two children stood with wide, round eyes, staring at the jewelled beauties swimming in the crystal-clear water. "Gosh," exclaimed the boy, "can we buy some?"

"Yes," I replied. "If you can pay for them."

"Oh, we have lots of money," the little girl said confidently.

Something in the way she spoke gave me an odd feeling of familiarity. After watching the fish for some time they asked me for pairs of several different kinds, pointing them out as they walked down the row of tanks. I netted their choices into a travelling container and slipped it into an insulated bag for transport, handing it to the boy. "Carry it carefully," I cautioned. He nodded and turned to his sister. "You pay him," he said. I held out my hand, and as her clenched fist approached me I suddenly knew exactly what was going to happen, even what the little girl was going to say.

Her fist opened, and into my outstretched palm she dumped three small coins.

In that instant I sensed the full impact of the legacy Mr. Wigden had given me so many years before. Only now did I recognize the challenge I had presented to the old man, and realize how wonderfully he had met it. I seemed to be standing again in the little sweet shop as I looked at the coins in my own hand. I understood the innocence of the two children and the power to preserve or destroy that innocence, as Mr. Wigden had understood those long years ago. I was so filled up with the remembering that my throat ached.

The little girl was standing expectantly before me. "Isn't it enough?" she asked in a small voice. "It's a little too much," I managed to say over the lump in my throat. "You've got some change to come."

I rummaged round in the cash drawer, dropped two cents into her open hand, then stood in the doorway watching the children walk away, carefully carrying their treasure. When I went back into the shop, my wife was standing on a stool with her arms submerged to the elbows in a tank where she was rearranging the plants.

"What was that all about?" she asked. "Do you know how many fish you gave them?"

"About 30 dollars' worth," I answered, the lump still in my throat. "But I couldn't have done anything else."

When I had finished telling her about old Mr. Wigden, her eyes were wet, and she stepped off the stool and gave me a gentle kiss on the cheek. "I still smell the gumdrops," I sighed, and I'm certain I heard old Mr. Wigden chuckle over my shoulder as I wiped down the last tank.