Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



Ebenezer Scrooge meets the ghost of Jacob Marley (Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division)



by Sr. Judy Principe

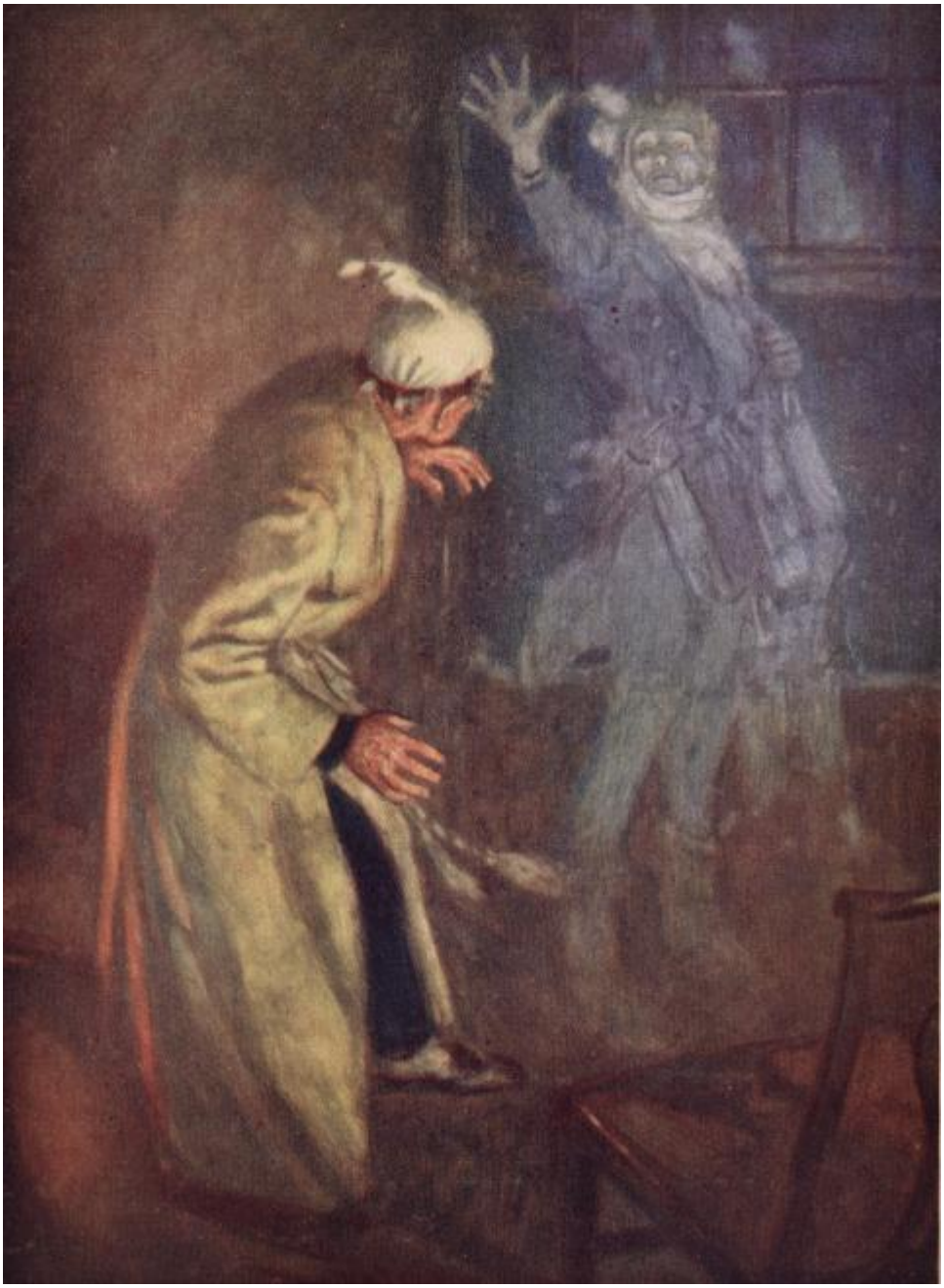
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Since my teenage years, I have always loved the novels of Charles Dickens and have probably read them all and seen most of the film versions. But my favorite is *A Christmas Carol*: the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, that miserly, insufferable grouch who rails against Christmas and all it means for us.

During my six-day directed retreat in January, the Holy Spirit decided to grace me with a visitation from the old curmudgeon himself, which at first I viewed as a distraction, somewhat as Scrooge did when he accused the ghost of Jacob Marley of being an "undigested bit of beef." But as the story and the music score began to ruminate in my mind and I began to quietly sing many of the familiar songs, I realized there was most definitely a message and meaning in this unexpected emergence of my friend Scrooge.

Of course, I thought I had better run this by my director to confirm that indeed, Scrooge's impingement upon my consciousness was truly the working of the Holy Spirit and not the imaginings of a misguided retreatant. Most assuredly, she suggested I open myself to what God may be saying to me and why God decided to use my Christmas companion to accompany me on my spiritual journey at the beginning of a new year.

So I allowed the apparent intrusion invoking the guidance of the Spirit so that I, like Scrooge, might be open to the Spirit's visitation, as Scrooge allowed the spirits of past, present and future to visit him. Being an associate of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, whose spirituality is rooted in Ignatian spirituality, I had confidence that God can and does use all things to bring us into divine relationship, including Scrooge!

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The message for me gradually unfolded: the similarities and parallels between me and Scrooge, his life and mine, his call to conversion and God's invitation to me, his subsequent transformation and mine.

As I contemplated poor Scrooge and his sad life as revealed by the spirits, I began to see how he suffers from himself, ignorant of want and need in others, while coveting his money and all he thinks will make him happy. With all his wealth, he is the poorest man, unaware of the great gifts and blessings that did and continue to abound in his world. Perhaps his childhood wounds turned him in upon himself and imprisoned him in a cold and lonely existence. He creates his own hell, which is revealed to him when Marley shows him those pathetic departed souls wailing and bemoaning their fate because they no longer have the power to intervene for good in the world.

But Christmas works its miracles in Scrooge, perhaps at the kind intercession of his deceased friend and ghost, Marley. Providentially, three spirits visit Scrooge and gently lead him to review his past, see the abundance of his present life, and realize his own personal power to influence the future of those he meets and with whom he interacts. Of course, none of this is accomplished solely without Scrooge's consent or commitment. He seizes the moment of choice so he may be transformed by the true spirit of Christmas, the Spirit of Christ.

What about me? What is God saying to me regarding my perceptions, attitudes and general worldview toward myself and all that is part of my world? Do I, like Scrooge, feel that I am too old or set in my ways to change on a deeper level? Do I allow myself to become discouraged on my spiritual journey, berating myself for repeated faults, failings and shortcomings while losing faith in the all-powerful, all-transforming grace of God?

Like Scrooge, with the gentle guidance of the Spirit, I must allow myself to look at the psychological chains forged by my past, accept them, own them, honor the lessons they teach, and let them go. Only then, like my Christmas curmudgeon friend, can I be interiorly free enough to see the giftedness of who I am and the abundant blessings of my life. And, if I am able to seize my moment of choice, I can certainly create a future of magnanimity and lavish generosity, all because of the graced visitation of the Holy Spirit of past, present and future!

This year, as I excitedly look forward to watching the many different movie versions of Scrooge that are an integral part of my annual Advent preparation and Christmas celebration, perhaps I can view it, and my old friend, within a new paradigm. What is the message for me? Of what do I need to let go to become more free, joyous and generous? Where and how is the Holy Spirit inviting me to live the Christmas message 365 days of the year?

As a Sister of St. Joseph associate in mission, I was graced and privileged to be part of a two-year consultation process of discernment, during which we prayed and discussed how we could be open to and accepting of God's dream and desire for us for the future. In our direction statement, which was the culmination of our discernment, we commit to "deepen and widen our lived expression of Sisters of St. Joseph spirituality" in all our relationships, in service to the "dear neighbor" in all circumstances of our lives, and to treat all with dignity and respect.

I think the converted Scrooge is certainly a model of this as he goes about his life among the people around him to make their lives better by his presence and generosity. He becomes aware, he smiles, he engages all in relationship, and he gives lavishly of his abundance and goodwill, and he probably appreciated the physical beauty of Mother Earth that surrounded him, as well. If he were among us still, I think he would be an excellent associate in mission — after his conversion, of course.

No more "Bah! Humbug," despite the evils, divisions, discord and suffering of our dear world. Like Scrooge, it behooves me and all of us to immerse ourselves in each graced moment, allow ourselves to be free to love and serve, and all together create a future full of hope (Jeremiah 29:11). Christmas does indeed continue to work its miracle. Come, Holy Spirit of past, present and future: Jesus has set us free. Transform the Scrooge in me!

And what better way to close than by repeating that famous prayer of Tiny Tim: "God bless us, every one!"

[Judy Principe is an associate of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Philadelphia. Her professional career was spent in training and development, organizational development and human resources. She holds a master's degree in management and supervision and a certificate in organizational development.]

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