

Beware This Boy

It's Christmas Time! Those of you who have been by my house at 8th and Evergreen in Chanute know how much I love this time of year. I have lots of decorations outside and, an Inbody family tradition, Virtual Santa who appears walking around a room of my house delivering gifts, eating cookies and wishing viewers a Merry Christmas. I have added a new feature this year, a small radio transmitter so you can tune your car radio to hear Santa talk! It's the one time of year when my wife and I encourage the public to sit outside our house and peer through our windows.

Like most families we have a great number of traditions we do every year in celebration – familiar foods, decorations, and favorite movies. I still think Die Hard is one of the best Christmas movies around, but Jen disagrees and favors Elf or Love Actually.

Each year I wind up watching ***A Christmas Carol*** in one of its many iterations. While the various film versions of the story are good, none can compare to the written source material of Dickens' classic tale. If you have a chance, it's a quick read, only five chapters, but it has some wonderful wit and wisdom.

At its heart, *A Christmas Carol* is a redemption story, and that's what Christmas is all about anyway, a path to redemption. Ghosts show a greedy, self-centered and cynical man the error of his ways, but also what's in store for him if he doesn't change. The book alludes to an early death for both him and Tiny Tim if Scrooge doesn't redeem himself. Personally, however, I was more intrigued with Dickens' version of Hell.

The Ghost of Marley tells Scrooge that since he never changed his ways he must now walk the Earth forever witnessing human suffering without the ability to do anything about it. Wow. Dickens' Hell was not physically suffering yourself, but having to watch others suffer in life and being powerless to change it.

Certainly ***A Christmas Carol*** was intended to motivate the reader to change society and help those who need it. In Dickens' time debtors' prisons, orphanages, and workhouses were common, as was starvation and dying of preventable disease and exposure. Much of Dickens' writing shines a light on human suffering in industrial society. But Dickens, through the Ghost of Christmas Present, warns us that the greatest threat is not the want that was prevalent everywhere.

The Ghost shows Scrooge two emaciated children, whom he calls, "Man's children."

"This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased."

Dickens goes on to give a further warning.

"Deny it!" cried the Spirit, stretching out its hand towards the city. "Slander those who tell it ye. Admit it for your factious purposes, and make it worse. And abide the end."

What Charles Dickens wrote then is true today. Ignorance is our greatest threat. But the worst thing we can do is deny that there is a problem. And I'm here to tell you ignorance is growing.

A recent study reported that the percentage of Americans who read for leisure has fallen to just 19% down from 23% 14 years ago. It is estimated that 30 million Americans cannot read, write and do math above third grade level.

Another study puts our math literacy, or the ability to do simple math (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) and the ability to read a simple chart at just 32% of Americans. This makes us ranked 32 in the world. Not good.

28% of Americans do have a literacy in Science, a marked improvement from 1980 when it was only 10%. Still 28% is pretty low. If you have ever seen the video of Ivy League grads in their full regalia on Commencement Day trying to explain how the seasons work on Earth, you'll know what I'm talking about. No, the orbit of the Earth is not elliptical so that the Earth is closer to the sun in summer. Ugh.

I am often asked by students why colleges and universities require them to take general education classes. They often say, "I came here to learn to be a (fill in the profession blank) and instead I have to take math, history, sociology, humanities, science, etc. to get a degree! This wastes my time and money."

No. It does not waste time and money. Education, especially a well-rounded education, is the thing that will preserve and save our society. My fellow educators and I are trying all we can to erase the word Doom from boy's brow. Taking the warning from the Ghost of Christmas Present, I do not deny that ignorance is rampant and that we have much work to do.

At Neosho County Community College we will continue to stress the importance of our general education outcomes of communicating effectively, critical and analytical thinking skills, responsible citizenship, and living a healthy lifestyle. Our own internal studies show that we are making good progress on these outcomes, but have more work to do, especially on critical and analytical thinking skills.

Students who leave NCCC and transfer on are reporting that they felt well prepared for their university. Records from the Kansas Board of Regents transfer study shows that NCCC students perform just as well at university as those students who started at university as true freshmen. We know our students are learning and being successful when they transfer.

Our society has progressed very far from the bleak days of Charles Dickens. Debtor's prisons are gone. A social services safety net exists. We do our best to care for the weakest among us. Is it a utopian world, free of want and ignorance? No. Much work needs to be done. But at this time of family, tradition, and redemption I remain hopeful that we can continue to move our society towards a day when no one turns a blind eye to human suffering, that want is no longer felt, and ignorance is gone. And we'll do it one student at a time.

If you have any questions about this column or anything else, please feel free to contact me at binbody@neosho.edu.