

“Mrs. Cratchit, the two young Cratchits & Tiny Tim”

DECEMBER 2021 – Mark E. Seifarth

Many of you know this is the third year of my growing tradition of relating a particular musing from Charles Dickens “A Christmas Carol” with the hope that we can see one of my favorite pieces of literature in a slightly different light.

TO PONDER – In a year of great triumph and great tragedy, Dickens may give us an opportunity to look at people who don’t often come into view or see them in a different light. Perhaps this is like many of the emergency folks, charity workers, volunteers, neighbors, first responders and many, many folks we may not think of until we need them – or folks for whom we may not give a second or even a first thought. Let’s talk this year of “Mrs. Cratchit, the two young Cratchits, & Tiny Tim”

“Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it: and Scrooge’s name was good upon ’Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail...”

Anyone who has read “A Christmas Carol” by Charles Dickens – or watched any of the myriad the movie or television adaptations knows this is how the story begins. Most of us know the main characters well. In fact, the name Ebenezer Scrooge has become so well known that the term Scrooge defines any miser or one who values money above all else or hoards money because he fears the world. Other characters that are recalled easily include Jacob Marley, Bob Cratchit, Tim Tim and the Three Spirits – Past, Present, and Future.

Authors develop their main characters in such a way so that they will be memorable. Of course, it would be an understatement that Charles Dickens has done such a masterful job so that once we meet them, we will never forget such characters.

Dickens goes on to weave in additional individuals – Scrooge’s lost love known in the book at first as “a fair young girl” and then Belle, mentor & former apprenticeship boss Fezziwig, and son of Scrooge’s deceased sister, nephew Fred – into our memory as well.

As we read and watch the many additional characters in numerous renditions of “A Christmas Carol” during the holiday season, let’s visit with what we know and maybe what little we actually know of Tiny Tim, Mrs. Cratchit, and the Cratchit children.

We meet Mrs. Cratchit in this way, “...Then up rose Mrs. Cratchit, Cratchit’s wife, dressed out but poorly in a twice-turned gown, but brave in ribbons, which are cheap and make a goodly show for sixpence; and she laid the cloth, assisted by Belinda Cratchit, second of her daughters, also brave in ribbons; while Master Peter Cratchit plunged a fork into the saucepan of potatoes...”

Even though we meet Mrs. Cratchit a number of times throughout this book and she has several memorable lines – such as “...It should be Christmas Day, I am sure,” said she, “on which one drinks the health of such an odious, stingy, hard, unfeeling man as Mr. Scrooge...” – she is given no first name. And we all know Mr. Cratchit’s first name – Bob.

Bob and Mrs. Cratchit have six children, Martha, Peter, Belinda, Tiny Tim, and two more known only as “the two young Cratchits.”

Here’s some of the book’s description of each of the children:

- “...Martha, who was a poor apprentice at a milliner’s, then told them what kind of work she had to do, and how many hours she worked at a stretch...”
- “...Bob Cratchit told them how he had a situation in his eye for Master Peter, which would bring in, if obtained, full five-and-sixpence weekly. The two young Cratchits laughed tremendously at the idea of Peter’s being a man of business...”
- “...and she laid the cloth, assisted by Belinda Cratchit, second of her daughters, also brave in ribbons...”
- “...in came little Bob, the father... and Tiny Tim upon his shoulder. Alas for Tiny Tim, he bore a little crutch, and had his limbs supported by an iron frame!... And how did little Tim behave?” asked Mrs. Cratchit... As good as gold,” said Bob, “and better. Somehow he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see... His active little crutch was heard upon the floor...”
- There are numerous references to the other two children only as “the two young Cratchits.”

Have our mothers and women shouldered much more of the burden during Covid, given up more employment, and been more strongly impacted with more responsibility? Perhaps a Mrs. Cratchit comes to mind.

Are our unnamed “two young Cratchit” an opportunity to see the impact on children that may go unrecognized in a time when political discussions of education and back in the classroom may blur the actual needs of so many children?

Further I may ask us to have a chat about Tiny Tim and just maybe we spend too much time defining people with disabilities as heroic or as Britannica.com writes “...the lame but ever-cheerful Tiny Tim.”

Okay, let’s ponder for a moment, each of Dickens three characters that we may not focus on as often and allow me to put forward what they may teach us even today. Allow me, as Charles Dickens wrote in the preface to “A Christmas Carol,” “...haunt their (and your) houses pleasantly...”

MRS. CRATCHIT – While all authors decide how much information to provide as to their characters, I submit, it's not okay that we do not know her first name. She has her own identity, and we should know it. As Bob Cratchit worked his backside off for only "fifteen shillings a week," Mrs. Cratchit was keeping a home together with six children including a child with a disability. With almost no money and absolutely no public support, Mrs. Cratchit persevered. This may give us an opportunity for discussion about the treatment of women in our society, such as wage parity, paid childcare, and full funding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act so needed education & services are available.

Further, this is a time to remember women in your life without whom you would not be where you are today because they cared for and supported you without reward or recognition – even to their own detriment. Maybe now is the time to pick up the telephone, smartphone, computer – or dare I say – pen, and communicate and say thank you.

Perhaps this is the moment to advocate for equal pay for women, who earn on average 82 cents for every \$1.00 a white man earns (year-round fulltime employment 2021 – Business.org) – not to mention all the unpaid support they provide. Women of color earn on average just 52-63 cents for every \$1.00 a white man earns (National Partnership for Women and Families).

TWO YOUNG CRATCHITS – In "A Christmas Carol," the Cratchit children we know are either already working or about to go to work very young. But the "two young Cratchits" remind us that many times children are forgotten, an afterthought, or used in a policy discussion to bolster a particular point of view and not seen or consulted to fulfill their actual needs or development. Maybe this gives us a moment to ask what do my kids/our kids really need to succeed and how can I/we support them.

In this season of the year when perhaps giving is focused on more than receiving, in addition to giving our children shelter and sustenance, perhaps now is the time to express out loud how much we love and support them – how much we treasure our children and listen to them.

TINY TIM – Full Disclosure, I am a mature white man with a lifelong disability. So perhaps I don the mantle the Tiny Tim as I was a child with a disability and ask you to think deeply about what could be long held assumptions and even beliefs.

As part of the debate on the Americans with Disabilities Act that became law in 1990, Congress declared that having a disability is a natural part of the human experience. In fact, in the disability community we say that we are the only minority group that anyone can join and everyone usually does with at least a temporary disability at some point in their lives.

So I submit to you that we should not use "A Christmas Carol" to perpetuate the myth of "...poor Tiny Tim..." because "...he bore a little crutch, and had his limbs supported by an iron frame!..." He was and is simply a child who has a disability and needs medical and perhaps educational supports.

Unfortunately, he only receives those supports because the wealthy Ebenezer Scrooge finally assists him due in large part to the Ghost of Christmas Present's admonition "...if these shadows remain unaltered, by the future, the child will die..." Perhaps this is moment to realize that at some point in our lives we will all need help and support, and those supports should be available to all not just those with a wealthy benefactor.

Finally, I ask to think for a moment about “...And how did little Tim behave?” asked Mrs. Cratchit... As good as gold...” and again as Britannica.com writes “...the lame but ever-cheerful Tiny Tim...” As having a disability is a normal part of the human experience, people with disabilities are just like everyone else in that we have good days and bad days, are happy some days and sad others.

My spouse would tell you I am rarely as good as gold, not always cheerful, and perhaps most particularly I am not heroic or to be admired. I’ve had more surgeries and physical therapy than some others and that is part of my experience. Just like there are parts of who you are and your experiences that make you unique. We are all part of a great mosaic. I have the same feelings as most people. I also have a disability.

I would put forward that perhaps when someone encounters people with supports they are not accustomed to – crutches, wheelchair, power wheelchair, white cane, ventilator, talking technology to help us speak, hearing aids and supports, and many, many, many more – you may be surprised and even a little fearful that you may say or do something that is not appropriate or helpful.

At first, that is understandable as with anything new. Remember to see the person first and not the supporting technology that assists that person.

That’s the beauty and genius of the Americans with Disabilities Act. As we are all treated equally and have equal access, we learn from each other, grow, and understand each other’s experiences a bit more. As technology grows and improves, we all have better access and can learn together. Look how technology has helped us communicate and support each other in new ways in a time of pandemic.

Each year I will submit to you things that “A Christmas Carol” can continue to teach us.

It can teach us not to cling to antiquated and outmoded ways of thinking that treat people differently due to gender, age, disability, or many, many others I have not addressed specifically today. If the Three Spirits have taught us anything it is that we are all indeed equal – none greater, none lesser.

As the Ghost of Christmas Present admonished Scrooge “...If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, none other of my race,” returned the Ghost, “will find him here. What then? If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”

“Scrooge hung his head to hear his own words quoted by the Spirit, and was overcome with penitence and grief.”

“Man,” said the Ghost, “if man you be in heart, not adamant, forbear that wicked cant until you have discovered What the surplus is, and Where it is. Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die? It may be, that in the sight of Heaven, you are more worthless and less fit to live than millions like this poor man’s child...”