

Ebenezer Scrooge Is Seriously Misunderstood

Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge is seriously misunderstood by most people, Dickens included. For the umpteenth year in a row, I've watched the movie, *A Christmas Carol*, with Patrick Stewart as Ebenezer Scrooge, and have finally put pen to paper and vent my frustration.

Contrary to popular belief, Mr. Scrooge was a pure Capitalist, as opposed to a crony capitalist. In his own words, Scrooge supported the union work houses, and was of the opinion that those who'd rather die than go to them didn't deserve his charity. Scrooge's charity was allotted for the people who proved to be hard workers, like Cratchett's eldest daughter, who was a factory worker.

Scrooge was from a middle-class working family, and perhaps unlike most of us, had to boost himself up by his own bootstraps. Left nearly orphaned as a young child, he learned the trade of accounting and finance, and worked his way up the corporate ladder under Fezziwig's careful tutoring. At nearly middle-age, he began his own business with life-long friend and partner, Bob Marley. Their business struggled during the late 18th and early 19th Century, yet became somewhat prosperous, and in late 1836, when Mr. Marley passed on, the business passed to Ebenezer.

Scrooge vowed to his dearly departed partner, Mr. Marley, that he'd make his counting house the most prosperous in the country. With one clerk, Bob Cratchett, and keen business sense of stock markets, finance and accounting, Mr. Scrooge pushed his counting house into the top of its class, garnering the admiration and envy of other less productive businessmen.

You see, Mr. Scrooge loved business, not money. He loved the hustle and bustle, the long, straight columns of numbers, the balancing of accounts to the penny, and the importing and exporting of goods and services. He loved business. And because he loved business, every aspect of business, he excelled at it. And, by excelling at it, he became sought after –people paid him more money *because* he was a shrewd businessman. In fact, Scrooge really didn't know what to do with all his wealth, so he stored it. And that's where the trouble starts. People who envied him saw his stored cash and called him stingy and a hoarder of money *because* he didn't *share* it with anyone.

But, why should he share it with people who he saw working less efficiently or diligently than himself? Mr. Scrooge was a lowly born individual, who in the age of a strict class society, used his talents to leap over the other noble born classes of people by building his own empire of money and fame. He worked at becoming the best businessman in the country. His long-time girl-friend left him because he'd leapt over her class, claiming that he loved money more than her. Scrooge didn't love money, he loved business. If you bother to look, you can see that he was perplexed at the sentiment coming from people who worked less hard than himself at his storing of his wealth. Didn't you store it until you found what to spend it on? That's what Scrooge did.

Scrooge had surplus cash because of finely developed habits of frugality from early in life. He never really knew how to enjoy his vast wealth—other than amassing more of it. These frugal habits allowed him to be generous later in life to people for which he had affection, but at the time of his Christmas Eve Nightmares, he had really no idea how to spend all his money.

Perhaps it was consuming a bad turnip, or British beef as he told the first Ghost of Christmas Past that induced the nightmares plaguing him the night of Christmas in 1842. No one will really know. But, the outcome is there for everyone to see.

The first Ghost of Christmas Past reminded Scrooge of all the mistakes he'd made. Mistakes for which he was totally not responsible: the death of his mother, the estrangement from his father, the separation from his beloved sister, Fran. But did Scrooge complain? No. He simply threw himself into his work, because in business it's just about business, not emotions. So, from an early age, Scrooge shut himself off from all his emotions except loving business: it was the key to his survival. For us, the future observer of Scrooge's tale, it is paramount to recognize that Scrooge accepted the unearned and undeserved guilt of events that were not within his control.

During his early to late twenties, while engaged to his girl-friend, he worked diligently at Fezziwig's Counting House—learning the craft of accounting and finance, but also seeing his boss treating the employees with respectful care. He was strict without being a micromanager. A truly good soul to work for, thought Scrooge, looking back with nostalgia.

Then, just as he's starting out with Bob Marley in his own counting house, his girl-friend accuses him of loving money more than her. Poor Scrooge. He didn't know how to tell her that he could still love her *and* business as well! But, to survive a bad break-up, he threw himself into his work, burying himself in accounts and measures.

The second Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge of all the miserable poor people. In fact, the implication is that the poor are more noble in their poor-ness than the person who has spent his life picking himself up by his own bootstraps. The message to Dickens' reader is that it's better to be poor and unhappy than rich. The Ghost implies that Scrooge ought to feel guilty *because* he's done well for himself. Unfortunately, Scrooge accepts this unearned, undeserved guilt because his whole life he's been waiting for other's to pat him on the back and say, "Well done, Ebenezer!" instead of patting his own back and giving himself his own accolades. Scrooge doesn't know how to be self-satisfied until the end of his life.

The third Ghost of Christmas-Yet-To-Come completes the guilt-dumping exercise by showing Scrooge a future that is not-yet certain. Heaping more unearned and undeserved guilt upon himself, Scrooge reasons that if the future can be changed then there is a way out of his nightmare, and he sets out to find the path to rid himself of all the unearned and undeserved guilt.

Note that Mr. Scrooge does not sit down to rationally think any of this through, which, I imagine would be difficult in the middle of a nightmare. But, he makes some astounding discoveries upon his awakening.

Discovery #1: he sends a massive turkey to the Cratchett Household, unanimously. Why unanimously? Why didn't Scrooge announce it to the whole world? Wouldn't he have gotten his "Well Done!" from the defenders of the noble poor? Perhaps Scrooge discovers that no, that would not be the case, and so sending the unanimous turkey was how Scrooge patted himself on his own back for being a good boss.

After all, he'd always been strict, yet flexible by allowing Cratchett to arrive at work after starting time. He allowed Cratchett a day off for Christmas at a time when every day that passed was business under the bridge. He mostly ignored how easily distracted Cratchett could be, and kept him employed when in most other businesses Cratchett would have been fired.

Discovery #2: Scrooge finds that he really does want to be part of a family, and visits his nephew, Fred, on Christmas Day. He begs forgiveness for the sin of being too busy with business, something for which I believe Scrooge did not really feel guilt –but to make amends with family, he was willing to take on unearned and undeserved guilt.

Discovery #3: Scrooge did not pay any attention to the nay-sayers speaking behind his back about his newly found generosity. He kept Christmas in his own way, and in his own heart rejoiced and patted himself on his own back. He didn't wait for others to pat him on the back, he did it himself.

So, you see, Dickens had Scrooge all wrong. Dickens wants his reader to feel that being rich is a bad thing; that being wealthy by inheritance it is a far better way of gaining status than actually earning money; that the truly productive business people who do it because they love their occupation is something for which to feel guilt. Working hard in the coal mines was a far nobler occupation in Dickens' view than being a wealthy businessman.

In this season of Christmas stop and review why you do what you do. Are you doing your occupation because you love it? Are you accepting unearned and undeserved guilt for being the best at what you do? When was the last time you patted yourself on the back, and told yourself, "Job well done!?" If your answers are "Yes", "Yes", and "Not in a long time", then your New Year's Resolution ought to be: I'll do my own back-patting in 2012, and lay aside the unearned and undeserved guilt that others try to pawn off on me.

Final comment: you don't have to do this, but once you see that the entire story told by Dickens is just Socialism for Christmas, you can get on with the celebration and let go of your long-held, ill-deserved guilt.