**The Ironing Board Store**

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“Mommy, are we gonna have store today?” Johnny’s eyes looked at me over the rim of his cup as he took a quick swig of milk while waiting for my answer.

“Store today?” echoed Barbara, dropping her half-eaten toast on the plate before her.

“Well, it is time,” I said. “But I have to get the things out of my Secret Place–you know the rules!”

Johnny swallowed quickly, tipped the cup again and drained it. “Hurry up, Barbara–let’s get outside quick so Mommy can fix the ironing board!” He pushed his chair back, his bare feet hit the kitchen linoleum, and he stood impatiently while his little sister more deliberately finished her breakfast. Then the two ran out into the early summer morning so that I could perform the beginning ritual of “the ironing board store.”

Actually, the ironing board was the logical thing to use. It could be lowered to the right height for two small children to check out my stock in trade. Quickly I went to the closet and took down the box that held my stock. Twice a month I did this. At the broad end of the ironing board went the cashbox, its fascinating small change still somewhat of a mystery to Barbara, but better understood by four-and-a-half-year-old John.

Next to the cashbox I arranged the color books. Just past them I placed a couple of small boxes of crayons, two pencils, and a fat pink eraser. Then a couple of small trucks, and a wee plastic doll. Remembering my shopping trip the day before, I hurried to the bedroom and got a paper sack from my black everyday purse. Out of it I took an inexpensive box of paints, a whistle, and a bottle of bubble-blowing fluid with its plastic ring.

Using a marking pen I wrote a large number on each item, first removing or crossing out the original price. I was ready for the next part of the ritual just as small knuckles knocked impatiently on the back door. I sat down quickly at the kitchen table, my change purse in my hand.

My “come in!” was just in time, for the children couldn’t have held out much longer. With eager side glances at the ironing board store, both children watched me count out the usual two piles of pennies, ten pennies in each. Before going to the ironing board they ran to their bedroom and brought back the jingling tithe envelopes they used each time. Barbara watched John drop a penny in his, and she dropped a penny in hers.

While my two offspring weighed the responsibility of their shopping, I recalled the times when John had cried with frustration when trying to buy something downtown, the counters filled with items beyond his comprehension and his money. Even at age four he had known that it takes money to buy something, but the immensity of the mathematics overwhelmed him. Out of that experience had grown my idea of the ironing board store. I watched now as John carefully showed his sister that the doll had a number 3 on it, and he pried open her fist to show her what part of her money to put in the cashbox.

Too Little?

She’s too little, I told myself, too little to grasp the idea. But her face beamed as she looked again at the items before her. John looked at the color book, but didn’t open it. One didn’t open, use, chew, or bite anything one hadn’t paid for–Rule 5, maybe. He sighed a tiny sigh, left the color books and proceeded down the “store aisle.” He stopped before the paintbox.

I had been waiting for this moment, and realized later I’d been holding my breath.

“Mommy, it says a 12?” His voice was uncertain. “How come it says a 12?" He flattened his palm and looked at the nine pennies, then at me.

“Well, Johnny,” I answered, “next time you will get more pennies, maybe you can keep some of these–save them, and put some of those you will get next time with them. Then you would have plenty for the paintbox. Would you like to do that?”

“I better think,” he said. He looked carefully at the new whistle, checked the big 2 on it, went back to the pencils, and finally chose one for a penny. He carefully put the penny in the cashbox.

Barbara watched him, the doll in one hand and her wealth in the other. She, too, wanted a pencil. Then with John’s help, she chose a pad of paper to go with it. Her money was gone, she lost interest. I helped her use the pencil sharpener, and she settled down on the floor to draw childhood pictures.

“Mommy,” Johnny turned to me, “if I didn’t put Jesus’ money away I still wouldn’t have plenty for the paintbox, huh?”

“No, dear.”

My son came over and climbed on my knee, and he absently twirled the pencil. I knew he had learned to count earlier than many children do, but maybe this decision was too hard for him. I had waited for some time to try this experiment after I had thought of it, and I wondered whether it was still too soon. Finally he slid off my lap. Together we searched the mysteries of the little paintbox. At his request my hands did the opening, his fingers reaching to touch almost reverently the squares of dry paint.

A Lesson Learned

“Okay, Mommy. Help me to keep my pennies till next time so I won’t lose ’em.”

I found a small jar, and he dropped the eight cents into it, screwing the lid on tightly as if to keep them from escaping. We found a place in the dish cupboard to set the little jar. As he climbed on a chair to put it on a shelf, my young man said something I’ve never forgotten:

“I wouldn’t ’uv used Jesus’ penny, Mommy. It’s His, ’cuz the Bible says it is.”

John is in his mid-twenties now, and married. Remarks dropped by him and his lovely dark-haired wife give us great peace of mind. The elements learned in the ironing board store are still in use! But he had a twinkle in his eye when he told me, “Mom, I never found such bargains in big stores as you had in yours!”

When Barbara went as a student missionary to Thailand, the people of two churches helped raise her plane fare. I learned later that she had saved out of her student missionary wages enough to pay the tithe on that plane fare.

All of us parents build little traditions to help our children grow up. Married children come home for Christmas and with joy hang the same Christmas trinkets they chose each year when they were small. Recently a box came from John addressed: To Mom’s Secret Place. Our address followed. He had called me earlier cross-country to tell me of a gift for his father’s birthday, and he wanted it hidden until the right time–hidden in the place where I had hidden all the family gifts. I wonder whether there will be a “Mom’s Secret Place” in his home when children begin to grow up there.

The ironing board store is only one of our family traditions. May all young parents have as much fun planning theirs, with prayer and with love. And may the little traditions work out as well for them as this one has for us and ours.