

Petty Thievery: A Confession

This is a memoir I thought I would never have the courage to write. When writing memoirs, you are the one that is writing about you, and you choose what you are (or are not) going to write about. I have been troubled for a long time about having engaged in what I have labeled “petty thievery.” This memoir is therefore another in a series of “confessions.”

Childhood

Thinking back to my childhood, I can only remember three acts of petty thievery, or stealing. I am aware that many young people indulged in similar acts: First, taking chalk from school. It was so easy. As you walked out, you simply took the pieces of chalk sitting on the blackboard ledge. I used the chalk to draw on the sidewalk, to mark the lines for potsie, and, during elections, to urge my neighbors to vote for my candidate. At the age of nine in 1936, I persuaded every voter on Fox Street to VOTE FOR FDR.

Second, pilfering from FW Woolworth’s 5 and 10 cents store. My 5 and 10 was on Southern Blvd. near Hunts Point Avenue. It was so inviting: Knick-knacks and candy bars lying there on the counter. Salespeople with their backs to you. Grab something, put it in your pocket and walk casually out the door. Who’s to know? Besides, it’s FW Woolworth, not a neighborhood storekeeper. (I was so nervous, I only did it once.)

However, there were a few times that I, and a few friends, stole from a neighborhood store. The third act of petty thievery. We swiped potatoes from the fruit and vegetable store on Longwood Avenue to roast “mickies.” Adding insult to injury, from the same store that gave us the wooden boxes which we used to make the fires in the street in the winter, and guns and scooters in the summer. That really was the extent of my stealing, as a child. However, there is another incident of a slightly different nature, from my childhood, that is etched in my memory, and troubles my conscience to this day:

I lived at 783 Fox Street, and our building had a lovely courtyard with bushes and a low rail enclosing the grassy area. In the summer, kids would play on the street, and very few would venture inside our courtyard. To make sure that kids who did not live in our building did not trespass, the landlord, Mr. Gordon, offered me and my friend Marvin, who was his nephew, five cents to report any trespasser to Jack, the superintendent. Day after day, we would stand guard. Kids walked by with no thought of entering. How can we make any money if nobody comes in? Out of desperation, I came up with an idea. I would invite in the next kid that came by, and then we would report him to Jack. When my friend Larry passed by, I called to him and he walked in. Marvin then called the superintendent, who told Larry sternly that since he didn’t live there he had no right to go into the courtyard. Larry left. Marvin and I got a nickel from Mr. Gordon. I felt lousy. We never did it again. Years later, it occurred to me that similar acts were done to innocent people, by law enforcement officials, with much more serious consequences. I believe it is called “entrapment.”

Another form of petty thievery, this time involving the New York City public transportation system: I mentioned elsewhere that as a small child I would accompany my mother on visits to relatives in the Bronx and Brooklyn. When we took the trolley, my mother would simply push me ahead of her and tell the conductor that I was five, and would not pay a fare for me. When

we took the subway, my mother would have me go under the turnstile. This continued for many years beyond the age of five. Fares were five cents.

Young Adulthood

When we went to high school, I rode the subway, often with several friends. We would meet on the way to the subway, and being skinny teen-agers, we would occasionally push into the turnstile together, two rides for the price of one. Sometimes, when no one was looking, we would duck under the turnstile. The more athletic would vault over the turnstile. We never thought of it as stealing. We felt we could use the nickel more than the IRT. (I mentioned this to my son David, and he pointed out that I gave him and others my Senior T Pass, which is supposed to be non-transferable, depriving the MBTA of a full fare. Still undermining public transportation in my old age.)

My part-time job while going to high school was as a “page” with the Newspaper Division of the NY Public Library. I considered myself very lucky to have that job. It was close to school. The hours fit in perfectly with my school schedule, and it enabled me to read newspapers from all over the US and the world.

What petty thievery did I engage in? As all working teen-agers: I was a thief of time. When I was in the afternoon session in high school, I worked from 9 am to 12 noon. In the morning session, I was able to work from 1 pm to 5 pm. We did not have a time clock; we signed in. If no one was looking and I came in a few minutes late, I signed in at 9 am or 1 pm. (If I came in before 9 am or 1 pm, I wrote down the exact time, but did not get credit for it, the assumption being that we did not start work until 9 or 1.) Our boss, Mr. Fox, reviewed the time sheets and reprimanded us if he saw too many latenesses. If we came in more than 15 minutes late, we were to be docked. My starting salary was 37.5 cents an hour.

The job required us to get the bound volumes of the requested newspapers for the readers, and to return the volumes to the shelves when the readers were finished. The pages alternated getting the volumes, and shelving them. When we shelved them, we filled the carts with the volumes that had been read, and disappeared into the stacks. We were out of sight, and could read, do homework or even sleep. However, Mr. Fox was aware of this, and would constantly sneak around the stacks in rubber soled shoes trying to catch us.

Another activity for which the term petty thievery may be questionable relates to the coveted assignment of going to the 42nd Street Library at the end of the day. From time to time, a reader would request that a newspaper article be copied. Remember, this is 1942 to 1945. There were no Xerox machines or faxes. All we had were Photostats, and the Photostat machines were at the 42nd Street Library. Pages would vie for the assignment to take the volume with the page to be reproduced to 42nd Street. We would be able to leave a half hour earlier and be given carfare. The act of questionable petty thievery: keeping the carfare and walking from 25th Street to 42nd Street.

Now for the “biggie.” From time to time, people would send the N. Y. Public Library copies of newspapers that they owned and no longer wanted. The logical repository, they assumed, was the library. It turned out that the library had no need for them. It had all the newspapers it could use, and they were neatly preserved. When the library received them, they were sent to the Newspaper Division, and then they sat in a pile in the corner of Mr. Fox’s office, gathering dust.

On a day that Mr. Fox was out, I went through the pile and found newspapers from the Civil War and other historic periods. I took a few. I had been collecting newspapers that had historic significance since I was in elementary school: events in Europe leading up to, and the start of World War II, the reelection of FDR in 1940, Pearl Harbor, the first copy of the newspaper PM. I now was able to expand my collection. I knew I was taking something that didn't belong to me. I knew if I asked if I could have it, I would have been looked at strangely and told no. I rationalized that I wasn't hurting anybody. It was almost the same as if someone threw it away, and I picked it up. It wasn't as if I was taking a book from the library without checking it out, or a newspaper from a news stand without paying for it. There was no record that the newspapers were there. But it was taking something that did not belong to me, and it was wrong.

I engaged in no more job-related petty thievery while in high school or college. I worked as a clerk in a stationery store in college, and the owner, Mr. Hyman Reich, made it clear from the outset that I must be trustworthy, and I assured him that I was. He told me that if I wanted anything, I could have it at wholesale. Initially, I was not allowed to ring up sales. There was change on the cash register, and if I made a sale, I would make change from the money on the cash register, not in it. After a year, I was permitted to ring up sales. I suspect Mr. Reich thought that seeing all that money in the cash register drawer would be tempting. I would never think of taking anything from the store, not merchandise and certainly not money.

My petty thievery during college involved the legitimate Broadway theatre. Toward the end of high school, I had discovered this new and exciting world. There were scores of theatres up and down the Great White Way, most of them west of Broadway from Times Square north to the 50s. The curtain rose at 8:40 pm. Broadway was dark on Mondays, so I limited my activity to Tuesdays through Thursdays. I would stroll up and down the theatre district beginning around 9:15 pm, looking for an intermission crowd gathered outside a theatre. It would be the end of the first act. When the crowd reentered the theatre, I would go in with them, pick up a Playbill and head for the back of the orchestra where there would usually be unsold seats. If it was a very popular show, and the orchestra was filling up, I would go up to the mezzanine and balcony. If there was nothing, I would check out the boxes; sometimes seats there were available because they were expensive and may have had obstructed views. I would strike up a conversation with the other box occupants, explaining that my seat was uncomfortable, or that I had to leave the theatre early. It was awkward when I was asked how I like the first act. I was never bothered by ushers. (They are more intrusive these days, asking to see your theatre stubs. Besides, tickets cost a lot more than they did in the late '40s.) Missing the first act was a challenge to my imagination. I would have to figure out what had already taken place. It added to the excitement.

A postscript: It was the late '60s, I was in New York for a meeting, and had a free evening. I decided to see a play, but tickets to popular plays were not to be had. Checking the paper, I bought a ticket to a play being performed prior to its official opening. It was awful. At intermission, I walked outside and noticed a crowd in front of the theatre across the street. They were playing Fiddler on the Roof. I joined them as they reentered, unaware that Fiddler sold out every night. Nothing in the orchestra, nothing in the balcony. Let's try the boxes. I took a seat, and just before the curtain rose for the second act, a group of people entered, filling the box. I got up, apologized, gave the same explanation I did twenty years before, and I was encouraged to stay. It was a great show.

Back to the fall of 1949: I was at City College, enrolled in the Master's program in Education. Since I had time between classes, I took the Broadway train from 137 Street to 116 Street, to Columbia University, picked up a schedule of classes, and started attending a couple of very interesting courses that fit my schedule. (Something like walking into Broadway plays after the first act.) I bought a Columbia spiral notebook in which to keep the notes from my Columbia classes. I paid no tuition at City, and paid no tuition at Columbia. The classes that I attended were in large lecture halls and I blended in easily. I did it again in the spring 1950 semester, with one embarrassing incident. I walked into a class on Labor Relations, which had caught my eye, and it turned out to be a seminar with about six or eight students. The professor asked me if I had registered for the class. I said I thought I might audit it. He smiled and said no. I left.

Adult Thievery

From my first job with the ILGWU, through my years with the Jewish Labor Committee, the Amalgamated Laundry Workers Union, AFSCME, the US Civil Rights Commission, the Massachusetts Department of Employment and Training and finally the Fair Labor Division of Massachusetts Attorney General's Office, I hereby confess that in each of those jobs, I helped myself to office supplies. I took paper, envelopes, scotch tape, pens and pencils, staples, paper clips. I viewed it as something to which I was entitled, a fringe benefit. In addition, I made and received personal calls from my office phone.

I am aware that other employees may not have helped themselves as I did. I remember visiting a friend who worked at the US Department of Labor in Washington. A colleague came over to tell him that he will be away from his desk for the next ten minutes. When I asked him what that was about, he told me that he was going downstairs to use the pay phone, since he believed it was improper to make personal calls from his desk. I asked my friend if he did the same thing. He didn't.

It is troubling now to realize how I rationalized improper behavior. I felt entitled. Finally, I come to something I did for which I am truly ashamed. At the time, I thought I was "entitled." I was a Regional Director of the US Commission on Civil Rights. A government car was assigned to my office. It was to be used by myself and my staff in the course of our work. I felt entitled to use it for non-work related activity from time to time, and did. I paid for the gas when I used it, so why not? From paper clips to using a government car. A slippery slope. When I worked for the Laundry Workers, I, along with the rest of the staff, received a staff car. A wonderful fringe benefit, and a precedent. However, the government car was not a gift to the staff. It was for government use only. My using it was more than petty thievery. I thought it was a lark at the time. I now deeply regret it. I don't feel any better, having written this.

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