

The Challenge of Christmas

Back in 1970 a paperback entitled *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* was all the rage. Written by Richard Bach, it appealed to the Narcissus that resides in each of us. The sociologist, Philip Slater, describes Jonathan as the epitome of the American dream: “The hero of the story is a sort of avian Charles Atlas . . . - his whole life given over to ambition, mastery, and self-betterment” Jonathan cannot bear interdependence with other low flying seagulls or confinement to a body that’s finite. In his ambition to transcend the “mob”, he seeks to become “not bone and feather but a perfect idea of freedom and flight, limited by nothing at all.” For Slater, he amounts to a symbol and product of our modern era that would lure us out of any sense of solidarity with people or nature by slogans like “Be all that you can be” and anthems like “I gotta be ME” and “I did it MY way”.

Dickens’ Scrooge is another example of this narcissistic tendency. Here it is Christmas and the ordinary folk of London are caught up in collective excitement over their age-old belief in God as the source of not just a world of competitive egos but of a human family made in his image - and Scrooge won’t have anything to do with it. He will not tolerate his nephew’s invitation to join in the fun. He has reached a point of “independence” whereby he feels immune to changes of season and temperature: “External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no windy weather chill him”

Having abandoned all association with his collective past, he even views December 25th as one more date in a fiscal calendar - a time that should warn his nephew of finding himself a year older and deeper in debt; a time for balancing his books lest he find every item presented dead against him. We ourselves are not immune to the lure of modern parables like *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. We too can be seduced by slogans to “be all that we can be”, to buy that luxury car (already sold to several hundred thousand other people) that will make us stand out among other commuters on the highway.

But all such parables and slogans may ultimately buy you nothing but a secular loneliness akin to that of Scrooge, who on Christmas eve sits in his chilly room by a low fire stirring his gruel - oblivious of the colorful Dutch tiles that decorate his fireplace: “There were Cains and Abels, Pharaoh’s daughters, Queens of Sheba, Angelic messengers descending through the air on clouds like feather beds, Abrahams, Belshazzars, Apostles putting off to sea in butter-boats, hundreds of figures to attract his thoughts . . .” Yet there he sat, within that context of the rich tradition he had abandoned to be independent, and what was he but profoundly lonely and morose.

Let’s hope that such widespread loneliness throughout our society may be but prelude to modern man’s recovery of a more wholesome sense of solidarity with others and nature and, yes, all the grand stories of our collective past - a recovery such as Scrooge eventually experienced when, upon snapping out of his negative dream world “He dressed himself all in his best, and at last got out into the streets. . . He went to church . . . and watched the people hurrying to and fro, and patted children on the head,

and questioned beggars, and looked down into the kitchens of houses, and up to the windows . . . He had never dreamed that any walk - that anything - could give him so much happiness.” Finally he reached his nephew’s house and knocked. “ ‘Why bless my soul!’ cried Fred, ‘who’s that?’ ‘It’s I. Your uncle Scrooge. I have come to dinner.’ ”