

Homily: Scrooge's Transformation

by Richard Stromer

Live Oak UU Fellowship

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A couple of years ago Garrison Keilor, of *Prairie Home Companion* fame, penned a rather uncharitable critique of Unitarian Universalists for changing the words of the Christmas carol "Silent Night" to make it, in his words, "more about silence and night and not so much about God." Christmas, Keilor emphatically declared, is a Christian holiday, adding "if you're not in the club, then buzz off." In addition to being uncharitable -- to say nothing of self-righteous -- it turns out that Mr. Keilor actually owes a debt of gratitude to our tradition for having a Christmas to celebrate in the first place. Or, if not Christmas itself, at least the kind of celebration we've come to expect at this season.

How, you may well ask, is the UU tradition connected to the modern celebration of Christmas? I can answer that question with the title of one of the most popular and beloved stories ever written in the English language, Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. How did Dickens' famous book inspire the contemporary observance of Christmas? And what does the UU tradition have to do with Charles Dickens' *or A Christmas Carol*?

To start with, why is *A Christmas Carol* so important to our modern observance of this holiday? Because this little book just about single-handedly revived interest in Christmas throughout the English-speaking world after it had nearly died out. While the celebration of the birth of Jesus had continued throughout the rest of Europe -- always as a joyful melding of Christian and pre-Christian pagan practices -- this feast had all but ceased to be celebrated in England and, by extension, in England's former American colonies.

Prior to the seventeenth century, Christmas had been the single-most important feast of the year in England. Christmas in medieval England was a potent and rowdy blend of Christian mythology mixed with customs from the Roman Saturnalia, the old Germanic feast of Yule, and the Celtic observance of the Winter Solstice. All of this changed, however, with rise of Oliver Cromwell and the English Puritans, who actually outlawed the celebration of Christmas in 1647.

Ironically, the Puritans' rejection of Christmas as genuinely Christian holiday were actually well-founded. To begin with, there's very little evidence as to when the historical Jesus was born. Most biblical scholars believe, based on the few details

offered in the Gospels, that he was probably born in the autumn rather than in December. In any case, though recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the story of Jesus' *birth* was not important to his immediate disciples. Perhaps this is why for the first three centuries after the death of Jesus, his birth wasn't celebrated at all.

What *had* been widely celebrated throughout the ancient world were the births of a number of other Divine Child and Savior gods, such as Dionysus in Greece and Mithra in Persia. And the births of these gods were all symbolically associated with the arrival of the Winter Solstice. It was the emperor Constantine who first decided that Christians should observe the birth of Jesus and, on being told that the bishops didn't know the date when Jesus was born, decreed that his nativity should coincide with that of the god Mithra. So the Puritan charge that Christmas was really a pagan feast was largely true.

Even though there had been attempts after the overthrow of the Puritans in England to restore the old celebration of Christmas, none of them had much effect. This state of affairs was actually worsened by the rise of the Industrial Revolution, since workers were not given the day off and few would have had the means to do much celebrating in any case.

Then came Charles Dickens and *A Christmas Carol*. Before Dickens' novel was published, Christmas was hardly celebrated at all in England or America. After it was published, people all over the English-speaking world began to make the celebrations described in Dickens' book real. Perhaps more than anything else, British and American readers latched onto this story, because it transformed Christmas from a dull religious holy day to a joyous celebration of the possibilities of human warmth, generosity, and hope.

So that explains why everyone who enjoys the pleasures of the Christmas season -- including Mr. Keilor -- owes Charles Dickens a considerable debt of gratitude. But what does any of this have to do with Unitarian-Universalism? Well, the evidence is quite clear that the principal source of inspiration for *A Christmas Carol* was Dickens' embracing of nineteenth century Unitarianism.

Evidence for the Unitarian roots of "*A Christmas Carol*" are not hard to find. For starters, as Christmas stories go, Dickens' book is notably light on traditional religious content. There are no traditional Christian figures in it, no focus on nativity stories, nor any sort of theological content. This is because Dickens did not believe in any of these things.

Though he'd been brought up in the Church of England, as a young man Dickens came to doubt both the Anglican faith and Christianity in general. In his short life Dickens had witnessed so much suffering, so much inhumanity, so many people failing to offer warmth and compassion to others less fortunate than themselves. Most of all, Dickens was deeply disturbed by the number of people who, while claiming to be Christians, in practice totally ignored the teachings of Jesus. At about the age of thirty, Dickens decided he could no longer accept the indifference of the Anglican Church toward the gospel of compassion, service, and love.

Then, in 1842, Dickens traveled to the United States. During his visit he had hoped to find more progressive religious denominations, but he soon discovered that the churches of mid-nineteenth century America were no more broad-minded or socially-aware than the ones in Europe. He noted, though, that one denomination was markedly different -- the Unitarians. Dickens was deeply impressed by his visit to Boston and his meetings with William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson, leading figures in American Unitarianism.

Dickens experienced Unitarianism to be "a religion which has sympathy for men of every creed and ventures to pass judgment on none; who would do something for human improvement if and when it could; and would always practice charity and toleration." Dickens embraced Unitarianism because he observed among its followers an attempt to live what he perceived to be the real Christian message. He also appreciated the fact that Unitarianism didn't promote any specific religious doctrine and was a religion focused on living justly rather than on beliefs. Dickens was so impressed that soon after he returned to England, he joined the Little Portland Street Chapel, a Unitarian congregation in London. It was after attending a Christmas service there in 1842, Dickens later said, that he'd found the inspiration for *A Christmas Carol*.

Like most of Dickens' stories, *A Christmas Carol* is about society and ethics. It's about the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. Dickens' deep social consciousness arises out of his own personal experience. Indeed, he understood poverty firsthand. Originally middle-class, the Dickens family fell into poverty when Charles was a child. After that, the family lived from hand to mouth, moving frequently to avoid debt collectors. Dickens' father was imprisoned twice for debt and during one of those imprisonments twelve-year-old Charles was forced to leave school and go to work in a factory to pay off his family's debts.

Charles Dickens wrote and published *A Christmas Carol* in 1843 when he was 30. Its publication came at a very low ebb in Dickens' career. While he had achieved great fame and unheard-of publishing success with his first two novels, his next two works

had proved much less popular. Increasing the gravity of his situation, his growing family was facing serious debt and the prospect of poverty.

The success of *A Christmas Carol* was anything but guaranteed, however, and his publisher balked at the mere idea of a story about Christmas. In the first place, there wasn't a large market for Christmas stories. In addition, a ghost story seem an odd choice for a tale celebrating Christmas. With the success of his literary career -- and the wellbeing of his family -- in the balance, Dickens decided to go ahead anyway, agreeing to pay the book's publishing costs himself. Happily *A Christmas Carol* proved to be exactly what was needed to revive Dickens' flagging fortunes, earning the author a sizeable profit and nearly universal acclaim from critics.

A Christmas Carol is a Victorian morality tale about an aging and embittered miser, a man who undergoes a profound experience of redemption and rebirth over the course of a single night. The novel's protagonist, Ebenezer Scrooge, is a man who cares profoundly and passionately about the bottom line. In contrast, Scrooge cares nothing at all for the people around him and values them only for the money that can be made by exploiting them. In particular, Scrooge reviles Christmas which he describes as 'a time for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer'.

The story starts on Christmas Eve, when Scrooge receives a visitation from the ghost of his dead business partner, Jacob Marley. Marley, weighted down by heavy chains attached to locked strongboxes, says that he has been condemned to roam the earth seeking opportunities to help his fellow human beings, opportunities he ignored while he was alive. In what might be described as a particularly UU vision of hell, Marley's torment lies in seeing the full depth of human suffering, yet having no capacity to alleviate that suffering in any way.

Attempting to defend their old way of life, Scrooge say that Marley was always "a good man of business." 'Business!' cries the Ghost, wringing hands. 'Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!'

Marley then tells Scrooge that he has come to offer him one last opportunity to avoid the same terrible fate. He says that Scrooge will be visited by three ghosts and urges Scrooge to learn what they have to show him.

The Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge on a tour of his own sad and lonely childhood. He remembers yearning in vain for the love and approval of his father. He

sees a variety of people who had reached out to him, attempting to slow his long descent into selfishness and preoccupation with financial security. He revisits old hurts that he never let heal, promises he failed to keep, and love he turned away in pursuit of material gain.

With the Ghost of Christmas Present, he visits the humble abode of Bob Cratchit, his clerk, where he experiences the human warmth and stoic determination of a family doing the best they can given the paltry salary Scrooge pays. He also experiences their anxiety over the fate of Tiny Tim, their sick youngest child. In yet another of the book's pleas for social justice, the Ghost of Christmas Present also shows Scrooge two pathetic, ragged children, a boy called Ignorance and girl called Want. The ghost tells Scrooge to beware of these two, warning that if their fate is left unchecked, it will ultimately spell doom for the whole of society.

Finally Scrooge encounters the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, a frightening specter who has no face and does not speak, communicating only by pointing its skeletal finger. Scrooge is shown the future of the Cratchit family, ultimately overcome by their struggle against poverty, mourning the loss of Tiny Tim, who has died for lack of proper medical care. Scrooge is also shown a man who appears to have died in his sleep and he looks on as the maid, the cleaning lady, and the undertaker callously divide the man's possessions. He overhears two business associates in the street discussing whether it would be fitting to have a funeral at all for this person, since no one would attend. "But who is this man?" Scrooge asks in terror. In response, he is shown an untended grave where the ghost points to a headstone bearing the name "Ebenezer Scrooge."

Having been confronted with both his own mortality and the meaningless nature of the life he has been living, Scrooge awakens -- truly awakens -- on Christmas morning knowing that he has been given a reprieve, a chance to begin anew. Through the agency of the three spirits, Scrooge comes to see that he has been living in a prison he created himself, a prison built out of bitterness, regret, resentment, fear, and isolation. He has come to experience his own long-buried feelings of both the sadness and the joy of life. Most importantly, he has come to understand the virtue of generosity and finds an abiding concern for the welfare of those less fortunate than himself. With a resounding commitment that "I will not be the man I was!", Scrooge completes his process of transformation and reclaims his life.

I'd like to close this homily with a brief appreciation of *A Christmas Carol* by Michael Timko, a professor emeritus of the City University of New York and an editor of the *Dickens Studies Annual*. Timko, who is also member of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Palisades in New Jersey, is well-suited to comment the deep

connection between the principles and values expressed by Dickens in *A Christmas Carol* and those of the UU tradition:

"In *A Christmas Carol*," Timko writes, "without once mentioning Jesus, Dickens shows it is possible to experience a conversion--not necessarily based on a specific religious experience--but a personal regeneration that leads one to help others. With Scrooge's transformative change of heart, Dickens illustrates that his readers, too, can be converted from a harsh, complacent, selfish worldview to one of love, hope, and charity. For Dickens," Timko adds, "*that* was the true meaning of Christmas."

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.