

Is it rude to take the last chocolate?

Description



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Should I take the last chocolate?

I didn't know it was the last one when, feeling peckish on a recent afternoon, I rose from my desk and walked across the newsroom toward where my editor, **Victoria**, sits. She keeps on her desk a glass jar stocked with candy, typically those trapezoidal, foil-wrapped Dove chocolates, free for the taking.

Every office has one of these generous people. Their desk becomes an oasis, a destination that helps break up the monotony of the day and gives us a temporary sugar high.

The candy jar becomes a sort of commons, as in the tragedy of the commons, a shared resource in danger of depletion. Each of us who partakes of the free-candy jar must confront certain questions: How often should we visit? How much should we take? How long should we stay and chat with the keeper of the candy? Should we bring in a bag of fun-size candy bars to replenish the stock?

Should we take the last chocolate?

Obviously it would be wrong to take *all* of them all at once. Or to take one every 15 minutes until they were all gone. Or to take the last one. Right?

Victoria wasn't at her desk. I saw a single piece at the bottom of the glass jar and felt the disappointment rising inside me. "Ah," I said under my breath. "Well, I'm not going to take the last one."

"Take it," said a voice to my right.

It was **Josh**. He sits next to Victoria, next to the jar, and because of that he has become a student of the human-chocolate nexus.

Most people do not take the last one, Josh said. They do as I was poised to do: mutter, then turn on their heels and shuffle away, chocolate-less. This has grown tiresome to Josh.

But, I said, isn't it rude to take the last one? No, said Josh. Quite the contrary. By being "polite" by *not* taking the last one I would just be forcing the uncomfortable decision on to the next person who came along. Surely it would be better to take the last one and thus relieve the next person of having to wrestle with that thorny moral calculus.

In fact, Josh said he had grown tired of excessive politeness regarding food. Ever seen the remains of a communal, celebratory cake? Lest anyone be accused of taking the last piece, it is cut increasingly thinner "slice after slice until it is barely a micron thick, a wee, frosting-topped nanotube.

Who could defend such a practice?

"I guarantee you research papers have been written about the last chocolate," Josh said.

I laughed, thinking of psychologist [Stanley Milgram's](#) infamous experiment, which explored conscience and authority by pretending to administer painful shocks to test subjects. I reached toward the jar, then hesitated.

"It's not electrified," Josh said.

Victoria returned to her desk and I explained my quandary: It is easy to take a chocolate when the jar is full but it is hard to take when there is only one left.

"Take it," Victoria said. Her philosophy: If a person wants a chocolate, and there is a chocolate, a person should eat the chocolate.

Well, she *is* the boss.

As I stood looking at the last one, which shone like a priceless bauble in a museum's vitrine, I felt myself coming around to Victoria and Josh's school of thought. If no one takes the last one, it is almost as if it ceases to exist. It enters a quantum state, both there and not there.

One chocolate is the same as no chocolate. In fact, the only thing worse than *no* chocolate is *one* chocolate, for as long as there is one, there will be no *more* chocolate.

I took it. I took the chocolate. I took the last chocolate. And it was good.

Is there someone in your office who carefully tends a jar full of candy? Are you that person? What sort of etiquette is involved? How do you handle the last chocolate?

[John Kelly](#) writes “John Kelly”TMs Washington, a daily look at WashingtonTMs less-famous side. Born in Washington, John started at The Post in 1989 as deputy editor in the Weekend section.

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Date Created

October 14, 2016

Author

sephra