

Humbugs Anonymous

December 6, 2009

Several years ago my nephews and I caught the latest DVD of Patrick Stewart in "The Christmas Carol." They watched intently, and just at that moment when Scrooge started loosing his cool, and uttered that famous exclamation, "Bah Humbug," my nephew David asked, "What's a humbug?" David's older brother, John, never missing a beat, leaned over and explained. "It's a gross bug that's half human and half insect that lives in the woods. Mother Nature put them there to teach us not to pollute the earth." I get it," David nodded and he elaborated further, "like when that Mr. Scroogie guy lights his coal stove, the Humbugs come out and bite him." "Ya, that right."

Well, upon further research, come to find out my nephew was not that far off! The children's author and illustrator Marghanita Hughes wrote of "The Little Humbugs" whose sole mission in life, was to teach humankind to care for our planet.

The origin of the word Humbug did not begin with Scrooge in reference to his miserly nature and ardent dislike for the Christmas Season.

My trusty cyber- encyclopedia defines the Humbug as : "an archaic term meaning "hoax", or "jest". While the term was first attested in 1751 in student slang, its etymology is unknown. It is known, however, that it was used as profanity centuries ago, in places such as Great Britain. Its present meaning, as an exclamation, is closer to "nonsense or gibberish", while as a noun, a humbug refers to a fraud or impostor, implying an element of unjustified publicity and spectacle." In modern day usage, of course, the word is most associated with Ebenezer Scrooge, in Dickens's The Christmas Carol bellowing his "Bah!

Humbug!", declaring Christmas to be nonsense, silly gibberish and a fraud.

In this country, the renowned circus entertainer, P. T. Barnum, was well acclaimed as "The Prince of humbugs," who created bazaar anomalies, fueled by his masterful sense of public relations.

It is well known that many of his promoted exhibitions were obvious fakes, but the paying public flocked to his side shows, either to scoff or to gawk in awe of them.

In several East-Indian dialects, the word is borrowed from English, and used to mean "to deceive" or "to cheat". In Australian Aboriginal English, humbug means "to pester or annoy."

It amuses me that many of us are rapidly becoming disillusioned with this season of light carried to its decadent extremes. Recently, I have developed a new appreciation for Marghanita Hughes, "Little Humbugs" and their mission to curb the growing, infectious and competitive exhibitionism of the massive electrical displays in our malls and neighborhoods that drain our natural energy sources in order to sing the praises of a child allegedly born under the stars, in a dark unlit stable.

As I age so has my intolerance for bobbing, singing, gyrating animated and badly painted Santa Clauses, elves and reindeer. This years model features Santa riding a reved- up hog... "just press the button and hear it roar," which just adds to the absurdity; not to mention that whom ever programmed the micro chip of Christmas Carols in these less than reverent displays, is obviously is not a musician! Just an additional note, incase you are of the inflatable giant snow globe persuasion, they are sold out at B.J.'s!

I have just two words for all of this this ... BAH HUMBUG!

It was not my understanding that Christmas was intended as a hoax to entice the consumer with cheap lead imbedded children's toys, still advertised, available and being purchased at bargain prices.

I am beginning to understand that just maybe our ancestral Unitarians, Charles Dickens and P.T. Barnum had it right after all and are perfectly correct in each of their examples of our growing fascination with the phony glitz and the pressures of the Christmas season, thus encouraging others to adopt practices of several kinds of modern day Humbuggery.

From Dickens's perspective, the sentiment of The Christmas Carol and the true meaning of Christmas was; that kindness, love and family is the message. It was a lesson that Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge learned the hard way. Whereas P.T. Barnum understood our propensity for one upmanship, outdoing the other guy, by providing the biggest the best and sometimes the most bizarre of displays, alas, The Greatest Show on Earth to commemorate the season.

Inevitably we are caught between the two; the need at this time of year for the simple inexpensive lessons and message of The Christmas Carol and conversely to face the social pressures of expressing ourselves in ways that out buy, out gift, and out shine our relatives and neighbors.

I presume that in some way we have all been bitten at one time or another by the elusive humbug. Particularly as we try to reconcile a balance between the gift buying, entertaining and installation of our commercial decor; while at the same time finagling with the idea that this is all about giving of oneself in love and caring to others. A season of simple family gatherings, thoughtful but personal gifts, and of course a genuine sense of wonder at the amazing force of creation, which has all been nearly obliterated from the minds of our children.

What I am getting at, is a true need for genuine humbuggers to protest and to speak up and to focus once again on what this season is all about before it gets any worse.

It is about simplicity, love and creation. These three have sadly evolved into complex electronic displays, discord between families as to whose turn it is to visit whose relatives, along with right and left wingers bullying one another and fighting over lawn space in our town halls and parks as to whether it is politically or legally appropriate to allocate space for a nativity scene. If this called progress, no thank you. Bah Humbug!

Last week on my visit home for Thanksgiving, while trying to catch up on my shopping, I was in line at the register and struck up a conversation with the woman in front of me. Her cart was packed with gifts. "I used to love Christmas", she said. "and I still do, but I can't wait until its over. It cost me too much in food, presents and the kids beg for everything they see on TV. Did you know the Wii computer system and the accessories which all the kids want costs over \$350.00? I don't have that kind of money ... who does nowadays?"

Now, she deserves a special membership to the Humbug Anonymous Club because she had the courage to admit it to a stranger.

Her commentary is rapidly becoming the national mantra of Christmas.

I suspect that more and more Humbuggers will be stepping out of the closet in the days to come and it begins right here.

I have considered the holidays of every faith as important, how about the option of lawn space shared in front our town parks for each group to tastefully display the symbols of their holiday season in a truly ecumenical attempt to recognize that we are diverse and that is acceptable. This is not a Christians only society or is it? I think Jesus would be ashamed!

It is not fair to beg for the return of the old days but it is fair to step up to the plate and refuse to purchase toys and decor that do

everything but celebrate imagination, simplicity, love and the miracle of creation.

Sadly, it pains me to tell you that one of the biggest sellers this year at the hardware store where I used to work is a string of lights embedded in large green and red shotgun shell casings. We have gone too far.

I want a true Christmas back, a time to dumb down what has become a side show of horrors, a perversely material culture that has crept up into our lives so gradually that each year we have braced ourselves to expect the apprehension and suffering it has brought too many of us.

At least here together in this sanctuary, in the principles of this church, no matter where we may be, we can restore the true meaning of Christmas and block out from our lives all that has poisoned a once beautiful message.

At least we Humbugs, no longer anonymous, can claim our membership, by cutting out the card on the front of your order of service, to remind ourselves what the cost in time and money should really be used for; a few moments in loving conversation, instead of an e-mail; a special handwritten card, a donation to a worthy charity, in the name of a loved one; to bring back into our own homes a simple, authentic Christmas and declare it as sacred to our beliefs ...

for each night any child is born is indeed a holy night. ..

So be it Amen

Rev Helen C. (Holly) Baylies © 2009