

Sometimes the very valuable lessons in life, come at little cost.

TWELVE CENTS

“Ahh, isn’t that cute?”

Topping off her coffee cup, a gentle smile plays on Samantha’s lips.

“What’s cute, Sam?” Rabbi Josh asks.

“That little boy at the register ... paying the check. He looks about ten.”

Turning, Josh chuckles. “Nice looking kid. Why didn’t Seth do that when he was that age? Heck, we’d have eaten out more often.”

Laughing, Sam playfully nudges Josh. “C’mon Rabbi, I’m sure his dad gave him the money.”

Watching the boy carefully count out the bills, a nostalgic look crosses Martin Williams’ face. “A dad teaching his son responsibility,” he says. “I remember doing the same thing when Jason was little. Had a heck of a time getting him to understand about tipping waitresses, though.”

“And bartenders too, huh Martin?” Josh asks.

The Baptist minister’s booming laugh resounds throughout the Bistro. “Josh, remember ... Baptist. We’re not supposed to even know what a bartender is.”

“A bartender, Reverend, is simply a pharmacist with a limited inventory,” Bullets chuckles.

“Thanks Walt... but even with that profound insight, aahh ... still no first-hand experience,” Martin says with a wink.

An impish grin ambles across Josh’s face. “So, Martin, tell me, why then did I see your boy, Jason ...

... wander out of Baldy’s late Saturday night?”

Hi, it's Tony. Today's lunch rush is over, and Samantha is taking a break, joining a few of the neighborhood gang for coffee.

All kinds of people frequent Sam's Bistro: professionals for breakfast, college students for coffee between classes, workmen for a quick lunch, high school kids for soft drinks and fries after school. You know the place, where everyone's comfortable and everyone belongs. And since school's out, families often drop by for the family lunch specials Sam's is known for.

Seems today, one little guy has captured the proprietress' attention. And from the look on her face, I think she's seeing more than just a patron paying a check.

What say we listen in ...?

"Josh, what was your son doing out on the town at midnight on a Saturday, no less?" Martin laughs.

"Yea, remember, Rabbi, Saturday ... the Sabbath?" Bullets chuckles.

"Aahh yes, the Sabbath, my Italian friend. Sundown ... remember ... sundown."

Chuckling, Sam turns her attention back to the boy, now in conversation with his dad. Seeing the look on Sam's face Josh sets down his coffee cup. "You seem touched, Sam. Something familiar?" he asks

"Yea, rabbi ... reminds me of something that happened when I was in college."

"A good memory, I take it?"

"More like bittersweet."

"How so?"

"Well, it was a summer job; a little family restaurant back home and this small boy came in. Probably about that little fella's age. I went to wait on him and he was reading the children's menu. He asked the price of a strawberry

sundae, then a root beer float. To this day I remember the float was seventy-five cents and the sundae, ninety cents. Anyway, he reached in his pocket - actually turned it inside out - and pulled out a handful of change. Well, almost. He dropped most of it on the floor and the two of us ended up on our hands and knees picking up pennies and nickels. When we got it all together, he laid it on the table and counted it slowly and carefully. He had ninety-four cents. Then, again, he asked the difference between the float and the sundae. So, I told him again and he started to count his money all over."

"I hear someone getting impatient," Josh says quietly.

Sam pauses, a wistful look in her eyes. "Well, by this time other customers were coming in and yea, I admit, I was getting annoyed. Obviously, he could get the sundae, but he finally ordered the soda. I could tell he was disappointed, but I was just happy to get on to other customers."

"Who were probably good for a nicer tip?"

"Yea, Rabbi, not one of my better moments."

Josh winks. "Go on, Sam, then what happened?"

"Anyway, I brought him his soda, went about waiting on other customers, and essentially forgot about him. About fifteen minutes later he got up to leave. I was busy taking orders, so, out of the corner of my eye, I watched him slowly count out his coins and lay them on the table. Then, he smiled at me and waved. I kind of half-smiled back, but really, I just brushed him off."

"And that's how the story ends?" Reverend Williams asks.

"I wish. Later, I went to clean his table and there on the check were a quarter, three dimes, and four nickels. Seventy-five cents. I put them in my pocket and started to clear the table. And there, next to the empty glass, was a nickel and seven pennies. Twelve cents. I remember looking at those coins for the longest minute and when I picked them up, it dawned on me why the little guy took forever to order."

"Because he really wanted the sundae, but he was trying to figure out if he'd have enough for a tip," Josh says softly.

"Exactly, rabbi, all that for twelve cents. I looked out the window, saw him heading down the street, and felt my eyes tear up. And I was angry with myself for treating the little guy like he was a nuisance."

“Sam, you’re being too hard on yourself,” Bobby "Pretzels" says, softly. “Who expects a little boy to worry about tipping. It was only twelve cents.”

“Yea, Bobby. Except it might have been the most important twelve cents he spent all week.”

“Really, how do you figure?”

“Well, the more I thought about it, the more I realized what he was doing. First, he was wrestling with the temptation to get the sundae and forget the tip. But he knew what was proper and chose to do what he thought was right. And even more importantly, he was telling the world he was not a little boy. That twelve cents was his way of saying, ‘I know how to act like a grown-up’.”

“Kids can be adorable,” Bobby says, lightly shrugging his shoulders.

“Yes, but it was more than a cute moment, Bobby.”

“It was?”

“It was. At some point he probably asked his dad why he left money on the table. Dad then explained tipping and he understood it was the grown-up thing to do. Looking back, that little guy helped me realize a mistake I’m not going to make with my Emily.”

“We preach, but we don’t engage them,” Father Bob says, quietly.

“Right, Father. Teach our kids responsibility by giving responsibility, not just talking about it. We need to let them learn by doing, not just preaching. Not to, is to shelter them. And in the end, it stunts them.”

“So, treat them like responsible adults, they’ll become just that?”

“Exactly.”

“And maybe Martin, Josh and I won’t have to clean up the mess when they color outside the lines.”

“Because they never learned where the lines were,” Josh chuckles.

“I remember when Aliana was fourteen,” Nick Kossarides says. “We had a heck of a time getting her to not leave the lights on ... the water running, doors open, wasting food, things like that. So, Andrea sat her down and had her write

out the monthly checks for the mortgage, the car payment, the utilities, groceries, things like that. And from then on, we never had to nag her. We learned a lesson we put it into practice with the other kids. Help them understand and you'll be amazed what they're capable of."

"Amen," the rabbi chuckles. "If I recall, it was a twelve-year-old boy with a slingshot, a few stones, and his faith in his God who saved his people from a giant-sized threat to their very existence."

"So, preacherman, you agree?" Pretzels asks. "Like Sam says ... a lesson we need to learn?"

"Yea, Bobby," Josh says, a twinkle in his eye.

"One that, sometimes, only costs about ... twelve cents."

"How is it you sought me? Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?" A twelve-year old's words - remembered for all time.

It's said respect for justice and society begins in the high chair, not the electric chair. Learning how to take one's place in the world, to act responsibly in society begins with toddlers. Children at all ages need to learn there isn't always a reward for doing what is good. Doing the right thing, acting like a responsible adult, is its own reward.

Virtue and maturity are occasionally revealed in marvelous ways, especially by children. But often, honesty, responsibility, and care and concern for others, proof our kids are growing up right, can be found ...

... in something as simple as a nickel and seven pennies next to an empty soda glass.

Thinkaboutit. I'm Tony Baggz.