



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Spirit of Christmas”

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Two homilies delivered December 22, 2013

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

“Bah,” said Scrooge, “Humbug.” Charles Dickens, from ‘A Christmas Carol’

I will honor Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach! Charles Dickens, from ‘A Christmas Carol’

In the little world in which children have their existence, whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice. Charles Dickens

Opening Homily, Ms. Morgan Watson, DRE

It’s just three days before Christmas, and I know many of you are busy with preparations for the holiday. What are some of your favorite activities this time of year?

Indeed, our holiday activities this month are plentiful. Many of us have brought in and decorated Christmas trees, baked goodies and mailed cards, bought presents and made presents, and wrapped them up for the surprise and delight of the receiver. We have gathered with loved ones, decorated and lit our homes, and maybe warmed ourselves by a fire to keep the chill at bay. Our holiday traditions come to us from many heritages~ from the pagan contributions of bringing in greenery, lighting a yule log, and kissing under the mistletoe to the Christian celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ and the practice of lighting of the advent candle on four Sundays before Christmas.

And we can count Unitarian Universalist contributions among these. It was Charles Follen, a Unitarian minister, who in 1835 shared a tradition of his Germanic heritage~ one of the first Christmas trees in America. The decoration of the tree was further popularized by two Unitarian best-selling authors, Harriet Martineau and Catharine Marie Sedgewick, in their writings of the Christmas tree ritual, as they experienced it at the home of Charles Follen.

Another American Unitarian author of that era, Louisa May Alcott, wrote an extensive Christmas scene into her famous novel, Little Women. In that scene, the four girls voluntarily give their Christmas presents to a poor neighboring family.

And here’s a story you probably all know. See if you can help me fill in the blanks:

’Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the (house)

Not a creature was stirring, not even a (mouse);
The stockings were hung by the chimney with (care),
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be (there);

Sure, most of you know that one, but you may not have known that this poem, originally titled “A Visit from Saint Nicholas” was penned by Unitarian poet Clement Clarke Moore.

Our story today, though, is not about a visit from our dear old Santa Claus. Rather, we share a tale of transformation following the visit from three spirits. This morning, we present, *A Christmas Carol*, written by English author Charles Dickens. While traveling in Massachusetts, Dickens had the privilege to meet Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing and joined a Unitarian chapel upon his return to England.

As our story unfolds, you’ll be invited to help us with our ghostly sound effects on the cues given by our Ghost Chorus Leaders. You’re even invited to dance with us in Scene Two. Enjoy.

Story

In between the Opening and Closing remarks, and punctuated by several Christmas carols written by Unitarians during the 19th century, an intergenerational cast presented an abridged version of “A Christmas Carol,” by Charles Dickens.

Closing Homily, Rev. Alison Eskildsen

Several years ago I wandered into Catholic University’s bookstore where I stumbled across several action figures. I couldn’t resist buying one. Yes, Charles Dickens warrants an action figure, complete with quill pen and removable hat!

Besides Charles Darwin, Dickens may be the only other Unitarian to rate such canonization. You see why I couldn’t resist? I want you to know, I’ve been waiting four years to display my find.

Dickens once wrote that he joined the Unitarian Chapel in London because it was his opinion that Unitarians practiced charity and toleration where others only preached it. Although Dickens maintained a pew in an Anglican church at the time of his death, he wrote “A Christmas Carol” while attending the Unitarian chapel.

Published in December, 1843, Dickens wrote in its Preface:

I have endeavored in this Ghostly little book,
to raise the Ghost of an Idea,
which shall not put my readers out of humor with themselves,
with each other, with the season, or with me.
May it haunt their houses pleasantly,
and no one wish to lay it.

The story appeared during a time of great economic upheaval in England. Poverty troubled Dickens deeply. He was forced to work at a young age to pay off his imprisoned father’s debts. In 1853 when he gave his first public reading of “A Christmas Carol,” Dickens demanded that seats be reserved for the working poor at prices they could afford. As evidenced in this story, Dickens felt strongly that every person can play a part in relieving the suffering of others.

His general views on the Christmas holiday were expressed by Scrooge’s nephew, Fred, who said:

I have always thought of Christmas-time, when it has come round — apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that — as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.

Although charity was part of the Christmas tradition, which wassailing and caroling attest to, the success of “A Christmas Carol” and the values it championed forever changed how we celebrate the holiday. Martin Andrucki, Professor of Theater at Bates College, writes: In the end Dickens triumphed, and indeed many historians credit his stories with helping to create the institution of Christmas as we now know it: a holiday of caroling, tree-trimming, family feasting, gift-giving, and universal goodwill.

Before Dickens, Christmas in England and America was a day of religious significance without much secular celebration. (In fact in Massachusetts and other Puritan jurisdictions the public observance of Christmas was legally banned.) After Dickens, Christmas became the emotional centerpiece not only of our religious calendars, but of that secular extravaganza known as “The Holidays.”

Besides influencing how we celebrate the holiday, Dickens also penned the most famous expression against Christmas, “Bah, Humbug!” He wrote:

Oh! But he was a tight fisted hand at the grindstone. Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner. Hard and sharp as flint . . . secret and self contained, and solitary as an old oyster. The cold within him froze his own features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice.

No one welcomes being called a ‘Scrooge’.

But Scrooge isn’t just a miser about money. Professor Andrucki believes Scrooge is the archetype of ‘spiritual miserliness, of the heart that begrudges the joy of others.’

But crotchety Ebenezer did learn his lesson. Through a fantastic nighttime journey Scrooge saw his own moral bankruptcy and emotional emptiness. He didn’t like what he saw. He, unlike Jacob Marley, had the opportunity and freedom to change his future. Some claim Dickens’ story should be called ‘The Gospel of the Second Chances.’

Without the need for ghostly visitations we, too, can reflect on our lives. If you find yourself more miserly than you wish, you can change. And each of us can promise, as Scrooge did, to honor Christmas in our hearts and try to keep it all the year. Regardless of where your spirit stands on the moral continuum, I hope you aim to live each day with greater kindness, charity, and love. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What does the ‘Spirit of Christmas’ mean to you? What contributes to your feeling this way?
2. In what ways do you share of yourself and your blessings with others? What do you receive?
3. In what ways might you have changed your own attitude towards generosity and/or holidays?
4. Do the holidays make you happy or sad? What helps you feel more happy than sad?