

For the Love of a Parsnip

Back in my college years, I worked for a while as a Student Director at the University Christian Student Center (UCSC) in Cookeville, Tennessee. One of the less-exciting duties of a Student Director was to keep the UCSC's soft drink and candy machines stocked.

Seemingly unrelated to that task, for a while at the UCSC, some of us had a running joke about parsnips. As I recall, the discussion and joking about parsnips started from something that appeared in a Bloom County comic strip, and just because we thought the word "parsnips" sounded funny, we would often work something about a parsnip into our daily conversations, retreat skits, and other random UCSC interactions. One of our Student Directors even wrote a catchy little song about parsnips that became quite popular in UCSC circles for a while. (It was popular until that particular Student Director was taken out back, stoned, and left for dead in the street. Well, not really... but I'm sure it crossed more than a few minds after hearing "The Parsnip Song" three-hundred times.)

For those who may be unfamiliar with parsnips, a parsnip is a vegetable -- similar to a white carrot. We never ate parsnips in my growing up years, and in fact, to this day I have not actually eaten a parsnip. One day, during this same time period, I was in the local Krogers, and I purchased a parsnip and took it back to the UCSC. As goofy (and perhaps bored) college kids, we threw that parsnip around, slipped it into people's book bags, and did all manner of pranks with the parsnip -- until that little "white carrot" began to shrivel up and turn a nasty blackish color. Somehow I ended up with the parsnip, and for a time, I kept it on my desk. What do you do with a shriveled parsnip? Well...

The UCSC had one of those "old timey" mechanical candy machines -- you insert your coins, pull a lever corresponding to your candy selection (probably 8 to 10 different candy options), and with a loud KA-CHUNG sound the candy you selected would magically fall with a loud THUNK into a metal bin near the bottom of the machine. Soon the time rolled around for me to re-stock the candy machine, and as I was loading the candy bars into the individual slots, it occurred to me that the little compartments for the candy bars were about the same size as that shriveled up parsnip I had in my office. I retrieved the parsnip and casually loaded it into a compartment in the machine -- but somewhere in the middle so that it would take another week or two before some lucky person received their surprise! I chuckled to myself, closed up the machine, and went about my business. In fact, a little time passed and I actually forgot about my little prank. Until...

A week or two later, on a Sunday morning, I remember walking past the candy machine during the short break between morning worship assembly and Bible classes. Some of the Bible classes at the church were held in the UCSC building. As I just happened to be walking by the candy machine, I noticed a young boy (probably 7-8 years old) and his mother standing beside the machine. "Go ahead, put in the money," his mother said. He carefully inserted his coins -- they made a klinkity-klunk, klinkity-klunk sound as they dropped in. He picked out the candy he wanted, pulled the lever, and KA-CHUNG -- his candy bar THUNKED into the metal bin! He reached in and pulled out his candy bar -- only to his amazement, it wasn't a candy bar at all -- it

was a shriveled up, almost black, nasty-looking vegetable (known in some circles as a parsnip, or what used to be a parsnip)!

When I engineered this little prank, it never occurred to me that a non-college student would end up with the parsnip! The young boy held the parsnip up to his mother, and the look of confusion and puzzlement on their faces was so hilarious to me! On the inside, I could barely contain my laughter -- I could not believe the timing of this whole thing! But on the outside, I played it cool. I walked up to them: "Oh, I'm sorry -- look at that! Hey, that must have been put in there as some kind of joke. Let me get the key, I'll get you a real candy bar..." I quickly opened the machine and retrieved a "real" candy bar and swapped it for the parsnip. The boy and his mother disappeared into the crowd, and I went about my business -- as if this was just something that sometimes happens with candy machines.

I have often thought back on that whole experience and wondered about that boy. I'm sure by now he is a grown man, probably with children of his own. I hope he wasn't scarred too deeply by his close brush with that shriveled parsnip.

Life is kind of like pulling that candy-machine lever. You never really know what you're going to get!

(Originally written: June 10, 2017)