

Sponging The Stone

by Arthur Paul Patterson

I DON'T REMEMBER reading the book until my adult years yet Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol seems always to have been with me. The Carol entered my life when I lay on the living room floor with a belly full of Christmas turkey avoiding adult conversation at my grandmother's dinner. My first recollection of the story is in the form of the 1951 American film version Scrooge. Alister Sim, the most robust interpreter of Scrooge, fascinated me by his depiction of a man who starts off as "solitary as an oyster" and winds up a "second father" to orphans, the best neighbor one could possibly imagine. With the annual retelling of the tale I luxuriate in the images of sad Tiny Tim, plump Fezziwigan celebrations, social injustice, cruel indifference, and deep regrets that end in transformation.

To the central invocation of Scrooge's "bah humbug" are added supplementary incantations, some humorous and others instructive. There is Marley's plaintive confession: "Mankind was my business." And Scrooge's cynical materialism: "...you may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than grave about you!" Vicarious shame colors our faces when the Ghost of Christmas Present recollects Scrooge's callous phrase: "If they had rather die... they had better do it and decrease the surplus population." After the first inkling of Scrooge's compassion for a crippled child, Tiny Tim, the Ghost demands that Ebenezer "forebear that wicked cant until you have discovered What the surplus is and Where it is."

The greatest impression or the terminal image that evokes so much emotion is the child-like character of the reborn Scrooge who sincerely pledges, "I will live in the Past, Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all three strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh tell me how I can sponge away the writing on this stone!" It is in this phrase that the Carol reveals itself as the conversion myth of a "squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner," a man who loved the darkness because it was cheap. Although he exaggerated, Dickens describes me at my worst, bent in upon my ego, isolated from the warmth of human compassion, from myself and from those around me.

The myth calls us to reflect upon and identify with Scrooge and his revelatory trek with the Spirits. How this identification is made is pivotal to our transformation. It is tempting with this myth, as with all myths, to nostalgically recite the story. The more familiar the tale becomes the more likely we are to sentimentalize. If this occurs the symbols and lessons do not gain entrance into our lives. But this story yearns to become our story.

To sponge away the writing from the stone on the grave of Christmas requires a new focus. Past interpretations seem to have focused on Scrooge the economic and psychological person. I propose that to understand the significance of the Carol is to integrate the psychological and spiritual messages.

SCROOGE'S MEMORY IS DEAD

To begin with, Scrooge's memory is dead. The legacy of the Ghost of Christmas Past is the heart-felt transformation of memory. That Scrooge attempted to repress his recollection of the past, especially the feelings of his past, is revealed by his reception of the first spectre. The coming of this first ghost is accompanied by theophany, a light, emanating from the head of the ghost, that Scrooge wants to repress. Scrooge prefers darkness to the light. Scrooge begs that the light of memory be taken away. The Ghost chides him. "'What!' he exclaimed, 'would you so soon put out, with worldly hands, the light I give?'"

With memory uncapped, Scrooge is taken back to his youth where his pain, loneliness, and joy are recounted. Through early friendships, celebrations, and a jilted love affair, Scrooge meets his inner child, who becomes an emblem of every child. The Ghost of Christmas Past reminds him of his own misery as a rejected little boy placed in a boarding home by a father who was as callous as Ebenezer had become. When the pain of his past has its full impact on his paralysed heart, Ebenezer sees the plight of other maligned children whom he formerly considered pestering waifs.

Memory, not moralism, is the motive for Scrooge's charitable impulses. Scrooge responds to the vision: "'I wish', he muttered, putting his hands in his pockets, and looking about him, after drying his eyes with his cuff... 'There was a boy singing a Christmas carol at my door last night. I would like to have given him something that's all.'"

To sponge away the writing on our memory-repressed souls requires that our callousness be challenged by recollection in league with imagination. The way the Ghost guides Scrooge through his past seems to parallel creative journalling methods that invite reflection on our personal "roads not taken". The Carol implies that Scrooge's present insensitivity is the result of stifling the memory of his own early suffering and his experience of simple human joys. Memory wounds and heals our frozen hearts.

The words of a holocaust memorial echo the Ghost's lesson: "To remember is the beginning of redemption." Remembering is an act of vulnerability and courage. Scrooge is a prisoner of his immediate experience. His memory leads him to a new identity in continuity with the better parts of his past. Stifling our memories, hardening our hearts to the past, engraves judgement on ourselves.

SCROOGE'S SENSES ARE DEAD

The Carol's second principle involves the transformation of our possessions through an appreciation of embodiment. Scrooge's senses are dead. You wouldn't think this at first, due to his here-and-now attitude, but Scrooge, like all misers, can't enjoy what he has. He misses the value of creation through his narrow conception of worth being related to a price tag.

Until this visitation Scrooge's vision is distorted. This inability is due to his obsession with the immediate; Scrooge can see himself, his belongings, and nothing much beyond. Scrooge's home, a miserly dwelling, reflects his character. When Scrooge encounters the ghostly knocker he is unwilling to believe. He tries to repress his direct perception. In his home Scrooge carries out a census of the senses, taking inventory rather than dealing with his encounter with the Ghost. Yet even in the midst of this mundane task, the face of Marley is projected on the tiles that adorn Scrooge's floor. When Scrooge locks the outer

door he believes that he has kept the inner sanctum of his soul "secured against surprise."

Supernatural attempts to arrest Scrooge's attention include bells ringing frantically and the sound of chains. This saving judgement of the senses intends to wake Scrooge up from his insensitivity with the only faculty he gives authority to - his direct perception. Even the flames in his hearth leap up, a screeching witness to the reality of Marley. "I know him," the fire crackles.

Scrooge sees neither the poor nor their squalid conditions. Moreover, he fails to notice the spiritual values symbolized by the church bell chattering above his head. The description of the London fog points to the narrow vision of Scrooge's urban pragmatism. Dickens depicts a myopia of the senses through having Scrooge be so near-sighted. He is a spiritual Mr. Magoo of the cartoons.

The Ghost of Christmas Present imputes spiritual significance to physical reality. A sprinkle from his wand makes the most mediocre fare substantial. As in the Fezziwig episode, Scrooge comes to confess that while nothing of distinction reflects the gathering at Bob Cratchit's, there is a grateful happiness that marks the occasion. This rather meagre meal is described in superlatives: "Never was there such a goose!" Cratchit refers to the brandy pudding as the greatest success in Mrs. Cratchit's marriage to him.

The family is so full of life that it appears that even the food they eat is humanized: "The potatoes knock on a pot asking to be let out whereas the pudding sings in the copper." Physical reality is honored when the family is recognized.

There is also a heart-rending optimism on the part of Bob Cratchit, who believes his son to be getting stronger and heartier though the boy is later revealed to be getting more sick. This is a hopeful suspension of the senses. Although the Cratchits have an extraordinary ability to see beyond the literal poverty of their situation, Mrs. Cratchit's imagination is strained in considering Scrooge as a benefit in any way to her family. As the topic of Scrooge fades into the Christmas festivities the family's happiness returns.

Finally, the Ghost grows old and grey. His final gesture is to introduce Scrooge to a sensate appreciation of the children of his age, a girl called Want and a boy named Ignorance. They are dehumanized by neglect, revealing a ferocious wolfishness that threatens civilization. They are not merely the images of the poverty Scrooge passes by on the street. The prison-houses and labour laws create the downfall of community through the deforming effect of poverty on children. Just as Tiny Tim becomes a face of the surplus, these children become the faceless mob of violence that accompanies poverty.

Participation in community revives our deadened senses and brings worth to our physical world. Dickens' Carol, while not particularly religious, is profoundly sacramental. Paul Davis says that Dickens "contrives to make the stomach in some odd way an organ of the soul... the glutton idolizes meat and drink; Dickens idealizes them" (*The Life and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge*, p. 62). The Cratchit love feast is repeated when community eats together. It is not, however, only in eating but in working and acting together in the world that a community discovers the significance of physical reality. Is it any wonder that our myopia is overcome when we engage in a common task of building,

repairing and turning chaos into creation. Instead of a work of isolated selfishness, the redeemed Scrooge transforms his vocation into charity. When our jobs become a service of transforming our world, our senses are awakened and we follow the founder of Christmas. The litmus test for the aliveness of the Carol is its ability to invoke action.

SCROOGE'S VALUES NEED CHANGING

The silent gloom of the mysterious ghost of Christmas Future is welcomed by Scrooge who now shows a spiritual inclination to saving judgement. The final lesson, the hardest to confront, is the transformation of Scrooge's values through intuition. Scrooge queries, "Answer me one question. Are these the shadows of things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?" He learns the lesson that moral means and ends are ultimately linked. Scrooge is shown now his own poverty of spirit that results from his mistreatment of himself and others. His business partners callously respond to news of his death by mocking his miserliness. Those he thought respected him because of his frugal image actually despised him, considering his death trivial and humorous.

In the vision of the Ghost of Christmas Future, the most brutal treatment Scrooge will receive will be at the hands of the distorted poor, the adult descendants of Want and Ignorance. At the Beetle shop, the charwoman, the undertaker and old Joe, not unlike the soldiers at the crucifix who rolled for the robe of Christ, barter Scrooge's belongings. Scrooge's vile empiricism is revealed in the vulturous greed of these low-lifers. They take inventory of Scrooge's belongings. Property rather than personhood, or even respect for the dead, is the code of these fiends. They steal the curtains of his death bed and show no respect even for his corpse by removing his night clothes and dressing him in cheaper attire.

Scrooge half-knowingly confronts his plundered corpse but cannot bring himself to face his death. He pleads for a revelation of tenderness in reference to his death. The Ghost escorts him to the home of a debtor and then the Cratchits'. He is shown how Tiny Tim's death is full of the warmth of human compassion and grief whereas his own death is a mere riddance. Tiny Tim's burial place is green whereas his own is full of gloom. Bob Cratchit kisses the corpse of Tiny Tim whereas Scrooge's cadaver is plundered.

Scrooge is ready for repentance. He pleads for mercy in exchange for a reformed life. As the Ghost disappears, Scrooge's bedposts and curtains reappear. Ebenezer is reborn. He says as much when he declares, "I don't know what day of the month it is!... I don't know anything. I'm quite a baby. Never mind. I don't care. I'd rather be a baby."

The Carol's conception of conversion involves a transformation of consciousness through living simultaneously in the past, present and future. The actions of gratefully uncapping our memories, joyfully reviving our senses, and humbly reorienting our lives through intuition, are all the spirits need to make the myth of the Carol's conversion come true in our lives. If we live in the Past, Present and Future, allow the spirits of all three to strive within us, and not shut out the lessons they teach, then we may sponge away the writing on the stone and be reborn along with Ebenezer.

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