

Transformation Results From a Changed Heart

If *A Christmas Carol* is about redemption—and I believe it is—then what is the catalyst for Scrooge’s redemption? It almost sounds like a trick question, since an earlier lesson (“It’s not about the Ghosts”) goes into great detail about how each of the spirits influenced Scrooge. But the spirits didn’t actually change Scrooge; they only enlightened him.

Oh, you might argue, his circumstances changed him. He comes home on Christmas Eve a bitter old man and goes through an emotional ghost blender that purees him into a softened soul by Christmas morning.

Actually, when the last spirit is finished with him, Scrooge’s circumstances haven’t changed in the least. He is still Ebenezer Scrooge, moneylender, boss to Bob Cratchit, uncle to Fred, dweller in the drafty old house of his former partner.

He is the same age, has the same body, and has the same capacity and freedom to think or not think, to feel or not feel. Though the spirits have some amazing powers, including the Ghost of Christmas Present’s cool torch of generosity, none of them instills any superpowers into the old geezer.

So why, at the book’s end, does the narrator tell us the man has gone from the city’s greatest hater of Christmas to its greatest lover of Christmas? “It was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.”

Because Scrooge’s heart changed, that’s why. More specifically, he humbled himself to allow his heart to be changed. Treated to fresh perspectives on his past, present and future, he submitted himself to the spirits’ leadings and, in the end, chose to change. Or in more theological words, he

repented—the necessary bridge between regret and salvation.

Fred says in the story's beginning that Christmas inspires people to "open their shut-up hearts freely." That's exactly what Scrooge is doing now: opening his shut-up heart freely.

"With power must come an inner sense of connection to others that, in Dickens' life and work, comes from the model of Jesus Christ as benevolent Savior," writes Jane Smiley in *Charles Dickens: A Life*. "The truth of *A Christmas Carol* that Dickens understood perfectly and bodied forth successfully is that life is transformed by an inner shift that is then acted upon, not by a change in circumstances."

We live in a post-Christian world that puts its eggs into three basic baskets: political, material and self.

The latter is decidedly dependent on a self-determination that suggests we can either bully our way into a new model of ourselves or, with enough social media skills, convince ourselves and others that we are new and improved.

The political basket suggests our contentment depends on who gets in office, which party gains power and what bills get passed.

Money and materialism represent the third basket that invariably disappoints. We think that buying things or amassing fortunes will bring us contentment, but they do not; the empirical evidence suggests as much and so does the research.

The Ghost of Christmas Present argues the point well while looking in on Christmas celebrations. The poor, despite squalid conditions, are often as content (or more content) than the rich, who have much and, instead of resting contentedly in that, pine for more.

Recently, at a social gathering, I heard of a wealthy new home

owner who forced painters to redo a room a dozen times. That is not the embodiment of contentment but an expression of discontentment—on steroids.

Smiley's thesis abides. We aren't changed by circumstances, in this case material circumstances; we are changed by inner shifts. Personal shifts. Heart shifts.

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