

One for Two

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***Note:** This was originally written for an English competition back in 2014.*

Few people can say that they were most accomplished at the age of five.

Even so for child prodigies; the accomplishments of geniuses seldom stop at a young age. With his earliest compositions surprising even his father, the five year old Mozart had no problem defining a new, volatile musical era; Caruana's tournament appearances for chess at the age of five never stopped him from attaining the rank of grandmaster before he turned fourteen; the legends surrounding Gauss adding up every number from one to a hundred at the age of five are only a small part of his significant legacy in the worlds of number theory and geometry.

With childhood being the apparent bud of larger successes of the future, it is rather easy to start thinking, or even believing, that adulthood is the time of true knowledge and understanding. Perpetualized by images of the naïve, angsty teen and of the wise, all-knowing old man, the perceived positive correlation between age and capability has little counter-evidence and an abundance of supporting cases. But between a young child and his older and "wiser" counterpart, which one is more likely to be mesmerized by the first snowfall of winter, by a fireworks display, by a colourful packet of pills lying on a table? Is it not rather expected that the young, curious child would ask about why every snowflake is different, why they see the pretty explosions before they hear it, why they have a tummy ache when they try some of those small capsules in the medicine cabinet? Would the adult not begin to answer, as to not disappoint their young student? But then, does the adult know everything about water bonds and crystallization? Does the adult know everything about waves and the electromagnetic spectrum? Does the adult know everything about the digestive, immune, and circulatory systems?

No, most likely not.

Does the adult ask anyone for more knowledge? Does the adult, in his realization that he does not know enough, make a resolve to learn more? Does the adult become humbled that the child could think to ask "Why?" when they themselves did not consider doing so?

No, most likely not.

And what is the most notorious response that these types of conceited, self-conscious adults give to the child who have the courage to ask such profound questions?

“Because that’s how things work.”

So, adults who are too afraid to ask questions inspire a new generation of people who think the most heinous of crimes is to admit ignorance. To ask questions. To learn more. Instead of allowing children to thrive in a free, beautiful, open world, our societies are keeping those children in captivity, depriving them of the radiant sunlight of truth. First break a generation, and then expect them to lead the future. The engine of failure continues.

The easiest solution, it seems, is to educate our friends and neighbours who are neglecting not only the curiosity of the young generation, but also that of themselves. But then, another brick wall pops up: “Do you think I’m stupid? Don’t tell me what to do. I already know. Stop bothering me.” People are not only becoming more and more afraid of asking questions, but also becoming more and more hostile towards the charity of knowledge that is being offered to them.

No more penny for your thoughts. Keep your two cents.

It is quite interesting (and perhaps depressing) what the value on the exchange of knowledge is. A penny for your thoughts? Giving your two cents? In a world where prices are soaring, where even insignificant things are becoming more and more out of reach, something as fundamental as knowledge is traded at cent values?

Let us think for a minute: If a thought costs a penny, and a thought is worth two cents...

Imagine economists and businessmen laughing when they hear that paying a cent for two is what will make the world prosper. But, quite frankly, we get the last laugh, because a balance in a savings account is worth an infinitesimal amount of the investment we can all put into having a more educated, more inspired, more successful generation of leaders. The real get-rich-quick scheme, the ultimate arbitrage, is to be willing to give a cent for two. To be willing to give appreciation to those who are enriching us. To be able to cast away some of our pride to be able to unlock greater truths. This is not prosperity that can be stripped away by a bank closing down, mind you; this is prosperity that makes every day one filled with childish wonder and awe.

If you won the lottery this instant, you could probably buy everything you ever wanted. Or so you thought. While sitting in front of that new grand piano, can you play it? While looking through the telescope in your new observatory, can you name the stars in the night sky? While on your new island getaway, can you jump into the ocean and start swimming? While having everything you thought you ever wanted, do you feel truly complete? Money can only buy happiness to a point. Up to the point where you wish you could sit down

and play some Beethoven for your friends, where you wish you could explore the Universe through a lens, where you wish you could discover a whole new world right underneath the surface of the water. Those “two cents” are the sort of happiness that money alone cannot give you, while costing no more than that imaginary penny.

It is time for us to all find the buried treasure right around us. Everyone around you is brimming with the two cents you want, and you yourself are full of facts and tricks that more people than you think would spare at least a penny for. Even as participants in a more and more unstable economy, we are all blessed beyond measure with boundless wealth.

On every billboard, on every news outlet, on posters on every lamppost on every street, two proclamations should be proudly displayed:

“To everyone afraid to ask: Do not be! Do not hold your pennies! Give them out to the ones in the world who can inspire and change you! What you give, you will get back twofold!”

“To everyone afraid to teach: Do not be! Spare just two cents! Give to those less fortunate than you! Be part of a society that is proud to be generous! What you give *will* make a difference!”

The economics of giving and taking knowledge is quite complex. In the “real” world, a cent given is a cent lost. Two cents is two times one cent. But in the exchange of knowledge, what is given is never lost, and what is received is always worth the price. When we reach the end of the day, what we remember is not what we lost, but rather what we gained in return. The happiness of the fading child in our hearts continues to inspire us to become better people.

When we were five, we all had dreams of one day understanding the world around us. Where has that daily wonderment gone? What happened to admiring the magnificent world around us? There might have never been a time in our lives where we loved everything about everything as much as when we were five; we may never be able to look at every fluttering butterfly, every passing car, every breathtaking sunset with as much awe and curiosity as we did back in the days of endless questions with even more potential answers. The first years of a child’s life can never be redone. As a society, we must work together to make every single person quick to question and enthusiastic in sharing the answers they have. Maybe one day in the near future, we will stop using the terms genius and prodigy to describe something special; maybe five year olds who change history will become a usual occurrence.

To think that such a bright future is worth but two cents and might not even cost a single penny.