

A Delicate Balance

BY JOSÉ ARMAS

ANTICIPATING: Describe a situation in which you have helped someone. Maybe you have a neighbor who is elderly and needs a snowy walk shoveled or assistance with a household chore. Perhaps you have worked with an organization whose members served as volunteers in the community. Write about the projects you've been involved in as a volunteer, or specific incidents when you have helped someone who needed help. Analyze how you felt at the time. Describe your feelings. Share your journals with a small group.



Romero Estrada had his home near the Golden Heights Centro where he spent a lot of time. He would get up almost every morning and clean and shave, and then after breakfast he would get his broom and go up and down the block sweeping the sidewalks for everyone. He would sweep in front of the Tortillería América, the Tres Milpas Bar, Barelas' Barbershop, the used furniture store owned by Goldstein, the corner grocery store, the Model Cities office, and the print shop. In the afternoons, he would come back and sit in the barbershop and just watch the people go by. Sometimes, when there was no business, Barelas would let him sit in the barber chair, and Romero would love it. He would do this just about every day except Sundays and Mondays, when Barelas' was closed. Over time, people got to expect Romero to do his little task of sweeping the sidewalks. When he was feeling real good, he would sweep in front of the houses on the block also. Romero took great care to sweep cleanly, between the cracks and even between the sides of the buildings. Everything went into the gutter. The work took him the whole morning if he did it the way he wanted.

Romero was considered a little crazy by most people, but they pretty much tolerated him. Nobody minded much when he got too drunk at the Tres Milpas Bar and went around telling everyone he loved them. "I love youuu," he would tell everyone.

"*Ta buena*, Romero, '*ta buena*. *Ya vete*," they would tell him. Sometimes when he got too drunk and obnoxious, Tino, the bartender, would make him go home.



omero received some kind of financial support, but it wasn't much. He was not given any credit by anyone because he would always forget to pay his bills. He didn't do it on purpose; he just never remembered. The businessmen preferred just to do things for him and give him things when they wanted. Barelas would trim his hair when things were slow; Tortillería América would give him *menudo* with fresh tortillas; the grocery store would give him overripe fruit and broken boxes of food that no one would buy.

When Barelas' oldest son, Seferino, graduated from high school, he went to work in his shop. Seferino took notice of Romero and came to feel sorry for him. One day, Romero was in the shop and Seferino decided to act.

"*Mina, Romero. Yo te doy 50 centavos cada vez que me barras la acera. Fifty cents for every day you do the sidewalk for us. ¿Qué te parece?*"

Romero thought about it carefully. "*Hecho*. Done," he exclaimed. He started for home right away, to get his broom.

"What did you do that for, *mijito*," asked Barelas.

"It don't seem right, Dad. The man works, and no one pays him for his work. Everyone should get paid for what they do."

"He don't need no pay. He has everything he needs."

"It's not the same, Dad. How would you like to do what he does and be treated the same way?"

"I'm not Romero. You don't know about these things, *mijito*."

Romero would be unhappy if his routine was upset. Right now, everyone likes him and takes care of him. He sweeps the sidewalks because he wants something to do. Not because he wants some money."

"I'll pay him out of my money; don't worry about it."

"The money is not the point. The point is that money will not help Romero. Don't you understand that?"

"Look, Dad. Just put yourself in his place. Would you do it? Would you cut hair for nothing?"

Barelas knew his son was putting something over on him, but he didn't know how to answer. It made sense the way Seferino explained it, but it didn't seem right. On the other hand, Seferino had gone and finished high school. He must know something. Barelas didn't know many kids who had finished high school, much less gone to college. And his son was going to college in the fall. Barelas himself had never even gone to school. Maybe his son had something there; yet on the other hand. . . . Barelas had known Romero a long time. . . . Despite his uncertainty on the matter, Barelas decided to drop the issue and not say anything about it.

Just then, Romero came back and started to sweep in front of Barelas' shop again, pushing what little dirt was left into the curb. He swept up the gutter, put the trash in a box and threw it in a garbage can.

Seferino watched with pride as Romero went about his job, and when Romero was finished, Seferino went outside and told him he had done a good job and gave him his fifty cents.

Manolo was coming into the shop to get his hair cut as Seferino was giving Romero his wages. He noticed Romero with his broom.

"What's going on?" he asked. Barelas shrugged his shoulders.

"What's with Romero? Is he sick or something?"

"No he's not sick," explained Seferino, who now was inside. He told Manolo the story.

"We're going to make Romero a businessman. Do you realize how much money he would make if people just paid him fifty cents a day, if everyone paid him just fifty cents? He does do a job, you know."

"Well, it makes sense," said Manolo.

"Maybe I'll ask people to do that," said Seferino. "That way the guy could make a decent wage. Do you want to help, Manolo? You can go with me to ask people to pay him."

"Well," said Manolo, "I'm not too good at asking people for money."

This did not stop Seferino. He contacted all the businesses in the neighborhood, but no one else wanted to contribute. Still, that didn't discourage Seferino either. He went on giving Romero fifty cents a day.

A couple of weeks later, Seferino heard that Romero had gotten credit at the grocery store. "See, Dad, what did I tell you? Things are getting better for him already. And look, it's only been a couple of weeks."

But, for the next week, Romero did not show up to sweep any sidewalks. He was around, but he didn't do any work for anybody. He walked around Golden Heights Centro in his best gray work pants and his slouch hat, trying his best to look important and walking right past the barbershop. he following week, he came and asked to talk with Seferino in private. They went into the back, where Barelas could not hear, and Romero informed Seferino that he wanted a raise.



"What! What do you mean a raise? You haven't worked for a week.

You've only been doing this a couple of weeks, and now you want a raise?" Seferino was clearly angry, but Romero was calm and persistent. He pointed out that he had been sweeping the sidewalks for a long time—even before Seferino finished school.

"I deserve a raise," he insisted.

Seferino stared at Romero coldly. It was clearly a standoff in a labor-management confrontation.

Seferino said, "Look, maybe we should forget the whole thing. I was just trying to help you out, and now look at what you do."

Romero held his ground. "I helped you out, too. No one told me to do it, and I did it anyway. I helped you many years."

"Well, let's forget about the whole thing then," said Seferino.

"I quit then," said Romero.

"Quit!" exclaimed Seferino, laughing at the absurdity of the whole thing.

"Quit! I quit!" said Romero as he stormed out the front of the shop, passing Barelas, who was cutting Pedrito's hair.

Seferino walked into the shop, shaking his head and laughing.

"Can you imagine that old guy?" he said. Barelas, for his part, did not seem too amused. He felt he could have predicted something like this would happen.

The next day, Romero was back sweeping the sidewalks again, but when he came to the barbershop, he walked completely around it and then continued sweeping the rest of the sidewalks. After about a week of doing

this every day, he began sweeping the sidewalk all the way up to Barelas' and then pushing the trash to the sidewalk in front of the barbershop.

He had also stopped coming to the shop altogether. When he and Barelas met in the street, they would still greet each other. And Barelas would never bring up the fact that Romero kept pushing the trash in front of the shop. Things went on like that for a long time, until fall came and Seferino went off to college and stopped helping his father in the shop.

It was then that Romero began sweeping *all* the sidewalk again. He was happier then, and he even whistled and sang at his job.

