

Hope from Heartbreak
Sunday, December 8, 2019

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." The philosopher George Santayana wrote that aphorism, and I've always taken it to mean the grand sweep of history – remember the cause of wars, the downfalls of empires, the seeds of revolution, but as I was thinking about Scrooge's encounter with the Ghost of Christmas Past I realized that those words apply to our own pasts as well. "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." For in Stave Two of "A Christmas Carol," Charles Dickens shows us – and Scrooge – the past he has forgotten and is now perversely living out.

In his ghostly visit, Scrooge's former business partner Jacob Marley told Scrooge to look for the first of three spirits to visit him when the bell tolled one. And so the chiming of the hours finds him peering into the darkness, literally and metaphorically, trying to see what is coming for him. As the bell in the nearby church steeple sounds "a deep, dull, hollow, melancholy One[, l]ights flashed up in the room..., and the curtains of his bed were drawn." And Dickens makes a point that the curtains were drawn not at his back or at the foot but directly in front of his face, as if this spirit knows exactly where he is even though he is hidden.

He finds himself facing a strange figure – small as a child but with long white hair. The face looks adult but without a sign of age. It wears a white tunic and carries a sprig of holly, but its tunic is trimmed with summer flowers. And Dickens describes, "But the strangest thing about it was that from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear jet of light, by which all this was visible." Under its arm it carries a cap which Scrooge sees as an extinguisher, for it's shaped like the cones used at the time to put out flames from torches.

But even weirder than the flame coming out of its head is the way light plays across it, so that at one moment an arm stands out and then falls back into shadow while another a leg or its face comes into focus.

Scrooge is so disturbed by this play of light that almost immediately he asks the Spirit to put the cap on his head. "What?" exclaimed the Ghost, 'would you so soon put out, with worldly hands, the light I give? Is it not enough that you are one of those whose passions made the cap and force me through whole trains of years to wear it low upon my brow?'" Though Scrooge doesn't know where this ghost of his own past will take him, he has a glimmer that the journey will bring him pain and he doesn't want to set out. When the Ghost tells him that the purpose of the visit is Scrooge's welfare, "Scrooge expressed himself much obliged, but could not help thinking that a night of unbroken rest would have been more conducive to that end." Scrooge has no time for matters of the heart or the spirit – only for the tangibles of the body and the world. But he does rise and walk with the Ghost, and

finds himself transported to a country road on a winter's day. The Ghost has transported him through time as well – it is the day school has let out for the Christmas vacation, and Scrooge recognizes his own long ago schoolmates dispersing to their homes. And he has been transported too in his psyche, moving into the realm of feeling. “He was conscious of a thousand odours floating in the air, each one connected with a thousand thoughts, and hopes, and joys, and cares long, long, forgotten!” The Ghost even observes a tear upon his cheek, but Scrooge denies it.

They move from the country roads and happy boys to a grim and desolate school where one boy sits alone in a cold classroom, reading. Scrooge is now openly weeping as he recognizes his younger self. Alone on Christmas Eve. We don't understand why until the scene wavers and Scrooge and the Ghost are in the same place but clearly several years later – the building is more dilapidated and dispirited and the young boy has become a youth. But he is still alone on Christmas Eve, until a young girl runs in announcing, “I have come to bring you home, dear brother!.. To bring you home, home, home!.. Home, for good and all. Home, for ever and ever. Father is so much kinder than he used to be, that home's like Heaven!”

From the school they travel through time and over miles to a warehouse – the Ghost asks Scrooge if he knows it: “Know it!” said Scrooge. “[I was] apprenticed here!” Again it is Christmas Eve, and Scrooge's master Mr. Fezziwig has Scrooge and the other apprentice clearing the floor for a party. People of all social ranks come in, from Fezziwig's family and business associates to “the boy from over the way who was suspected of not having board enough from his master [and].. the girl from next door but one, who was proved to have had her ears pulled by her Mistress.” So we know this is not a gathering to impress society but a celebration of joy and the season. It is a glimpse of the realm of love and justice. They dance, they play games, and they feast and Scrooge enjoys it as much as anyone present.

The Spirit transports him from that happy scene to an older Scrooge sitting on a bench with a young woman dressed in black mourning. Scrooge now is “a man in the prime of life. His face had not the harsh and rigid lines of later years; but it had begun to wear the signs of care and avarice.” The young woman is weeping as she tells him the words that Honora spoke in this morning's dialogue. She is ending their engagement, not because she no longer loves him, but because Scrooge's fear of want and his corresponding desire for money have grown greater than his love for her. “Another idol has displaced me,” she tells him and asks him if he had met her now, impoverished and orphaned, with no money to bring to a marriage, would he have made the same promises. His silence speaks his answer.

Finally the Spirit shows him the same woman, now 15 or 20 years older, in a modest but comfortable home with a loving husband, surrounded by her children on a happy Christmas Eve. It happens to be the Christmas Eve seven years earlier when Jacob Marley, Scrooge's only friend died, leaving him alone.

This final visit upsets Scrooge so much that he grabs the extinguisher-cap from the Ghost and presses it down upon his head, hoping to put out the flame which has illuminated these scenes. "The Spirit dropped beneath it, so that the extinguisher covered its whole form, but though Scrooge pressed it down with all his force, he could not hide the light, which streamed from under it, in an unbroken flood upon the ground." The light of memory, once lit, can't be snuffed out so easily.

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Scrooge has blocked his memories of the past and so has turned himself into what he feared. He has become his father – an unloving, lonely man, - though wealthier than his father, still held prisoner by his fears of poverty. In Scrooge, Charles Dickens is portraying the man he might have become had he not been able to remember his past.

Like Scrooge, Dickens grew up in a country town. His father was a lower level civil servant who always lived above his means. Hoping for a better paying job, John Dickens moved the family to London when Charles was 10. But the better paying job didn't come. After two years of little income and enlarged expenses, Dickens' father was put into prison for debt. Dickens, now 12, had to leave school and work in a shoe polish factory. He worked 14 hours a day, six days a week, labeling the pots of blacking, and earned 6 shillings a week – the equivalent of \$34 today. At first he lived at home. But his mother couldn't pay the rent on her own for long, so she took the six younger children, and they all moved into the father's prison cell. That was better than the only other alternative of going to the workhouse. So Dickens boarded – at age 12 – on his own in a rooming house. Looking back on this experience later, Dickens wondered and mourned "how [he] could be so easily cast away at such a young age."

After a few months, John Dickens inherited some money, enough to cover his debts and release him from prison. The family moved home and Dickens hoped that he could return to school. But his parents told him that they still needed the income from his job. He continued to work in the factory until his father had a fight with the owner and took him away. And though he attended school then for a couple of years, when the family finances fell again, his parents again pulled him from school, but this time to work as a clerk in a law office – a job like Bob

Cratchit's. This led to his reporting on the law courts and eventually to his success and fame as a novelist, but Dickens was always aware of how his circumstances could have been different. And though he kept his connection with his parents and helped support them, he never lost the hurt of their abandonment.

How easily this abandonment could have led Dickens to close his heart to love, trust, and connection. How easily his experience of poverty could have led him to value the security of money. How easily he could have lived out of fear. But it didn't. Dickens married, was a loving father, and enjoyed many friendships. And rather than hoard money for lean times, he shared what he had, especially supporting orphanages and schools for abandoned and homeless children. He used his novels to draw attention to children and the ways that society abused them. He was inspired to write *A Christmas Carol* after a visit to the industrial city of Manchester where he was trying to raise money for the Athenaeum which offered education and arts for the factory workers. He wanted to inspire others to generosity and care. And though he felt shame over his time in the blacking factory and his parents treatment of him – he told only a few people about it during his lifetime and his children only found out about his experience when they read about it in a biography written by one of those trusted friends – yet he took the space in his heart hollowed out by pain and filled it with compassion.

This is what Scrooge hasn't been able to do. He has closed his heart over the pain of his own abandonment and experiences with poverty and so can't resolve them, can't turn them to good. This is the gift the Ghost of Christmas Past offers him, opening the hurt so that it may heal. And we see that beginning happen. The memories lead to compassion: after seeing his young self all alone in the schoolroom, Scrooge says through his tears, "There was a boy singing a Christmas Carol at my door last night. I should like to have given him something." After remembering his sister's love he feels "uneasy" over his lack of care for his nephew, his sister's son, and after the Fezziwig's party, while he is praising his employer for the way he took care of those who worked for him, he says, "I should like to be able to say a word or two to my clerk just now!"

So though Scrooge tries to douse the light which has shown him his memories, the light is already warming and changing him. The other ghosts will increase his recognition and acceptance of his pain, not to hurt him, but to help him heal and live. They will continue the process of moving him from hurt and fear to compassion and abundance. And they invite us to join them on that journey too.

For all of us have pain and fear which scar and narrow our lives. It doesn't have to have been as extreme as Dickens' experience to do damage or to count. Sometimes we dismiss our own hurts because they are not as great as others. But doing so only closes us off from the others we are trying to care about. Pain is pain. Loss, abandonment, and fear are part of the human condition and only when we can acknowledge them can we be filled with the compassion we desire. Only when we face our truth and acknowledge our hurts can we be freed. Scrooge is haunted by the harm done to him until the haunting of the ghosts releases him. So may we be haunted if we don't take care to release ourselves.

And how do we do that? We have to see and tell the truth. Acknowledging it to ourselves is good. Even better is saying aloud to someone else, as Dickens was able to share his with a friend or two. You can tell me. You can tell your therapist. You can tell a friend or share it in one of our small groups. Saying it aloud is scary, but it releases us from its power and allows the hearer to say, "Yes. That was wrong. You were harmed. And it wasn't your fault."

And then we take the next steps of looking at how that trauma scarred us, how did it direct us down paths which might not have been the healthiest for us – that's what happens when the Ghost of Christmas Present visits Scrooge in Stave Three; and we re-form, re-make, re-cast – we transform ourselves and our lives to live out of the wholeness this process leads us to – that's what happens when the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come visits Scrooge.

This is a process that we need to do as individuals – sometimes over and over again – and one we also need to do as a nation. Our inability to recognize the abuses of settlement, slavery, and violence are still scarring our country and preventing us from living with justice and mercy.

This is the Sunday of hope. Hope, as I said to the children, isn't wishing. Wishing is passive, waiting for something we believe out of our control. Hope acknowledges that we have power to heal ourselves, one another, and our world. And this hope leads to action. Though the visit from the Ghost upset Scrooge, still it gave him the beginnings of hope that he could change. So will recognizing and telling our truths allow us to begin to make the changes to transform our lives, our country, and our world. Hope is a miracle present within and all around us. That miracle continues in us.

- Pamela M. Barz

