

INSPIRE YOUR AUDIENCE

To be delivered Wednesday, May 4, 2016

Lessons Learned From a Penny

Mister/Madame Toastmaster, fellow Toastmasters, and esteemed guests:

Picture this: You walk into a dinner party and introduce yourself to a stranger. The first thing that happens is a name exchange – let's say you learn that the stranger's name is Gertrude. What's the second thing that happens? More than likely, you ask Gertrude what she does for a living. Why might you ask that? It might be because it's an easy question, or you're just curious. But I think that for all of us, there's another driver lingering beneath the surface: *our identity*. We all want to know who we are, who others are, and, if we are honest, how we compare to those around us. And quite often, we find our identity based on things like what we do, what we are capable of, and what others think of us.

Woah, you say – this is getting a really personal, really quickly. Ok, let me back off a little and give you an example from my own life. About nine months ago I ran the San Francisco half marathon. It was a great race and I had a personal-best time, but about two weeks later I began to realize that something wasn't right in my left foot. Every time I took a step, I felt this jolt of pain in my big toe. I tried taking some time away from running for a while, but things didn't get better. Eventually, I went to see a doctor about it. The diagnosis? I have arthritis in my left foot.

This came as a bit of a shock to me. I'd been jogging regularly since about eighth grade, and running was a huge part of my life. I took pride in my physical fitness and my speed. I enjoyed being known as a good athlete. I cherished the alone time each morning, just me and the pavement. Now all of this – this key contributor to my *identity* - was threatened because of my silly toe.

My crisis of sorts gave me the opportunity to think about identity and where it comes from. As I pondered, I was inspired by an object that until recently I have found to be completely uninspiring – the penny. Today I want to share with you three insights related to the concept of identity that I gained from these coins. What you are going to hear is that (1) Everyone is created with value, (2) Everyone can be part of change, and (3) Everyone can invest in the future.

How many of you have seen a penny just lying in the street, but you didn't bother to pick it up? I think all of us have done that at one point or another – even me, and I almost *always* pick up pennies. But what if you lived in the year 1900? I'm guessing most of you would have quickly snatched it up – back then, a penny was worth 25 times what it is now. But what is common to a penny in 1900 and a penny in 2016? They both have a face value, or what I'll refer to as *worth*, of one cent. The price of copper might rise or fall. The purchasing power of the penny may change. The outside of a coin could be worn down or become tarnished. The penny could be lost in a drawer or saved in a collector's album. None of these things change the penny's inherent worth however – it's still worth one cent. Why is that? Because the penny was *created* with that worth; it's worth is derived by the fact that the United States Government says pennies are worth one cent. The identity of a penny has nothing to do with what it can do, what shape it's in, or where it's located.

At this point, I'm guessing that some of you are thinking, "This is pushing it a bit – we all know that pennies just aren't worth much!" But as it turns out, you just proved my point by your very train of thought. The point is *not* how much worth a penny has. Rather, the point is that pennies *have*

worth. And moreover, all pennies have the *same face-value worth of one cent*, no matter where the penny is, its date, or its condition. Now, I concede that every analogy breaks down at some point – try buying a candy bar with a penny these days and you won't have as much luck as in 1900. But the point is that pennies in 1900 and in 2016 still have the same face value of one cent, and today we'll move forward based on that fact.

This leads us to the first insight about identity. Just like a penny is created with a defined value of one cent, I have come to realize that all humans – each one of us in this room – are created with value that is an inherent, essential part of who we are. As even our Declaration of Independence says, “All men are created equal.” For me, this means that running is something that I do, but it's not what gives me value. The way I look or my athletic ability say nothing about the worth I have as a human. To me, this thought is incredibly refreshing and freeing.

It is essential that we understand this first insight as we move forward. At least in my experience, my perpetual temptation is to try and justify my existence and to prove my self-worth by accomplishing great things, out-performing my competitors, and meeting all of my goals. Just a couple days ago I learned that a project partner I had in a class at Stanford is the co-founder and CEO of a successful company! I have to admit: my jealousy over his success wrestled away my joy in life for a little while, all because I felt like I was worth less because of my lack of such accomplishment. Now, there is nothing wrong with doing good things. The problem comes when I try to use good things to establish my identity. If a penny tried to do that, it would either be perpetually depressed (if, say, the price of copper decreased so that its metal was worth less) or proud (if the price of copper increased). As we move forward, we must do so with the complete understanding that nothing we say or accomplish changes our inherent, endowed identity. What we will see is that now, with our identity secure, we are in fact more free to take risks and to fully engage in whatever we do because we no longer feel the need to preserve our fleeting good standing.

Returning to the penny, one thing that this coin can do because it has the unchanging, inherent worth of one cent is to be part of change. Yes, this *is* a pun, but the significance of this statement stands none-the-less. A penny can be *spent* now to achieve a good result. Combined with dollars and some good sense (or *cents*), this coin can buy medicine for a sick child, purchase food for a homeless man, or send a Mother's Day card to a grandparent (remember: Mother's Day is this Sunday!). No penny is too small to be part of a movement to create change for good, because each penny has worth. In the same way, because we as humans have worth, we are able to affect change for good! There is something unique and special about even the simplest gestures – a warm smile, the touch of a hand, or a listening ear. All of us can be part of change. And even if a gesture is not well-received or our efforts fail, we as human beings still have worth. It's just like a penny still has value even if it's spent on something like cat food – I personally think dog food would be a much better choice, but that's just me. Anyway, our own identity is independent of the outcome of our efforts. This frees us to try and even to fail! I am free to be part of change because my identity is secure.

This brings us to the last insight; let's go back one more time to the penny. Pennies have worth, which means they can be spent now to be part of change, but they can also be *invested* in order to make a difference the future. Now, I thought I could inspire you by calculating the future value of investing one penny per month at 5% interest for 10 years, but unfortunately after that time you'd only have about \$1.61. 10,000 pennies, maybe that's a different story. But instead of this route, I want to tell you about an elderly couple that I met at my church in Minnesota – Wendell and Roberta Brown. They invited me over to their house for lunch semi-regularly when I was in high school and college to listen to me and share their insights about life. The Browns invested in me with their time,

and of course with their coffee, cookies, and sandwiches too. Now Wendell is gone and Roberta is getting very old as well. But one of the most important things they demonstrated to me is that even though they were *aged to perfection*, they still had something to invest in me and my future. I owe part of my character, perseverance, and faith to their wisdom. They showed me that I have inherent worth, and that like them, I too can invest in the future.

Well I hope that all this talk about pennies hasn't left you senseless (or *cents-less*). Circling back to the beginning of this talk, just a few days ago, after several months of physical therapy, I was actually able to go for a short jog without significant trouble. But to tell you the truth, I've come to be somewhat thankful for my little toe issue, in a strange way. Because without it, I may not have been so acutely aware of these three observations about identity. We all are created with worth. We all can be part of change. And we can all invest in the future.

Mister/Madame Toastmaster.