

This is one of the stories in a book, IT WAS ON FIRE WHEN I LAY DOWN ON IT by Robert Fulghum. The cardboard box is marked “The Good Stuff”. The box contains those odds and ends of personal treasures that have survived many bouts of “clean it out and throw it away” that seize me from time to time. One of the keepsakes in the box is a small paper bag. Lunch size. Though the top is sealed with duct tape, staples, and several paper clips, there is a ragged rip in one side through which the contents may be seen.

NOTES: A “bout” is a short period of intense activity or a period of suffering from an injury or illness (As in, I had a bout of rheumatism.) “Odds and ends” are miscellaneous articles (stuff, knickknacks, bits and pieces). A “keepsake” is something small that you keep to remember someone or something.

This particular lunch sack has been in my care for maybe fourteen years. But it really belongs to my daughter, Molly. Soon after she came of school age, she became an enthusiastic participant in packing the morning lunches for herself, her brothers, and me. Each bag got a share of sandwiches, apples, milk money, and sometimes a note or a treat. One morning Molly handed me two bags as I was about to leave. One regular lunch sack. And the one with the duct tape and staples and paper clips. “Why two bags?” “The other one is something else.” “What’s in it?” “Just some stuff—take it with you.” Not wanting to hold court over the matter, I stuffed both sacks into my briefcase, kissed the child, and rushed off.

NOTES: If you “come of age” you reach a period which marks new responsibilities. Usually “come of age” refers to becoming an adult, but in this paragraph it means reach the age where a child starts school. “Duct tape” is a strong, wide, silver-grey tape that is very sticky. People use duct tape to repair almost anything.

At midday, while hurriedly scarfing down my real lunch, I tore open Molly’s bag and shook out the contents. Two hair ribbons, three small stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny seashell, two animal crackers, a marble, a used lipstick, a small doll, two chocolate kisses, and thirteen pennies.

NOTES: “Animal crackers” are small cookies in the shape of animals. These are very popular with young children. A pencil “stub” is a pencil that is almost used up. All that remains is an inch or two of pencil.

I smiled. How charming. Rising to hustle off to all the important business of the afternoon, I swept the desk clean -- into the wastebasket—leftover lunch, Molly’s junk, and all. There wasn’t anything in there I needed.

That evening Molly came to stand beside me while I was reading the paper. “Where’s my bag?” “What bag?” “You know, the one I gave you this morning.” “I left it at the office, why?” “I forgot to put this note in it.” She hands over the note. “Besides, I want it back.” “Why?” “Those are my things in the sack, Daddy, the ones I really like — I thought you might like to play with them, but now I want them back. You didn’t lose the bag, did you, Daddy?” Tears puddled in her eyes. “Oh no, I just forgot to bring it home,” I lied. “Bring it tomorrow, okay?” “Sure thing—don’t worry.” As she hugged my neck with relief, I unfolded the note that had not got into the sack: “I love you, Daddy.”

Oh.....And also—uh-oh.

Molly had given me her treasures. All that a seven year old held dear. Love in a paper sack. And I had missed it. Not only missed it, but had thrown it in the wastebasket because “there wasn’t anything in there I needed.” Dear God.

NOTES: The author of this story is a minister. He says, "Dear God", to mean Dear God why am I so stupid sometimes that I don't see the great amount of love that my daughter is sending me.

It was a long trip back to the office. But there was nothing else to be done. So I went. The pilgrimage of a penitent. Just ahead of the janitor, I picked up the wastebasket and poured the contents on my desk.

NOTES: A "pilgrimage" is a trip taken to a holy place. A "penitent" is someone who is totally sorry and seeking forgiveness. The holy place is the lunch sack he threw away. He is a penitent because his daughter gave him something so valuable and he didn't recognize the value and threw it away.

After washing the mustard off the dinosaurs and spraying the whole thing with breath-freshener to kill the smell of onions, I carefully smoothed out the wadded ball of brown paper into a semi-functional bag and put the treasures inside and carried the whole thing home gingerly, like an injured kitten. The next evening I returned it to Molly, no questions asked, no explanations offered. The bag didn't look so good but the stuff was all there and that's what counted.

After dinner I asked her to tell me about the stuff in the sack. She took it all out a piece at a time and placed the objects in a row on the dining room table.

It took a long time to tell. Everything had a story, a memory, or was attached to dreams and imaginary friends. Fairies had brought some of the things. I had given her the chocolate kisses, and she had kept them for when she needed them. She gave it to me again several times after that. Same stuff inside. I felt forgiven. And trusted. And loved. In time, Molly turned her attention to other things and never asked for the bag back. And so I have it still.

Sometimes I think of all the times in this sweet life when I must have missed the affection I was being given. A friend calls this "standing knee-deep in the river and dying of thirst."

So the worn paper sack is there in the box. Left over from a time when a child said, "Here—this is the best I've got. Take it—it's yours."

I missed it the first time. But it's my bag now.

Discussion:

1. Briefly describe what happened in this story.
2. In this story, the author makes the point that _____...
3. Do you have any keepsakes?
4. What does he mean when he says it's like "standing knee-deep in the river and dying of thirst"?
5. Talk about a time when you may have ignored or overlooked love.
6. What did you like most about this story?
7. Compare this story to the others we have read?