

Struggling dad's lesson on giving

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I was thinking about Thanksgiving recently when a memory snapped into view as unexpectedly as a computer pop-up window.

In the memory, it was summer, not November. I was 10 years old, wearing shorts, flip-flops and a sleeveless button-up blouse. The day was sticky hot, and from somewhere outside came the bell of the ice cream man.

My 10-year-old self hurried to the porch to watch as kids from up and down the street flew out of their front doors toward the truck, hungry for Eskimo Pies and Nutty Buddies.

A couple of my brothers were in the jostling crowd, which puzzled me since I knew we had no money for the ice cream man. All I could figure was that they were selling handmade Bugler cigarettes, the cheap kind we rolled for our parents, to the neighbor boys.

Suddenly, from my porch vista, I wanted a Nutty Buddy like I'd never wanted a Nutty Buddy before, like I'd never wanted anything. I deserved a Nutty Buddy. I would demand a Nutty Buddy.

My father was sitting in a rocking chair downstairs. He looked odd, at home in the middle of the day, no cuff links or tie, watching TV. He was out of work and had nowhere to go. I gathered my courage the way you might hug a thin coat to your chest in an icy wind.

"Can I have some money for the ice cream man?"

In my memory, just before he says no, my father looks as sad as I ever saw him. I knew we were broke, whatever that meant, though I didn't know then that his business had gone bankrupt. The desire for that Nutty Buddy swelled within me anyway, and words that I had never consciously formed

burst into the room with the ferocity of bulls.

"I hate being poor!"

There were things you weren't allowed to do in my father's house. Curse. Lie. Leave lights on in empty rooms or dirty dishes in the sink. Of all the sins, the greatest was talking back, so I spun on my flip-flopped heel to get out of there, and fast.

"Mary Theresa."

He used his children's middle names only when trouble loomed. I turned back toward him, the metal boot of dread stomping on my heart.

"You never ask for anything," he said.

He was standing up, fishing in his pants pocket. He pulled out some change, counted it in his palm, pressed it into one of mine. "Buy something for your brothers too."

I was scurrying away, elated and mystified, afraid the ice cream man would escape before this miracle came to fruition, when he spoke again.

"Mary Theresa."

Again, I turned around.

"Yes, sir?"

"We don't have money. But we are not poor. Poverty is a state of mind."

Off and on for years since then, the vision of my father giving me money that was hard to spare has come back to me. I think that's why the memory surfaced when I was thinking about Thanksgiving.

This week begins the official giving season, a season that also comes with wishing, expecting, demanding. There's a temptation to feel that what we get, or what we give, is never quite enough.

I don't agree that poverty is entirely a state of mind, but I know what my father meant. And part of what he meant is that no matter how little you think you have, there's always enough to give some away, and no matter how little you think you've gotten, you may understand later that it was huge.