It?s an ethical thing

By SHERALYN ROMAN

Many years ago I was at a coffee retailer in a small town that is known to employ persons with varying abilities. I handed the young adult a $10 bill in payment and waited for my change. In addition to coins, it included a $10 bill. Immediately (and obviously) I explained the error politely and returned the money and together we worked out the amount I was really owed. My children commented afterwards that while that was the right thing to do, they worried too many other people might have just walked off with the money and the cashier would get in trouble. It was, as parents sometimes label it, a ?teachable? moment. An opportunity to show our kids how important it is to always do the right thing. But - you knew there was a ?but? coming ? not long after I had a similar incident where this time, the retailer insisted I was wrong and should take money I knew wasn't mine (in this case an unearned discount applied to the wrong product.) It was a small ticket item and not a significant amount of money but I would essentially have walked away with a ?buy one get one free? which was not the deal on offer. What would you have done?

Wikipedia defines ethics as ?pertaining to or dealing with morals or the principles of morality; pertaining to right and wrong in conduct.? It further describes morality as a ?body of standards or principles derived from a code of conduct from a particular philosophy, religion or culture, or it can derive from a standard that a person believes to be universal.? For me, I believe taking money that isn't yours is always wrong. It doesn't matter if the amount was 10 cents or 10 dollars ? as the definition implies, it's the principle behind the act. In both circumstances mentioned above, every effort was made to do the right thing. Not only was the money not mine, but I also don't want to be responsible for someone possibly losing a job over an error in accounting. I helped pay my way through school working as a cashier ? it's hard work. But ? you knew there was another ?but? coming didn't you. I am writing about these old incidents today because again recently something similar happened to me and this time it would have resulted in $20+ extra dollars in my pocket. $20+dollars! It begs the question fellow Caledon citizens, at what point do you stop asking a retailer to give you less money and simply walk away?

The most recent occurrence involved a large Canadian retailer and not having a receipt to return some product. I wasn't even sure I would be allowed to return it. A discount notification was plainly visible on the product. I'm a regular customer. Indeed, I was told I could return the item and the staff proceeded to do so, crediting my account for the full price of the product. I explained the error. Three separate times. While I did not have my receipt, I knew I had only paid the discounted amount. A moral and ethical conversation is waging war in my head: ?take the money, you've tried to explain,? vs. ?don't take the money, it's not yours,? and ?you shop here often, maybe in the past they've overcharged you and this is just karma.? You get the idea. You're attempting to justify a decision (to make something sound reasonable) that we know is otherwise not.

I'm interested in your responses. Does it make a difference if it's a large retailer or your small, friendly ?mom and pop? store where you know and love the staff? What about that time as a parent when you were frazzled, the baby was crying and you're rushing to get groceries done and get to the school pick up on time and the cashier forgot to ring in your ?bottom of the cart? items? Do you go back? Or when you let your child hold that small toy to placate them and you accidentally walked out without paying for it? Should you go back? Is your decision different based on whether you're still in the mall or have already strapped your child into the car seat and you're ready to head home? These are questions I know we ask ourselves. In other words ? are there ?50 shades? of a moral standard? What should I have done? What would you do?