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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Ebenezer Scrooge's example may be unique in Dickens' work: the story's motivation is the regeneration of a single lost soul . . . This change of life is not as sudden (as Chesterton said) "as the conversion of a man at a Salvation Army"; the process as presented in Dickens' narrative is precise and subtle, playing on the man's deeper repressed feelings aroused from a recollection of his former self, an education through the example of his clerk and nephew, and a warning of what his fate will be should he follow the same path in his life.¹"



Dr. Tim Madigan

The Spirit of Counseling: A Comparison of “Gloria” and A Christmas Carol

STAVE ONE: INTRODUCTION

Ebenezer Scrooge’s example may be unique in Dickens’ work: the story’s motivation is the regeneration of a single lost soul . . . This change of life is not as sudden (as Chesterton said) “as the conversion of a man at a Salvation Army”; the process as presented in Dickens’ narrative is precise and subtle, playing on the man’s deeper repressed feelings aroused from a recollection of his former self, an education through the example of his clerk and nephew, and a warning of what his fate will be should he follow the same path in his life.¹

When I first watched the three-part film “Gloria” over 25 years ago in an Introduction to Counseling course taught by Richard Siggelkow, I was struck by a sense of familiarity. The manner in which Gloria underwent the counseling techniques of three very different individuals—Carl Rogers, Frederick Perls and Albert Ellis—reminded me of another three-tiered approach to self-acceptance, namely the approach undergone by Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Like Gloria, Scrooge underwent his sessions in a single day (or rather night), and in quick succession. Just as she had an introduction to what would happen to her by the doctor who opens the film, so Scrooge had *his* introduction given to him by his former business partner, Jacob Marley. But what particularly struck me was the manner in which the three counselors, Rogers, Perls and Ellis, corresponded to the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Future who visited Scrooge. Of course, such a comparison can be quite fanciful and arbitrary. One can perhaps just as easily say the counselors correspond to Dorothy’s companions in *The Wizard of Oz*:

Scarecrow/Brain	=	Ellis/Intellectual
Tin Man/Heart	=	Rogers/Emotional
Lion/Courage	=	Perls/Physical

And I am sure that anyone who so desires can find comparisons with the Three Wise Men, the Three Blind Mice, the Three Billy Goats Gruff, the Three Stooges, or any other disparate triumvirate. But *A Christmas Carol* is unique, in that it is the story of one man’s change of character, a moving example of the possibility of redemption. It is thus a quite appropriate vehicle with which to compare the film “Gloria,” itself an examination of one person’s encounter with differing counseling systems. The counselors, like the Spirits in Dickens’ story, seek to help

that person come to grips with reality, and shed the shackles of pain and remorse. And like the Spirits, each one has a specific method. “Marley’s Ghost is the symbol of divine grace, and the three Christmas Spirits are the working of that grace through the agencies of memory, example, and fear.”ⁱⁱⁱ While there may not be any “divine grace” in “Gloria” I wish to demonstrate the similarities of the counselors’ approaches to that of the Spirits, and also show why it is that Scrooge and Gloria must both undergo all three approaches—memory, example and fear—before they can change their attitudes. In other words, both *A Christmas Carol* and “Gloria” show the benefits of an eclectic approach to counseling.

STAVE TWO: THE FIRST OF THE THREE COUNSELORS

“Spirit!” said Scrooge in a broken voice, “remove me from this place.”

“I told you these were shadows of the things that have been,” said the Ghost. “That they are what they are, do not blame me!”

“Remove me!” Scrooge exclaimed. “I cannot bear it!”ⁱⁱⁱ

The counselor chooses to act consistently upon the hypothesis that the individual has a sufficient capacity to deal constructively with all those aspects of his life which can potentially come into conscious awareness.^{iv}

Ebenezer Scrooge had long sought to repress his childhood memories—principally memories of abandonment and loneliness. But mingled with these are softer, more pleasant memories: the joys of imagination which came from reading adventure stories, and the feeling of being rescued when his beloved sister Fan (whose son Scrooge had treated with scorn) tells him he can come home from the awful boardinghouse to which his father had sent him. All these memories, and more—long repressed if not forgotten—are called forth by the Spirit of Christmas Past, a child-like yet elderly figure with a soft, gentle voice. Scrooge is overcome by these recollections, and by the visit to his old, beloved employer Fezziwig, so much so that the pent-up emotions of many years burst forth, and “to see his heightened and excited face . . . would have been a surprise to his business friends in the city, indeed.”^v

The Spirit does not show Scrooge these past experiences merely to be nostalgic. He is concerned with Scrooge’s welfare. Scrooge, in his encounter with Marley, had expressed a desire to change. The Spirit now sets the groundwork for such a change to occur: the first stage is self-awareness.

Reliving the past is an emotional experience, especially when the past in question is filled with painful feelings. A counselor must have an understanding of the client’s past if he is to have any effect upon that client. He must, in Carl Rogers’ terms, immerse himself in the client’s experiences “because it is more effective the more completely the counselor concentrates upon trying to understand the client as the client seems to himself.”^{vi} It is not so much the *event* which is important, as it is the feeling which the client has for it. Scrooge, like Gloria in her encounter with Rogers, cries over the emergence of past memories, but he is able, nonetheless, to at least tentatively apply his feelings to the present as well. For example, seeing his former self all alone in the boardinghouse at Christmastime reminds him of the young boy singing carols at his home just before his encounter with Marley’s Ghost: he regrets now that he chased the child away. Scrooge recognizes that he was guilty of the same neglectful actions which had been perpetrated upon himself as a boy, and which had made his own childhood such a lonely one. This sudden

memory, painful though it is, is also the cause of a feeling of empathy. The Ghost smiles thoughtfully at this, but says nothing, in much the manner of a non-directive counselor, who believes it to be unnecessary—and perhaps even detrimental—to make comments upon the client’s expression of feelings.

The First Spirit’s technique is similar to Rogers’ technique. He asks “What is the matter?” rather than telling Scrooge what the problem is. He gently coaxes, he does not coerce. Scrooge becomes lost in the moment of reliving his past, so much so that he loses his awareness of the Ghost, just as Gloria temporarily becomes unaware of Rogers as she tells about her relationship with her father. The past is made real, but more importantly it is confronted.

“What is the matter?” asked the Ghost.

“Nothing particular,” said Scrooge.

“Something, I think?” the Ghost insisted.

“No,” said Scrooge, “No. I should like to be able to say or word or two to my clerk just now! That’s all.”^{vii}

“Something, I think?” The Ghost does not explain, but in his own way he sees that Scrooge deals with his feelings. His voice is non-threatening but his grasp, “as gentle as a woman’s hand, was not to be resisted.”^{viii} You cannot escape your past but you can address it, and lay to rest the ghosts which haunt you in the present.

Like Rogers’ all-too brief session with Gloria, the Spirit tells Scrooge that “my time grows short.”^{ix} He shows him, for maximum effectiveness, the moment when Scrooge initially dons the crabbed, miserly persona which in later years came to possess him completely—the moment when he breaks off his engagement to his fiancé Belle, because her dowry is too meager. Money has become his obsession. It is money, he comes to think, which will make him accepted, a man of the world, respected by all. But Belle had loved him when both of them were poor. She accepted him for what he was, not for what he might become. By pursuing wealth he lost her love, and set the course for his own future existence, one every bit as lonely as that of his childhood, but one he himself was fully responsible for. It is this memory more than any other which devastates Scrooge, but the meaning of it is now clear to him. “You fear the world too much,” Belle tells him. “All your other hopes have merged into the hope of being beyond the chance of its sordid reproach.”^x Rogers stresses the point that a healthy individual is one who accepts the world for what it is, in a realistic fashion, and is in tune with both himself and his environment.

“Why do you delight to torture me?” Scrooge rages at the Spirit. But these images, these memories, have been conjured up by *Scrooge*, not by the Spirit, for they are memories of his own past. The non-directive counselor cannot dictate the path a client must take, for only the client knows his own past, or rather only the client knows his own feelings for this past. Memories can be exhilarating or painful, but in order to come to grips with one’s self, they must be expressed rather than repressed. Scrooge fights with the Spirit but the Ghost offers no resistance, just as the client-centered counselor makes it a point to listen rather than argue with the client. Belle’s words, so long buried in the recesses of Scrooge’s memory, have been brought to the forefront, and Scrooge relives them now in the light of what his life has become. He now accepts them, and only from such acceptance can genuine change occur.

STAVE THREE: THE SECOND OF THE THREE COUNSELORS

“Come in!” exclaimed the Ghost. “Come in! and know me better, man!”

Scrooge entered timidly, and hung his head before this Spirit. He was not the dogged Scrooge he had been, and though its eyes were clear and kind, he did not like to meet them.

“I am the Ghost of Christmas Present,” said the Spirit. “Look upon me!”^{xi}

From the Gestalt viewpoint the neurotic is not merely a person who once *had* a problem, he is a person who has a *continuing* problem, here and now, in the present . . . He cannot get along in the present, and unless he learns how to deal with problems as they arise, he will not be able to get along in the future.^{xii}

Scrooge has, to a certain extent, come to grips with the ghosts of his past. He must now come to see how these memories apply to his present situation—his lonely, loveless, miserly self-centered existence. It will not be easy, but if his situation is to change it first must be examined. He has seen the roots: now it is time to see the tree.

Scrooge hopes to be able to confront the second Spirit on his own terms. He “did not wish to be taken by surprise and made nervous.”^{xiii} Gloria, too, seemed anxious when meeting Perls. She did not know what to expect. “The moment Scrooge’s hand was on the lock, a strange voice called him by his name, and bade him enter.”^{xiv} Again, Gloria was greeted by a “strange voice,” namely Perls’, with its thick German accent, calling her name. “There sat a jolly giant, glorious to see.”^{xv} Perls might not have been a giant, but he was certainly larger-than-life, with a jolly disposition. “Its eyes were clear and kind.”^{xvi} For all his confrontation techniques and pointed barbs, Perls comes across in “Gloria” as a kindly man, albeit one who refuses to humor his client or take any nonsense. “Its dark brown curls were long and free: free as its genial face, its sparkling eyes, its open hand, its cheery voice, its unconstrained demeanor, and its joyful air.”^{xvii} All in all, a rather good description of Perls as well, especially his “unconstrained demeanor.” Perls is nothing if not spontaneous.

The goal of Gestalt therapy is to increase the client’s awareness of the here and now, so that he accepts his personal responsibilities. Perls does not merely listen to what Gloria has to say. He provokes her, drawing awareness to her body movements, her gestures and expressions. And he throws her words back at her when he feels them to be smokescreens for what she is really thinking. Likewise, when Scrooge expresses true remorse at the thought that Tiny Tim may soon die, the Spirit repeats the words he had spoken earlier to a gentleman who asked him for a charitable contribution to help the needy: “If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”^{xviii} More than this, the Spirit lectures him on the presumptuousness of this earlier comment, something a client-centered counselor would never do. But Scrooge accepts the rebuke, for he knows it to be just. His earlier words were mean-spirited, and no longer express the feelings he presently has.

There is a sense of give-and-take in the Gloria/Perls session. She, too, does more than merely listen to his theories. She fights back, accusing him of being insincere and insensitive. Likewise, Scrooge accepts the Spirit’s admonitions when he feels them to be justified, but he also makes his own accusations, criticizing the Spirit for seeking to close all public places on the

Sabbath and thereby depriving the poor of innocent enjoyment. The Spirit defends himself and claims this to be the wish of misguided men rather than his own. This second Ghostly visitation is much more active, more “spirited” as it were, than the first, as is Gloria’s session with Perls when compared to her session with Rogers. And this is to be expected. What is being dealt with in both situations is the present, which is changeable, as opposed to the past, which cannot be alerted. The Ghost of Christmas Present

Is the only purely active spirit in the story. [Perls is the only truly *active* counselor in the film—Rogers remains passive, while Ellis suggests future activities rather than interact in the moment.] The Ghost of Christmas Past has the ability to present only “shadows of the things that have been”: it does not judge, it cannot alter what has been. [The non-directive counselor is non-judgmental and accepting.] The Ghost of Christmas Yet to come lacks any power for reflection: this grim reaper cannot be diverted from its inevitable course. [Ellis is no “grim reaper” but as we will shortly see he *is* very sure of himself—he doesn’t seem to even listen to Gloria except when what she says concurs with his theories.] Only the Ghost of Christmas Present has the ability to comment on the events and to offer alternatives to Scrooge’s miserable life.^{xix}

Although the Spirit of Christmas Present greatly resembles Perls, there is another character in *A Christmas Carol* who seems to embody the Gestalt concept of a healthy individual. This is Scrooge’s nephew Fred, who yearly invites his uncle to join him and his wife for Christmas dinner, and is yearly rebuffed. Rather than take this to heart, he sees the situation from Scrooge’s perspective. “I am sorry for him; I couldn’t be angry with him if I tried. Who suffers by his ill whims? Himself, always.”^{xx} Fred is comfortable with *himself*. He is not offended by Scrooge’s nasty remarks, because he sees them for what they are—the expressions of a man who has seemingly lost the ability to love other people, and one who resents anyone capable of doing so. Scrooge, before the ghostly visitations, is a man in pain, and he desires to spread this pain to others, dragging them down with him. Fred will have none of it. His statement, “I want nothing from you; I ask nothing of you: why cannot we be friends?”^{xxi} is similar to the Gestalt “prayer”:

I am I, and you are you. I’m not in this world to live up to your expectations, and you’re not in this world to live up to mine. I is I, and you is you. Amen.^{xxii}

Scrooge is angry with his nephew because Fred married without his permission, and worst of all a poor girl at that. But Scrooge, too, had once loved a poor girl. The Ghost of Christmas Past accompanied him to the moment where he broke that engagement, and he was filled with feelings of remorse. The second Spirit accompanies him to his nephew’s home, where he sees that the spurning of Fred’s offer of hospitality is duly noted by the lady of the house (Fred’s wife is much less sanguine than is her husband regarding the behavior of Uncle Scrooge). But Fred toasts him, nonetheless, little realizing that his uncle stand nearby, ready to thank him if he could.

The second Spirit, for all his emphasis on the present, can still see the probable future of an unaltered course of behavior. Tiny Tim’s empty chair sits by the heath in Bob Cratchit’s humble abode, and “If these shadows remain unaltered by the Future, the child will die.”^{xxiii} It is time for Scrooge to face the consequences of his present-day actions.

STAVE FOUR: THE LAST OF THE COUNSELORS

“Ghost of the Future!” he exclaimed. “I fear you more than any Spectre I have seen. But, as I hope your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear your company, and do it with a thankful heart.”^{xxiv}

It is very difficult to prophesy, especially about the future.^{xxv}

The main difference between the Third Spirit in *A Christmas Carol* and Albert Ellis, the third counselor in the film “Gloria” can be stated simply: Ellis speaks a lot, the Ghost not at all. But one word can be used to describe them both—unrelenting. Ellis, in the film, espouses his Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET) with great fervor, spelling out its basic concepts and doing all he can to relate these to Gloria’s situation. The Third Spirit in Dickens’ story points straight ahead to the scenes he wishes Scrooge to visit, paying no heed to Scrooge’s queries or protests. There is in both cases a high degree of direction, and little if no emphasis on the past or the present. Ellis seems to say, “Listen, you’re screwed up right now. Let’s see what we can do to change your ways of thinking about yourself so that in the future you’ll be better able to deal with your situations.” It is Ellis’ conviction that if present illogical thinking patterns continue, the client will continue to suffer and perhaps even self-destruct. The Ghost of Christmas Yet to come also holds to this view. He shows Scrooge the inevitable consequences his mean-spirited behavior will lead to—a lonely death, with his meager belongings picked over by human vultures, and where the only emotion felt over his demise is pleasure from the poor debtors who are finally freed from his grasp. The old woman who sells his bedclothes is even more of a utilitarian than Scrooge was earlier in the story—why bury him in his best shirt, when calico will do just as well? “They’d have wasted it, if it hadn’t been for me.”^{xxvi} It is a horrifying dénouement, but Scrooge recognizes its message:

“Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change.”^{xxvii}

Ellis, too, stresses the fact that every person has the ability to change their behavior—the question is not *can* they do so, but *will* they do so.

STAVE FIVE: THE ENDS OF COUNSELING

“I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future!” Scrooge repeated, as he scrambled out of bed. “The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. Oh Jacob Marley! Heaven and the Christmas Time be praised for this! I say it on my knees, old Jacob; on my knees!”^{xxviii}

I have used the framework of *A Christmas Carol* as a comparison with the counseling methods of Rogers, Perls and Ellis, specifically by examining the ways in which these methods were utilized in the film “Gloria”, not because I think the three men exactly correspond to the three Spirits in Dickens’ story but because I believe the story captures the *spirit*, as it were, of

their differing approaches to counseling. Each counselor desires the same end, namely a client who is healthier and better integrated into his/her environment than before he/she underwent the counseling. *A Christmas Carol* is an example, albeit a fictional one, of such a process brought to a successful completion. One might say that the three Spirits, by emphasizing in turn Scrooge's past, present and possible future, are embodiments of an eclectic approach to counseling. Scrooge, in order to change his self-defeating behavior, had to see what had led to that behavior (his past); how that behavior affected himself and those around him (his present), and what the probable outcomes of that behavior would likely be (his future). Too much emphasis on any one area could very well prove to be detrimental to such a process, since what is sought after is the client seeing himself or herself as a *whole*. All three methods need to be utilized. A behavioral change as "miraculous" as that of Ebenezer Scrooge cannot always be expected. But this three-tiered approach can indeed prove to be most effective. Gloria, in the film of that name, recognized (or was prompted to recognize by her respective guides) that each counselor seemed to address a different area of her life, but she also seemed unable to relate to the approaches in a meaningful way—which is to say, she failed to see the manner in which all three approaches affected her as a whole person.

It is significant that Scrooge, at the end of the story, finally accepts his nephew's long-standing offer of sharing Christmas dinner with him. Fred, the most self-accepting character in the story, had earlier expressed his opinion of the Christmas spirit:

There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say . . . Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come around . . . as a good time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely . . .^{xxxix}

"To open their shut-up hearts freely . . ." This nicely expresses the spirit of effective counseling as well.



End Notes

- ¹ Richard Patrick Hearn, *The Annotated Christmas Carol* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1976), pp. 35-37.
- ¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.
- ¹ Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2010), p. 66.
- ¹ Carl Rogers, *Client-Centered Therapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 24.
- ¹ Dickens, p. 50.
- ¹ Rogers, p. 30.
- ¹ Dickens, p. 50.
- ¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- ¹ *Ibid.* p. 60.
- ¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ¹ Fritz Perls, *The Gestalt Approach and Eye Witness to Therapy* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1973), p. 63.
- ¹ Dickens, p. 70.
- ¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- ¹ Hearn, p. 42.
- ¹ Dickens, p. 94.
- ¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ¹ Perls, pp. 141-142.
- ¹ Dickens, p. 68.
- ¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- ¹ Albert Ellis, quoted in *The Counseling Process* by Sheldon Eisenberg and Daniel J. Delaney (Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Company, 1977), p. 17.
- ¹ Dickens, p. 118.
- ¹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- ¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- ¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

