**Helpful Background:**

**The True Story That Inspired the Movie**

Right before he started the internship at Dean Witter, Chris Gardner's girlfriend (they weren't married) disappeared and took their son with her. His efforts to find his son were fruitless. Dean Witter paid its interns $1000 a month. With that money, Mr. Gardner was able to rent a room in a boarding house. Therefore, when he had to prepare for the broker's exam, Chris Gardner had a secure place to sleep and a quiet place to study. In addition, he didn't have to take care of a young child.

Mr. Gardner did very well on the broker's exam and was hired by Dean Witter. At that point he had a choice. He could work for an established broker in the office at a salary large enough to support himself at a reasonable level. Any prospective clients developed with his telephone calls would be referred to his employer. Perhaps Mr. Gardner would be allowed to take over a few small deals. Working for an established broker would give him more money right away but he would have to put off building his own set of clients. The alternative was for Mr. Gardner to work on his own from the beginning, using the telephone to build his business. This would give him less money for the first year or two (only about $1200 a month). However, if things went well, in a year or two, or three, he would make more money from his own set of clients than he would have made if he had started out working for an established broker. In addition, if Mr. Gardner tried to build his own set of clients from nothing, his success would depend entirely on his own efforts. Mr. Gardner chose to work on his own and make very little money right away with the hope of making a lot more money in a few years.

One Friday night, several weeks after Mr. Gardner had started working as a broker trying to build up his own business, his former girlfriend appeared at the boarding house. She was tired of being a single mother. (She had trained to be a dentist and was trying to get established in that field.) She gave Mr. Gardner their 19-month-old son (Little Chris), the child's stroller, a very large duffle bag filled with the child's possessions and lots of disposable diapers. The former girlfriend told Mr. Gardner what Little Chris ate, that he was to have no sweets, and then she left. The boarding house didn't allow children. Mr. Gardner and his son were now homeless. Chris Gardner had no one he could call and ask for money. Nor did he feel that he could ask his friends for a place to stay with a 19-month-old child.

Over the weekend, Mr. Gardner found day care for his son ($400 a month) and they lived in a $25-a-night motel. $400 a month for day care and $750 a month for a motel would eat up almost all of his $1200 a month income. There'd be no money for food, diapers, or anything else. The only way for Chris to afford a place to live was to start working for another broker. He'd have to postpone his plan to focus on developing his own group of clients. Over the next several days Chris made a fateful decision: he and his son would be homeless for the next year or so until his own business at Dean Witter gave him enough money to rent an apartment. He would not work for someone else to put a roof over his son's head. (Since landlords usually require hefty security deposits and first and last month’s rent, this meant that Mr. Gardner would have hundreds of dollars in savings while he and his son were still homeless.) Mr. Gardner made a conscious decision that he would not postpone his chance to become rich. As a result, he and his son were homeless for approximately one year.

What does a two-year-old child need? He needs at least one parent, food, dry diapers, safety, and stability. Rich or poor doesn't mean anything to a toddler if he has these basics. Being homeless is a risky proposition. Homeless people are more likely to be assaulted and killed than people sleeping at home in their beds. Homeless people are exposed to the elements and can become ill. Perhaps the worst thing that could have happened to Little Chris was for his father to have been seriously injured in an assault or killed.

The resolution of the film teaches a lesson. How can you apply the lesson in the film to your own life?

Which character did you [admire, hate, love, pity] the most? What was it about that character that caused you to have that reaction?