

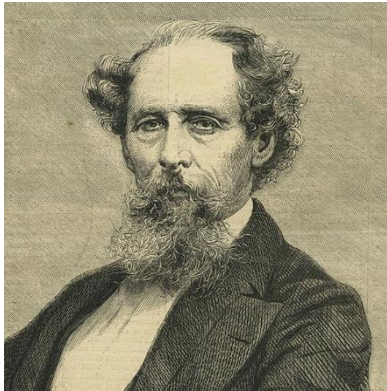
The Real Meaning of “A Christmas Carol”

Final Presentation for the 2018 Masonic Year at the 3,479th Stated
Communication of Lexington Lodge No. 1

John W. Bizzack, Master - December 17, 2018

We always strive to end our Masonic year with an education presentation that carries a purposeful message into the following year. Perhaps, even more importantly, we make every effort to make the final presentation brief.

Tonight, we'll keep brevity as part of the tradition. I hope you'll find the purposeful message in the presentation keeps within our tradition as well.



Charles Dickens was an English writer and social critic. He created some of the world's best-known fictional characters

and is regarded by many as the greatest novelist of the Victorian era. His epic works like *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *A Tale*

of Two Cities are today at the top of what we call Classics.

There is one story of his with which you may be more familiar than his others. In 1843, *A Christmas Carol* was published which led the world to become familiar with the name, Ebenezer Scrooge, and introduced into our language some other terms.

The phrase "Merry Christmas" had been around for many years – the earliest known written use was in a letter in 1534 – but Dickens's use of the phrase in *A Christmas Carol* popularized it among the Victorian public.¹ The exclamation "Bah! Humbug!" entered popular use in the English language as a retort to anything sentimental or overly festive.² And today, we still reference or use the name "Scrooge" as a designation for a miser, a skinflint or someone who is grumpy and crotchety - and sometimes refer to a person as a "Scrooge" because they lack Christmas cheer, or because they are wealthy and greedy. The term has been so widely used since 1843, that it was added to the Oxford English Dictionary.³

And, by the way, the next time you hear someone say, or say yourself, *some one* or *some thing* was "dead as a door nail,"

¹ Cochrane, Robertson (1996). *Wordplay: origins, meanings, and usage of the English language*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

² Standiford, Les (2008). *The Man Who Invented Christmas: How Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol*

Rescued His Career and Revived Our Holiday Spirits. New York: Crow

³ Scrooge, n. OED.

remember the phrase was coined by Charles Dickens in *A Christmas Carol*.

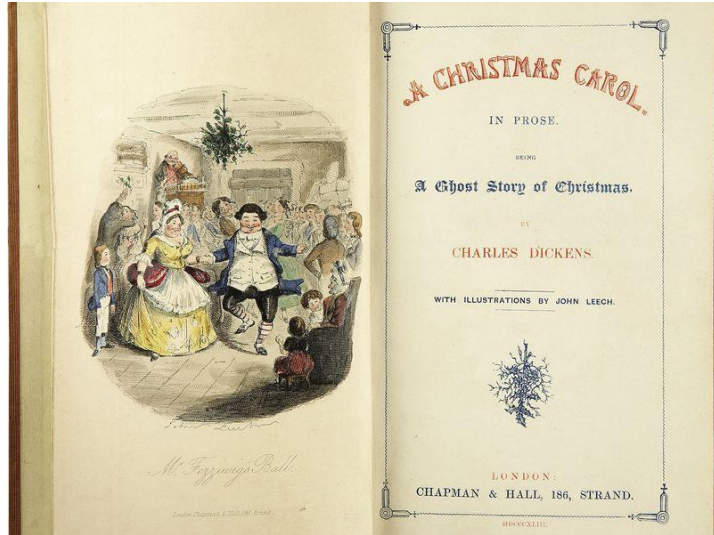
Scrooge is the main character in this book. He is an aging old miser who is visited late on Christmas Eve by the ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley, who brings with him three Spirits who represents Christmas Past, Present and Future. After their visits, Scrooge is transformed into a kinder, gentler man.

Dickens's story is enjoyed by millions every December. It's been performed as plays and adapted for the screen in least fifteen major film productions ranging from the dramatic to cartoon and animated versions for children.

The popularity of this tale makes it all the more unfortunate that it is so frequently mistaken as a story about charity.

One of the most memorable scenes from *A Christmas Carol* has Scrooge telling two men from a local charity that he has no desire to give, since he already supports the prisons and workhouses. He goes on to suggest that if the poor would rather die, they should “get on with it and decrease the surplus population.” Another statement Scrooge makes is “If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.”

The message is clear: Scrooge was rich, didn't give to the poor and didn't care for Christmas. But to come away from the story thinking this was the source of his condemnation is to miss the whole point. Ebenezer Scrooge was haunted not because of his wealth or lack of charity alone, but because he had narrowed his perspective and misplaced the true value in life; material security had become his priority—for its own



sake—while the love of friends, family and neighbors had been completely neglected.

This is a story about a man who abandoned every opportunity to build meaningful relationships with those around him, and therefore never discovered the purpose for which he was given life.

Ebenezer's particular idol happened to be money. He worked for it, hoarded it and measured everything—and everyone—by it. His every action was determined by whether or not it brought him gain—a rational, calculating approach, but one that was unable to fulfill his true needs as a human. As time wore on, loneliness led to bitterness and back again. The Spirits did not come merely to make him generous, but to restore his life by removing this idol.

Books are always better than their cinematic counterparts, and it is no less true in this case. When reading the words of Dickens himself, one meets Ebenezer Scrooge on a more personal level. The texture and depth of the story convey more fully the sadness that he feels in watching his life pass before his eyes, and in confronting a cold and lonely end to a suddenly meaningless existence. Everything in which he had invested

himself—his narrow definition of success—provided no solace on his deathbed.

In the story, the three Spirits the ghost of Jacob Marley brings with him to Scrooge's home force Scrooge by morning to view his own life and that of others through a new perspective.

The first Spirit takes him on a tour of his childhood to remind him of the joys of that time in his life and the love of his youth. He is shown people in meager situations, who manage to find warmth and fellowship in good company.

The second Spirit allows him to watch his life again as he grew into an adult, gained material wealth, but lost his friends, his fiancé and a little sister, who had a son before her death. It is this very nephew—the only family Scrooge has left—whose friendship he rejects time and time again.

When the third Spirit – representing the future – makes Scrooge look at his name on a tombstone, it is not death itself that terrifies Scrooge but the prospect of sharing his dead partner's fate who died not realizing all he'd missed in his life and was now doomed to wander eternity with regret. What renders Ebenezer Scrooge so repentant is the fear of *having never truly lived*.

After seeing it all, he pleads to the Spirits that he is changed; he promises to “live in the past, present *and* future.”

What Dicken's shows us through Scrooge is that life is not only about money—it is about recognizing the value of our human connectedness, to our family, our community and even to our former and future selves.

There's another character with whom you are probably familiar in this story – that

character is Tim Cratchit – better known as the sickly and crippled child, Tiny Tim - the son of Bob Cratchit – a family man who as an employee of Scrooge is underpaid and overworked.

When Scrooge is on the tour of his life by the Ghost of Christmas Present, he is shown just how ill the Tiny Tim really is and that Bob Cratchit cannot afford to obtain proper treatment for him on the salary Scrooge pays him. When visited by the Ghost of Christmas Future, Scrooge sees that Tiny Tim has died. This, and several other visions, lead Scrooge to reform his ways. At the end of the story, Dickens makes it explicit that Tiny Tim does not die, and Scrooge becomes a "second father" to him.

In the story, Tiny Tim is known for the statement, "God bless us, *every one!*" which he offers as a blessing at Christmas dinner. Dickens repeats the phrase at the end of the story as symbolism demonstrating Scrooge's change of heart.

Scrooge's lesson was that no amount of money could buy happiness, and that love and friendship are worth more than all the material goods a person could acquire in a lifetime. In the end, we find a man not only more generous—a sign that he no longer worships at the altar of profit—but one who is more genial and eager for a good laugh. Thus, he is liberated in both life and death.

I was with friends a few months ago. In addition to myself, three in the group of eight, were Freemasons and serious about their Masonic journeys.

We had a long discussion about Dicken's book, the plot, characters, the historic setting in Camden (a section of London), and how the story was written during a period when the British were exploring and re-evaluating past Christmas traditions,

including carols and newer customs such as Christmas trees.

That led us into the question of whether Dicken's was perhaps Freemason. He wasn't, but some of his brothers and some of his sons were, making it less strange that we can find many Masonic connections within his writings.⁴

Our discussion moved us toward how Dickens's writing, especially the message found in *A Christmas Carol* compels us to consider others. How he encourages us to embrace a selfless spirit of giving on Christmas and year-round – not just of money and material gifts, but also of our time and consideration of other who are less fortunate.

In fact, most of his works tell us we must stop and consider the truly important things in life, and how easily they are tossed aside as we seek our own goals.

And, of course the main lesson is that material gain, for all of its very real benefits, does not compare to the richness and happiness found in sharing our hopes, fears and good humor with those around us – the lesson being that our pursuit of prosperity exists for greater ends, and is not an end in itself.

Several reasons have given me pause over the past years to think about giving, how we teach children and others about gratitude and charity, and how we do that while we attempt to instill a sense of fairness, tolerance, and justice – and how these things related to the spirit of the season we are in right now.

What Scrooge learns from the three Spirits is not just to keep the joy, the love and the warmth of Christmas alive the year round, but to live in a way that calls for intelligence, memory, and action and the personal and social reality that we are all responsible for the welfare of each other.

In that, brothers, we find much of the aim and purpose of Freemasonry. And, we'd do well for ourselves to give that some thought this season and perhaps use it to fuel our actions and behavior as we soon enter another year.

In closing brothers, I ask this question -

What greater gift can we as Freemasons give to each other, our families, and our friends, than our time; our gratitude; a kind word; support in many ways when needed; fellowship; and, steady assurance that we will always strive to meet, act and part on the square?

We close this lodge on all three degrees with the same uplifting and encouraging words.

I'll repeat them tonight for the final time in 2018 and say, "May the blessings of Heaven rest upon us and all Masons everywhere. May brotherly love prevail, and every moral and social virtue unite and cement us."

Brothers, that is precisely the vital message Charles Dickens conveys in *A Christmas Carol*.

With apology to Mr. Dickens, I close with a paraphrase of one of his most unforgettable passages in *A Christmas Carol* – "May God Bless Each and Every One of Us!"

⁴ Gregory J. Knott, *Was Charles Dickens a Freemason?*

<http://www.midnightfreemasons.org/2013/12/was-charles-dickens-freemason.html>, accessed, December 2018.

Sources

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