

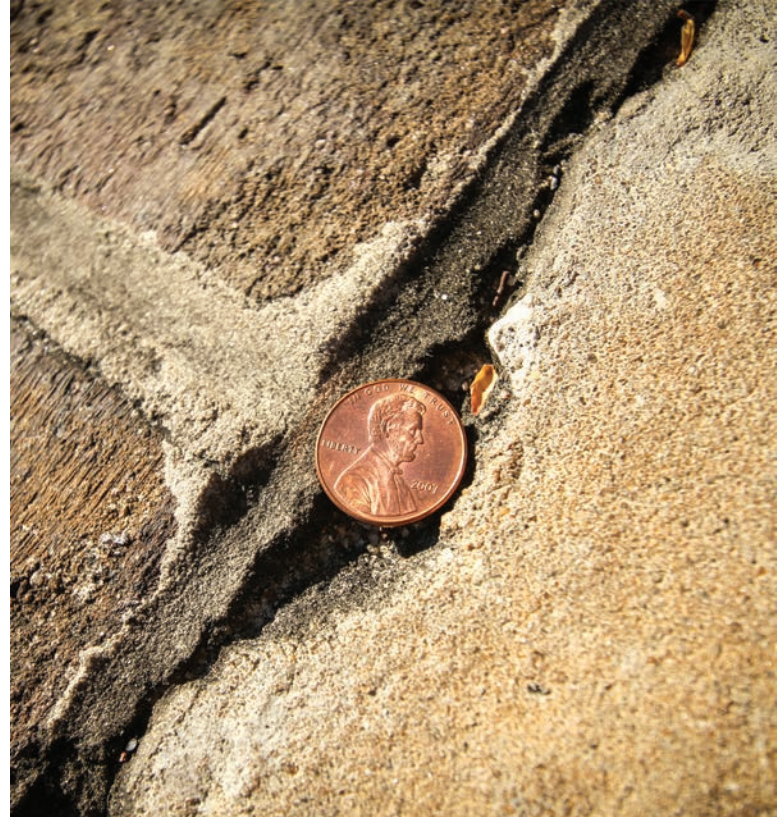
pursuits ✦ good reads



HEAVEN CENT



By Penny Gregory ✦ Photos by Cobblestone Photography



A deeply spiritual woman, Jen Shimalla doesn't believe in coincidences. "There's a reason why God puts you in certain situations," she says. Even, as she's come to discover, a situation as painful as losing her father. Though his loss was a terrible blow, it also inspired Jen to write her recently published children's book *Heaven Cent* to help children cope with the loss of a loved one and to convey this message: "You're not alone."

Jen's father passed away in 2003, and she felt his loss terribly. "My dad and I were very close. He was my best friend," she says. At the time of his passing, Jen's children were eight, six and four years old, and they were also struggling to understand why their Grandpa was no longer around. Then one night a few days after her father's death, Jen had a dream that became the basis for *Heaven Cent*. "I woke up and the book was there," she recalls. In the story, a young girl is grieving the loss of her grandfather. In need of comfort, she hopes to find a sign from him. Written in a simple rhyme, the book describes how the girl is missing her grandfather, then continues:

"I wish he was standing near me, but then I see a penny in his place."

Writing from the perspective of her oldest daughter Alexandra, who was eight at the time, Jen used the book to help her own children cope with the loss of their grandfather. Then, the Shimallas began to find pennies. "We were all searching for comfort after his death," says Jen. "Alexandra would find pennies in the most unreal places. I found them on my counter in my bathroom. I found them in a new purse I just purchased." Recalling the first time they found pennies shortly after she had written *Heaven Cent*, Jen says, "The morning of my daughter's First Holy Communion, one month after my father's passing, was a horribly difficult time

for us all. As Alexandra started toward the church she found a penny in the parking lot. All of us cried a little, but we were elated to know that Dad was with us on this important day."

And the Shimallas have continued to find "pennies from heaven" in the most inexplicable places, even ten years later. The stories of unlikely pennies number in the hundreds now, Jen says, and all of her family members have jars of pennies that they have found over the years. Jen says they find pennies in particular at "times that you need to be reminded that you're not alone or that you're loved." One particularly unusual find occurred recently when Jen and her husband Fred were celebrating their anniversary. They were in the middle of making a lot of changes in their lives – starting a new company, selling their current business – and were feeling the stress. They had gone out for soft-serve yogurt on the eve of their anniversary, and Fred was unable to finish his, so he stuck it in the freezer for later. The next day, when he took it out and began to eat the rest, he suddenly bit into something hard. It was a penny, buried deep in the yogurt! Their kids scrambled to wash it off in order to check the date on the coin and discovered that it was from the year Jen and Fred were married.

"It's not coincidence or magic," Jen insists, "it's my father." That is the message that she's hoping to convey to the young readers of her book: "If God made this whole world, why couldn't He allow you to find something that was left behind by someone you love? I thought our experience could help other kids who are grieving."

Although the book was written over ten years ago, Jen only recently decided to seek publication. "I'd been debating publishing," she says, "[but] if I can help one person [through the book],

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that's what I was called to do." She chose to self-publish with Balboa Press, a division of Hay House, because of their emphasis on spiritual/positive message books. The book was published in September 2013 and is available on Amazon.com, BarnesandNoble.com and Jen's website www.jensbooks.net. Jen also sells the books at her business, the Uptown Deli. In addition to writing the book, she also did her own illustrations. She originally had students from Savannah College of Art and Design submit illustrations, but chose to use her own work instead. "I felt sad with the original artwork," she explains. "It was very good, but it made me morose. I wanted it to inspire kids and adults to see beyond the hurt... to make you happy, have good memories, feel loved."

Jen has been overwhelmed with the positive response that she has received from customers. "I get a lot of people coming and crying and telling me that the book helps them to not feel so alone... [to feel] that someone is sharing their experience. I think I've achieved my goal of 'if I could help one person,'" she smiles.

In the future, Jen hopes to devote herself full-time to encouraging others to look at life with a new perspective and to help them become more aware of God's presence in their lives. "I'm not afraid to see something in a different way... to see a sign that's been left from God," says Jen. "I want to help others change their way of thinking and make them look at things differently. If I hadn't changed the way I was looking at the world, I might never have even seen the pennies that were left from my dad." She wants to inspire this new perspective in others through her writing, as well as through a clothing line that she has developed using different takes on the saying "Do Life Inspired." "This is what I want to do," Jen says of her desire to communicate her inspirational message. "This is my true passion – writing or talking about the possibilities that life holds for people. That's what gets me up in the morning." ✦