

Loose change: If this coin could speak

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

In 1986, having been married to me only one year, my wife was casting about for an interesting birthday present. She wandered into a coin shop and found a case of coins from antiquity. She already knew me well enough to know that I would be fascinated by them. The owner didn't know much about the coins, only that they were from Rome, and he was pretty sure that one of them dated from the time of Christ. That's the one my wife bought.

She was absolutely right about my reaction to this gift—I fell in love with this coin the minute I saw it. I couldn't believe that I was holding something so old in my hands.

It is a brass dupondius, struck about 17 BC when Augustus was emperor of Rome. A dupondius was not a particularly valuable coin, something like five dollars in today's currency. It is unlikely but possible that someone who held this coin met Jesus or heard rumors of his marvelous teachings in the exotic land of Galilee.

Sometimes I stare at this coin, wishing that my gaze could draw out its story.

On the day when this coin was created, the engraver struck a blank circle of metal with a punch. Each coin was punched individually, which is why some ancient coins are off-center. Afterward, a man inspected the coin, then put it with others to be introduced into circulation. This much of the coin's story can be reasonably assumed, but from this point forward my imagination is all I can offer.

People carried this coin around in pockets or small leather bags. They bought things with it. What or even who was purchased with this dupondius is unknown. We can't know if it was used for good or for evil. If it lasted 20 years in circulation, then it was being used when Jesus was a small boy. That's something I like to think about.

And then the coin was lost. It slipped out of someone's hand or fell off a wagon, and it landed on the ground and was covered over by dirt or debris. Perhaps, for a while

at least, the coin might have been found if someone had scuffed through the dirt or chanced upon it, but each passing year made that less likely. The trees deposited a layer of leaves each fall, and the earth heaped on soil from storms and floods. The coin sunk deeper until it was too deep to be found by anyone simply passing by.

The Christian church was born. The Roman empire swelled to its greatest size, and its edges were eaten away by barbarians until even Rome was sacked. The Catholic Church came to dominate the Western world. Ideas about Jesus became theology, theology became doctrine, and doctrine became dogma. An age of intellectual darkness fell over humanity.

And still my ancient coin lay buried in the earth.

The Renaissance and Reformation came and went, marking the coming and going of the Western world's adolescence. The age of enlightenment rose, followed by the birth of science and the advent of the modern, industrial age.

And then one day someone chanced along—I like to imagine an archaeologist wearing a pith helmet—stuck a spade into the earth, and found this coin. He or she dusted it off and experienced the thrill of a valuable discovery. The coin changed hands here and there, then ended up in a shop in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1986.

From this point forward, the coin and I share a history. Since 1986 the coin has been in a small box in which I keep a few things of value. This box has been with me as my wife and I moved from place to place and brought three daughters into the world.

In May of this year I was showing my daughters the contents of my little box of treasures. They passed the coin among themselves while I told them how Jeanene bought it for me in the little shop in Fort Worth. Their interest was keen but brief. They handed back the coin, and I impulsively put it in my pocket instead of back in the box.

I carried the dupondius around with me for a few days along with some actual 21st-century coinage. When I wanted to buy something, there was the Roman coin along with the quarters, dimes and nickels.

I thought the coin might appreciate hanging out with money again, for old times' sake. But soon, fearful that the coin might be lost a second time, I put it on the table

beside my bed. I see this coin each night before I go to sleep. If only this dupondius could talk. When I hold it in my hand, my desire to know the details of its story becomes a deep longing. I want to know everything about the life of this coin. I want to know who carried it and what he or she bought with it. I want to know where it lay for all of those centuries. I want to know how it ended up in Fort Worth.

I hate knowing that the story is lost because I love stories and want to know them all. I want to know what happened to the water on Mars. I want to know what the northern coast of India looked like before the sliding plates of the earth forced it into Eurasia, throwing up the Himalayas. I want to know the story behind every redwood tree. I want to know what was happening during the 200,000 lost years of homo sapiens prehistory. Most of the generations of humanity lived in those days.

I want to know what it is like to be my wife and to experience the world with her mind and through her eyes. I want to know how my daughter, who has a medical condition that robbed her of her depth perception, manages to catch a softball.

But I can't know these things. I don't even know my own story. Layers of living have slowly pushed my memories deeper into my unconscious mind, like a coin sinking into the earth. Most of my own story is lost, swallowed up by my dreams and personal myths.

So I'm left staring at my coin, looking at Mars in the night sky, poring over maps of Pangaea, laying my hands on the bark of a redwood, rubbing my thumb over the ancient spear point I found last year, listening to my wife and gazing into her lovely brown eyes, getting hit with a softball while playing catch with my daughter because I am trying to catch it with one eye closed, and looking into a mirror saying, "Who are you, stranger?"

I cannot accept the idea that our sacred stories are as easily lost as the story of my ancient coin. Someone needs to know these stories, someone who can watch them and remember them and appreciate them with a depth of love that could come only from the Creator.

I believe in God in part because I like thinking of God watching over our stories. My worship and devotion is a meager gift, offered in the possibility and hope that someone out there knows our stories, loves them and keeps them safe for us in a place called eternity.