

The Mission Box

After my parents split up, I became an overnight Catholic. Baptized at eight years old. First communion the same year and confirmed two years later.

Subsequently enrolled in a Catholic grammar school and upon graduation I attended an all boys Catholic high school. Both were located close to home in the city of Chicago. With around 2000 boys, ages 13 to 19. the high school was very strict in its rules and policies. A combination of Christian Brothers and lay staff made sure those rules were followed. Back then the staff were allowed to whack a student if he got out of line and many a student received a backhand across the face. To say we paid attention and listened would be an understatement.

During my freshman year, in my morning religion class, early in the start of the school year, a fellow student I shall call "Sleeper" had fallen asleep in class again. Rumor had it, he had a night job and just couldn't stay awake during the day. Of course, there were many other rumors why he couldn't stay awake in class. He also had the distinction of being a straight "F" student. However in the third grading period freshman year he did manage to get a D- in one of the subjects. So strange to see the blue D in the sea of red Fs. The teacher who gave him the D- said simply he passed a test and turned in the required assignment. The teacher had no choice, but to give him the passing grade.

Most classrooms had a mission box on the teacher's desk for you to place your change in for the poor. In 1963, we were lucky if we had change in our pockets for lunch, let alone for the mission box. The box was made of cardboard, with a metal bottom and a pop off metal top. In my morning Religion class it sat predominately on the teacher's desk waiting for contributions. Very few ever came and the box sat basically empty. Our teacher for this class was a Christian Brother with, how shall I say this delicately, a rather violent temper.

On one particular morning, this teacher was in an even nastier mood than usual. He noticed the sleeper dozing off, head in hands braced on the desktop. In a rage, the teacher grabbed the mission box and flung it at the sleeper. The box struck the sleeper on the forehead, popping open and spilling the contents on the floor. The box itself flew in the air and landed on the desk next to the sleeper.

The teacher screamed there was fifteen dollars in the box and there better be as much in there when we brought it back to his desk. The student who had the box on his desk looked inside while the rest of us looked on the floor for the spilled change. He turned the box over to show it was empty and a quick glance on the floor netted about eight cents. The usual amount for these boxes.

In a state of near panic, everyone started digging into their pockets to see how much they had. With a class of about 30, we hoped we could reach the amount. Frantically, we each placed what we had on the student's desk housing the empty mission box. He counted each contribution and tallied it onto a sheet of paper before placing the coins back into the box. Sleeper, with a knot growing

on his forehead where the box had struck added two whole dollars. Maybe he did have a job after all. The rest of us used our lunch money.

When the last student placed his change on the desk, we waited for the final tally. In what seemed like forever, the counter sat back in his chair and nodded yes. In all we had collected just over fifteen dollars. All of it now stashed back into the mission box. Another student handed the counter the top of the box, which was fit back into place and resealed the money inside. Sleeper took the mission box back up to the teacher's desk. The teacher had been standing this whole time. Leaning forward. His hands resting on the top of the desk. Sleeper placed the box back on the corner of the teacher's desk and started back to his own seat. The teacher sat back down quietly. He lifted the box in the air and feeling the weight, smiled.

The next day, the teacher held the box high in the air shaking it, thereby letting us know it probably had only the eight cents in it again. He set it on the corner of the desk as usual.

We took turns making sure sleeper did not doze off again or anyone else during the rest of the school year. A punch in the back, or poke in the ribs usually did the trick. Sleeper stayed awake and upright. We could not afford another refunding of the box, nor did we want to go without lunch again.

During the next four years of high school, I was acutely aware of the mission boxes placed on teacher's desks and of anybody sleeping in class. Not all of the staff had boxes on their desk. Even some of the Christian Brothers didn't have them. Some had them somewhere else in the room. But, every time I saw a mission box sitting on top a teacher's desk, I instantly became alert in class and ever watchful of someone about to doze off.

I've always wanted to believe the mission box was not set there to be used as a weapon. The actual intention to be part of the sacrifice of being catholic. However, after the experience my freshman year, I was leery of the effect of the mission box sitting on the teacher's desk. Especially, within reach of the teacher.