

Message by Marie Cisneros: "Scrooge, Father Time, and Alice's White Rabbit," 12/29/2019



As an avid reader since very young, I spent many hours with my nose in a book; and the works of Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll were two of my favorite authors. I feel that while these stories very entertaining, especially to children, they usually have much more to them than meets the eye; and can be a means of opening up our minds to higher concepts as well as how to live more moral and just lives. Being born on New Year's Day and having the reminder as the clock strikes midnight that I am one year older right when most people are thinking of new beginnings; Father Time, and what he symbolizes also has a lot of significance for me. I would like to share some thoughts about what these stories may symbolize.

I hope everyone has had a good holiday...whatever holiday you celebrate...or if you did not celebrate at all that is fine too. I wish you well. I know I ate my share of cookies and fudge this week. I don't know about but this particular season does that to me.

But in addition to celebrating and enjoying holiday treats and spending time with family, this time of year also brings with it the goal for us to try and be more compassionate and charitable towards others, even if it seems it is only for a short time. While many look towards Christian ideals to be the foundation for this, I have to think that Charles Dickens' story, *A Christmas Carol* has also played some small part for promoting how we view Christmas. To me there is nothing that says Christmas more than Ebenezer Scrooge and his three spirits. Every Christmas I make it a point to find my favorite version to watch while I wrap presents. This year it was the 1984 George C. Scott version. I suspect that many people have a favorite version of this classic; or one of the many holiday classics that gets them into the holiday mood. But just when we are getting into the Christmas mood with Scrooge and his other-worldly encounters, we have to switch gears and start thinking about Father Time, urging us to leave behind the old and make way for the new. This is what prompts me to seemingly throw Scrooge, Father Time and the White Rabbit all in together today. You may be thinking that Alice's White Rabbit doesn't fit in very well into this theme and its true that he is certainly not symbolic of Christmas; but if we think about the ideas of time, especially the feeling that we don't have enough time to do the all the things we need to do or want to do this time of year; I think you might agree that the white rabbit and his pocket watch has a place among these symbols.

So let's start with Dickens and what he was trying to tell us about time through his characters and scenes. In the story he uses allegorical metaphors to deliver his message of hope, love and compassion for others. Allegories have been written throughout the course of history, but none, is more cherished than *A Christmas Carol* with its simplicity and moral message. Through characters such as Scrooge, Tiny Tim, Ignorance and Want, he called upon those of his day to make needed changes in their society. For this it stands the test of time.

Scrooge symbolized the wealthy and aristocratic members of society, who were ignorant to the misfortunes of the poor. Then, as now, we are called upon by Dickens to make moral change for the common good. He brings to life the two traits that mankind will inherit, the ignorance of the wealthy and the want of the poor. He saw Ignorance and Want as the children of mankind. They represent the traits that pass from generation to generation because of the poor quality of life that they cannot change without help. Dickens felt that the wealthy must change their ways and help the poor for the betterment of all humanity. Most of us are familiar with the ghosts that haunted him that night; Christmas Past who symbolized the experiences that made Scrooge into the person he was and how he remembered it; Christmas Present showed him the vast differences in how the wealthy lived and how the poor lived. Christmas yet to come showed him the uncertainty of the future; which is shadowy and unknown but may be altered. Scrooge went his way, living his frugal, solitary life; not knowing that he lacked something until those ghosts showed up and told him he needed to change. But he only tried to change when he realized that he might die alone with one to care, so even when he wanted to change, he feared it was too late. Much to his surprise; it was not; because the Past, Present, and Future all arrived within one night.

It is easy to see how reflecting on our past experiences may alter our present and our future; but can a deeper meaning be found in it? Does Dickens story also tell us something else about time in his story? I may have read too much into it but I think this story also gives us an in-depth notion of the nature of time itself, although maybe not intentional, telling us that time is not linear and that our idea of time is all relative; so all things being equal; we always have time to change.

You must not think of time linearly. The water in the fountains doesn't. Nature doesn't; nature knows nothing of time. Time is an invention of the West."

Umberto Eco, Foucault's Pendulum

Here's where that rabbit comes into this discussion; when we think we don't have time. The white rabbit was fascinating for Alice because he was unusual—he was wearing a waistcoat and had a pocket-watch, which he was always checking, racing against the clock, but was always late. Late for what? In *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll uses the character of the white rabbit to symbolize time, the need to always be somewhere at a specific time, and the fear and anxiety of being late. The story never tells us where he had to be. Alice was distracted and fascinated by this rabbit; following him down a hole, to a strange world that was unfamiliar to her, as most worlds to be found down rabbit holes tend to be, or at least misunderstood. By chasing after him, Carroll may have inferred that Alice was looking for some hidden meaning, that may not be visible to others. To follow the white rabbit is to feel that there is something important ahead but we never know what that something is; so perhaps it is a call for us to transcend time altogether. You cannot be late when you are already there. Time itself may be the ultimate metaphor.

Trying to write about time may even lead me down a rabbit hole today because it is an immense topic, perplexing and illusive at its core. But although time itself may not be easily explained, it is usually on our mind in one way or another. We talk about the time. We think about the time....well pretty much most of the time. The white rabbit in the story seems to suggest that time is a limited resource. How we talk about time is a bellwether to our changing relationship

with it. The concept of “time is running out”; and our modern mantra of modern life and its pursuit of the work/life balance taxes even the most reasonable of lifestyles.

“The hurrier I go, the behinder I get- Lewis Carroll...Alice in Wonderland.

In our modern society, people may sense that they are much busier than the previous generations and rightfully so, but also that the world itself is moving faster than ever before. Life has gone from the seasonal clock of an agricultural society to a society that measures our days by the digital movement on a man-made device, not by the rising and setting of the sun. People are constantly in the “On” mode but yet there never seems to be enough time.

The metaphors that we have to explain time directs our perception of this reality, as in the metaphor of Time being a precious resource. We say things like, “spend your time wisely”, “I don’t have time”; or “you’re wasting my time; etc.” It is expressed as movement; a river, a stream; something we move through, or a race where we are constantly running against the clock; as the case of the white rabbit. Time is also thought of as a thread, with fate spinning the strands of destiny. Time is also a predator; a relentless force, a storm, or a thief that takes life from you. It is fleeting; a moment; only the now. It can be a prison or a trap that one cannot escape; lastly it is thought of as a straight line, shooting like an arrow with a start and a destination.

Some of the explanations of time I explored for this presentation were rather lengthy and complicated, so the short version is that our modern understanding of time is based on the Chronus model; or the causal relation of different modes of time in a linear fashion, anchored in the past, present, and future. We use the symbolism of clocks to show the progression of some of those abstract concepts; such as the molecular clock in the study of evolutionary biology, the

cosmic clock, millennial clock and of course the doomsday clock, which has been maintained since 1974. This is the clock that is ticking down towards a possible global catastrophe; either by war or climate change, unless we can make changes that will alter that reality. Its hands are now set at three minutes to midnight and counting.

Let's take another look at the white rabbit with his pocket watch. His stress, anxiety and urge to keep running was triggered by him checking his watch every chance he got. It is very similar to how most of us move through our day to day lives, but also how we measure those more abstract concepts like the doomsday threat or what lies ahead in our future. More and more, very minute of the day, our days are plotted out in cloud-based calendars on smart phones, prompting us to take immediate action, even though our instinct may urge us to wait. Want to really confuse people these days? Ask them what time it is. Most people will not believe that you don't have a mobile phone and if they will "give you the time of day," more than likely it won't be from an actual watch; unless of course it is a smart one.

So last but not least in our exploration of time metaphors is Father Time himself. He is one of the most significant symbols used to personify time; especially at the start of a new year with the most common image of him being that of an old, bearded man dressed in a white robe wearing a sash with the previous year printed on it. He is usually pictured carrying an hourglass and a scythe. The hourglass has served as an analogy of the span of human years from ancient Egypt right on up to modern pop culture.

This image of him is said to have come from the Holly King, the celtic god of the dying year and Chronus, the Greek god of time. At the end of each year, he hands over his duties to the Baby

New Year; an infant wearing a sash with the coming year on it; who of course grows older and older as the months progress, becoming an old man himself by the end of the year. In most cases, Father Time carries the scythe as instrument of reaping and is often confused with the grim reaper.

Overall, time was considered the great enemy in the classical world; seen as a destroyer that had to be overcome but inherent in these myths lie the ritual recreation of the cosmos and a time of resolution for the coming year. Its legacy is our modern traditions and celebrations of New Year's Eve; to break bad habits, let go of the past and create a new reality in the coming year.

Perhaps for the year 2020, Father Time should be seen as a man or woman without a scythe. Perhaps, he or she should be carrying a scale; the symbol of honest judgment. This is the tool we need; not technological devices that fool us into a false sense of time, making us worry needlessly, as in the case of the white rabbit; forever running towards one deadline or another, and never having enough time; or Scrooge, who decided to change only when he felt his death was imminent. This scale of Justice would symbolize our means of furthering progress and restoration. Time should not be looked at as an enemy, but as a tool of construction, creation, and renewal. So do we have time to change, like Scrooge; or has the sand in Father Time's hourglass run its course? While Scrooge may have thought he was out of time as he rose that Christmas morning, he was wrong; because Hope, if I can use another allegory, springs eternal. To be hopeful is to look on the future positively, to see opportunity in challenges (rather than challenges in opportunities), to "look on the bright side of life."

It is the ability to see the possible good in future events, especially when those events are *potentially negative*. It isn't blindly expecting every positive thing to fall into your lap, nor expecting yourself to magically avoid every potential danger. People often think that hopeful people are naive, even foolish, and that they believe good things will happen when in truth they never will. It's this idea of "false hope" or "blind hope" that has given hope a bad name in recent years. One of the main reasons why hope is important is that life is hard and will kick you in the butt if you let it. We all face setbacks. We all wonder at times whether we're going to get by. We all know what it's like to feel like you're right on the brink of disaster. And many of us know what happens when we are negative at such times. It doesn't feel good and it doesn't help. Life is always going to bring us challenges. Life is always going to be comprised of setbacks that might pull us down. Is it still foolish to have hope? Maybe, but regardless of disappointment, regardless of a discouraging outcome, I'd rather feel hope's bright light than live my days in the dark. Things can change in an instant, and many times they do; but we should never give up hope.

At midnight, December 31st, 2019, we will usher in the year 2020. Like many people, I am looking forward to what it has in store; for myself, our country and the rest of the world. All in all, 2019 has been a mixed bag for most people; some may be glad it is over; some may feel it was a great year and hope the next one is just as good. Either way, I hope you all have a wonderful New Year and if you are out celebrating; have fun, and be safe. Namaste.

-Reverend Marie Cisneros