

Christmas Eve 2013

The Haunting of Scrooge

Christmas Eve Remarks

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Charles Dickens wrote and published *A Christmas Carol* exactly 170 years ago. It was an instant popular and critical success. And I'm not exaggerating in saying that it played a huge role in reviving and reshaping the Christmas season in Great Britain and North America from a rather muted, somber, church-based religious commemoration to a holiday season of merriment, family gatherings, seasonal food and drink, games and a festive generosity of spirit.

Earlier in the year, and I'm talking about 1843, Dickens had visited tin and coal mines where he saw children working in appalling conditions. He knew personally from experience the reality of child labour. And after reading a Parliamentary Report in February 1843, exposing the impact of finance capitalism and factory labour on the working poor, he decided to write a political pamphlet entitled "An Appeal on Behalf of the Poor Man's Child;" but then changed his mind. Changed his mind, because he realized that the best way for him to reach the widest audience with his concerns about poverty and injustice was to write a deeply felt Christmas narrative, rather than a political tract. And thereafter, in late Autumn of 1843, over a six week stretch, he wrote *A Christmas Carol*, and published it on December 17th.

I think most of us have seen the movie, or read the book. The story of the bitter old miser Ebenezer Scrooge and of his thoroughgoing change of heart—the result of supernatural visits from the ghost of Jacob Marley, his long dead business partner, and from the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future. It's full of unforgettable images of darkness, despair, sadness and death, as well as light, joy, warmth and love.

Let's look deeper at the visits of the three ghosts of Christmas and Scrooge's extraordinary transformation, where Dickens is telling us something very revealing about how

people change. In the first visit, the Ghost of Christmas Past hurtles Scrooge back to when he was a child and a young adult—and what plays out are a succession of profoundly unhappy experiences: his father abandons him at a bleak boarding school; his beloved young sister dies; and the young Scrooge makes the fateful decision to reject his fiancée because he has determined to devote himself to making money over making a meaningful marriage.

From there, the Ghost of Christmas Present takes over. He shows Scrooge a joy-filled market of people buying the makings of Christmas dinner; the celebration of Christmas in a miner's cottage and a lighthouse, and, central to this visitation, the big-heartedness and joy of the poor Cratchit family, whose youngest child, Tiny Tim is dying—as a direct result of Scrooge's refusal to pay Bob Cratchit a decent wage that would provide the care Tiny Tim needs.

And then comes the third Ghost—it's Christmas one year later. Tiny Tim is dead and deeply mourned, while the death of someone else—a “wretched man”—moves no hearts at all. The Ghost shows Scrooge a neglected grave with a tombstone bearing his own name; and utterly wrenched, at last, Scrooge is transformed. He wakes on Christmas morning filled with joy, generosity and love. He spends the day with his nephew, a new man; and gives Bob Cratchit a handsome raise and a prize turkey for the family's Christmas dinner.

“Scrooge doesn't change because he's frightened,” writes Stephen Grosz, “he changes because he's haunted.” We can be frightened of many things. Haunting is different. “It makes us feel—makes us alive to—some fact about the world, some piece of information we're trying to avoid.” So what is it about Scrooge? He doesn't want to think about the death of his mother, his sister, Tiny Tim and his own miserable death. He doesn't want to think about the loss of his fiancée and what might have been. He cannot bear the thought that love ends. So, instead, every night, eating a meager dinner alone, he reads the ledgers from his office—deposits, withdrawals, and interest paid—and here alone he finds comfort in his books and columns of sums, and thinks to himself—“You see? No losses, only gains.”

But at the bitter end of the Christmas to come, after journeying backward in time to the present, Scrooge changes because the ghosts unpick the lock tightly fastened on his heart—“the delusion that you can live a life without loss. They undo his delusion by haunting Scrooge with the losses he has already experienced, the losses now endured around him, and the inevitable loss of his own life and possessions.”

And further, in *A Christmas Carol* Dickens is telling us that “Scrooge can’t redo his past, nor can he be certain of the future. Waking on Christmas morning, thinking in a new way, he *can* change his present—change can only take place in the here and now.”

But even here, Dickens isn’t quite finished with us; his tale points further. “Sometimes change comes not because we set out to fix ourselves, or repair our relation to the living,” as crucially important as those acts may be and are. Sometimes “we change most when we repair our relation to the lost, the forgotten, the dead. As Scrooge grieves for those he had loved but put out of his mind, he begins to regain the world he had lost. He comes to life.” (Stephen Grosz, *The Examined Life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves*, pp.113-14)

What haunted Dickens and his generation?: the loss of pre-Industrial Revolution England, a simpler, less exploitative, more communal world? And what our own age? Our era? We cannot redo the past; we can’t be certain of the future. But can we change our present? Can we think and act in a new way? It may take a haunting, some grieving, and repair of our relation to the living *and* the lost and forgotten.

“For so the children come,” we read earlier together this evening, “and so they have been coming... always in the same way.” If ever there was a call to live in the here and now, this is it—a new life in the form of an infant, a new life, a new way of being and relating, and for each of us to do our part to ensure that this infant, and this life of ours and what we need and want it to be here and now may grow and flourish.

That is my Christmas wish and blessing this evening.