

HAVE EMPATHY & HONESTY GONE DOWN THE DRAIN?

I heard a tale recently that appalled and fascinated me at the same time.

The tale was told to me as a funny story, a hilarious situation. But I was more circumspect.

A girl, about eight or nine, had been out with her sister, parents and grandparents. While she was out, she'd visited a public bathroom. As she went to wash her hands, she found a significant amount of money – apparently around $70 – left on the sink by the tap.

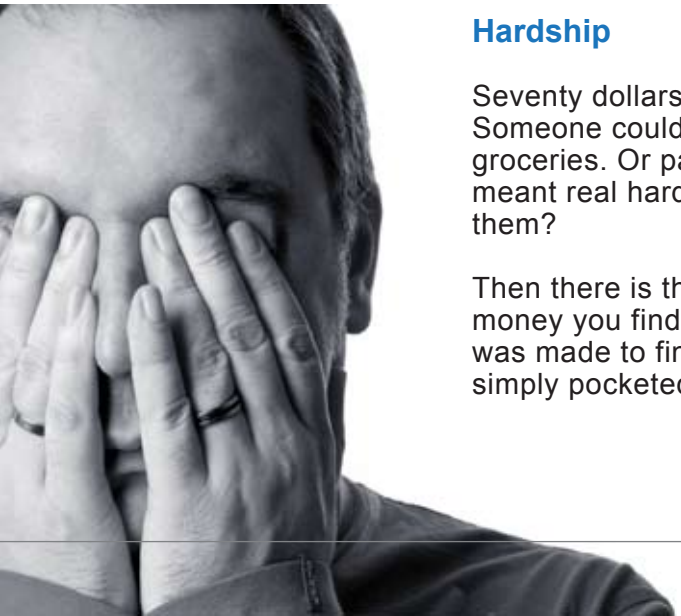
The child picked the money up and took it back to her parents who were surprised and delighted at her find. She got to keep the money.

Sibling rivalry

But her sister wasn't happy. She whined and fussed about the unfairness of it. Her sister was now $70 richer than her.

After they'd been home a while, Grandma suggested to the unlucky sister that she might like to go to the bathroom. There, by the taps on the sink, was $70, left there for her to find.

There are so many things wrong with this story I don't know where to begin. Firstly, there was no attempt to consider the position of the owner of the $70 lost in the bathroom.



Hardship

Seventy dollars is an appreciable amount of money to most everyone. Someone could have been on their way to buy their family's weekly groceries. Or pay their heating bill. Losing that money could have meant real hardship for someone. Where was the consideration for them?

Then there is the question of honesty. While it isn't illegal to keep money you find in the street, isn't it morally questionable? No attempt was made to find the person who'd lost it. It appeared to me it was simply pocketed with glee.

In fact, a statement such as that published by the Policy Framework for Substantive Equality in Australia is, to my way of thinking, much more appropriate, “If you want to trust me equally, you may have to be prepared to treat me differently.”

We have to adapt to our situations, whatever they may be.

Uncomfortable feelings

Shouldn’t we be teaching our children skills to help them manage those uncomfortable feelings, helping support them through it, rather than providing short-term relief for them (and us) by making things perfect in their world?



These children were taught:

- **That it is okay to take, without any exchange or trade;**
- **That life is always fair;**
- **To consider their own needs;**
- **To disregard someone else’s.**

Furthermore, they were taught:

- **That the acquisition of money, however that acquisition occurs, is paramount and worthy;**
- **That discomfort should be avoided at all costs and without regard for any moral imperative,and**
- **That someone will come to relieve them of their discomfort and assuage their unpleasant feelings.**

There was no attempt to help these children to manage their feelings, to appreciate the value of a strong work ethic. There was no consideration for the notion of leaving the world in a better place for all. In fact, the emphasis was on making the world a better place just for them.

Righteous indignation

I sat for a little and considered the strength of my righteous indignation. Could there be anything right with this picture?

The children could feel loved by their family who were delighted for one child’s luck and sad for the inequity the other felt. Don’t we all enjoy some good fortune now and again? The world would be a dull, heavy place if the universe didn’t conspire to give it to us on occasion.

Grandma probably got a wonderful warm feeling for making her granddaughter happy. Everyone was happy, in fact. There was no malice toward anyone. They all bonded over the experience and clearly one at least was enjoying telling the story to family outsiders.

And someone, perhaps, will take greater care of their money in the future. A lesson learned there.

Negative feelings

My overwhelming feelings about this story, though, are negative. The focus on the short-term learning and one's own needs bothers me. The behavior of the adults who seemed to think their job was to intervene and make things right for one child while putting both children at the center without regard for the implications of their actions on others depresses me.

Those children lost an opportunity to take a step towards independence and develop some empathic insight as well as possibly some moral character. And someone lost an opportunity to get their misstep righted. They didn't get their money back.

Values guide us

Our values guide us through life. They are the touchstones upon which all our actions are based. Some of mine include: honesty, empathy and meaningful exchange.
To make it better

If I were to rewind this story, on hearing about the money in the public bathroom, I would suggest to a child to:

- Start looking around for the person who could have lost it;
- Hand it into a police station;
- Put a sign up with contact information if there was something to identify the rightful owner; or
- Donate it.

These actions help a child develop a conscientious view of the world around them. Their value core is strengthened.

If not us, who?

Interestingly when I did an, admittedly small, amount of research for this article, most people online said they would have pocketed the money and kept quiet.

Perhaps we need to work extra hard at helping our children feel good for things besides money. If not us, who? If not now, when?

What do you think? Am I being too harsh? How and at what point would you have intervened to make things turn out differently?

Posted by: Jensen, Anabel. "My Invisible Emotional Raincoat." SixSeconds, 19 September 2011.
< http://www.6seconds.org/2012/02/28/emotionalal-intelligence-empathy-honesty/>
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