

DECEMBER 28, 1967

THE TRUSTEES

Hanukkah - Reading from the Talmud  
by Dr. Victor Reichert

The Christmas Story - Reading from Luke  
by Stephen Starr

\* \* \* \* \*

- 1 - O Tannenbaum - - - - - Ernest I. Miller
- 2 - Early Rome Revisited - - - - - Robert H. Allen
- 3 - Charity Suffereth Long and Is  
Kind - - - - - Charles D. Aring

1 O Tannenbaum

In the section of the treeless plains which I knew as a boy, cottonwood, ash and American elm grew along the creeks but not indigenous were evergreens suitable for Christmas trees. There was always a Christmas tree in our home but it was an artificial one on which there were branches that could be folded up for storage. Each Christmas Eve, wrapped in its muslin dust cover, this tree was brought down from the attic, duly placed in the parlor and decorated. The decorations consisted of tinsel, popcorn strings which we had prepared earlier, glass ornaments and candles. My recollection of the tree was that it was large, green and with its flickering candles handsome indeed. However, when we were engaged in the ghoulish task of sorting the accumulation of a lifetime after the death of my parents, I came across this tree. It was small, more gray than green and by today's standards, a miserable facsimile of a tree. I was sorry I found it.

An artificial tree was not peculiar to our family. All of our neighbors and relatives had them. Sears, Roebuck was the source of many of life's luxury items and I noted in the Public Library's copy of a catalog of 45 years ago that natural looking artificial Christmas trees were available. The 34 inch tree could be purchased for 79¢, the 36 inch tree for \$1.00 and

the giant 54 inch tree was priced at \$2.65. Branches, the catalog copy writer said, could be bent up for storage and with proper care the tree would last for years.

The only natural Christmas tree with which I can remember any personal involvement in my early boyhood was with the one annually installed in our rural church. This was an immense tree shipped, I presume, from Colorado or the East. Here again I should add that an "immense tree" by my standard then might have been eight to ten feet high. At any rate, on the occasion when I was assigned the very responsible and honored job of candle watcher, I was able to extinguish all candles with the aid of a short pole on the end of which a wet cloth had been wound. A "candle watcher" was also equipped with several pails of water but these to my knowledge were never used.

In our German neighborhood, the Christmas Eve service was the big event of the year for the children of the congregation. There was always a pageant portraying the Bethlehem scene in which I can recall being cast as an angel, a shepherd several times, and on occasion a wise man. Apparently I was out of character for this latter role for I was not assigned the part again. At the conclusion of the drama the congregation would sing "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht". The tree would then be lighted and "O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum" would be sung and brown paper bags filled with an orange, an apple, nuts and candy were passed out. World War I put an end to all German, even in song. Obviously you cannot sing with any feeling O Tannenbaum translated to O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree and the congregation saw its patriotic duty and a Santa Claus was installed complete with sleigh bells.

I had one near miss being involved with a Christmas tree when I was in high school. The seniors were having a Christmas party and obviously a tree was needed, preferably a free one. The most readily available evergreens were some cedar trees on the property of a Miss Handy, the town's recluse. Relying either on Miss Handy's holiday spirit or more likely on her supposed timidity, the boys cut one of the trees and took it away. But it was regretfully learned that Miss Handy was neither timid nor generously inclined. She watched

them from a window, summoned the town marshall and each of ten boys was assessed five dollars, a princely sum in that post-war depressed farm area. By the Grace of God I was home with the flu.

I really didn't learn about Christmas trees until I was married. My wife is an East Tennessean in whose family the selection of a tree was a ritual. You didn't buy the first tree you saw. In fact, you didn't buy any of the first hundred. Every available lot had to be visited and trees viewed from all angles, the condition of foliage examined and the straightness of the trunk observed. As likely as not you ended up buying the first tree inspected. By the time the shopping trip was over we were seldom on speaking terms. There was, in my wife's estimation, at this period, only one type of evergreen suitable for a Christmas tree. That was a short needled balsam distinguished by its capacity to shed its foliage. There was consequently no reluctance to dispose of a tree shortly after Christmas Day.

I made only one attempt to alter this routine. Coming home from work in Detroit I shopped at a Christmas tree lot. Stuck in a snow bank on a curb was a handsome Scotch pine. Its size was right, the branches evenly distributed and the price reasonable. The attendant obligingly loaded the tree for me. I had made only one error, the trunk took a sharp S-curve near the base and it was impossible to use a holder without having the tree resemble a rapidly settling Tower of Pisa. Never again have I had the courage to go out on my own.

As this is written it seems our children will not be home for Christmas and for the first time in 31 years we may not have a Christmas tree. And if we do it is to be an artificial one. Since I have had experience with this type I am permitted to buy it. Naturally, I shall go to Sears.

Ernest I. Miller

Christmas time my cheeks take on a ruddy glow, my face creases into a semi-permanent friendly smile and the general influence of cheerfulness and martinis make me ready to give forth with a hearty laugh or gentle tear at the merest opportunity.

So when we ran into the Murchisons in the Gibson Girl Lounge, it is only natural to extend an offer of the hospitality of the season.

"Come out over the weekend", I said. "We'll be there all the time - come anytime. See us as we are".

While it was 15 minutes and a drink later before the Murchisons stumbled out into the warm afternoon, my wife still had a steely glint in her eye. "See us as we are, you Nut", she snarled. "That's all I need for you to begin inviting drop-ins to wander through the shambles that our kids make of the house when they are home on vacation".

"My dear wife", I replied with dignity, "I am quite aware of the undesirability from our point of view of anybody seeing us as we are. A person of any perception might also, I should think, recognize that no civilized person -- and I take it you will grant me the Murchisons to be civilized people, would wish to see us in this condition anymore than we would desire to be so observed".

Now you might think that a woman would resent being talked to in this fashion, and I rather suspect that my wife does resent it, but I have found that, while she may occasionally break something or sometimes simply not say anything for a week or so following one of these 18th century remarks, at least that terminates the conversation and leaves her without any come-back. I am cautious though to never address her as "my dear woman", and some day I'll show you the scar.

Unfortunately, and I really can't understand how this happened, the Murchisons dropped in over the weekend. My wife retired to her room with a migraine, Mrs. Murchison removed herself to a corner of the room and proceeded, as near as I could tell, to enter into an extended conversation with a pitcher of eggnog. At any rate, as nearly as I can remember, she didn't say a

word. Frank Murchison and I settled into two comfortable chairs and looked beamingly at each other over a bottle of brandy.

"Now about beatniks and peaceniks", he said. "I have a copy of an editorial here that appeared in the Rome Daily Tribune on April 12, A.D. 70, complimenting the Emperor on the stern treatment meted out to the filthy bearded Christians who seem everyday to be more underfoot. The editorial referred to the Flower People's activities earlier in the province of Palestine and commended the example of Judge Pilate to other judicial authorities throughout the empire".

"I don't like analogies, Frank", I replied. "They are useful as ways into a puzzle. They serve no purpose at all as a way out. Comparing the peaceniks of today to the early Christians is a pretty superficial tour de force".

Frank Murchison poured himself another dollop of brandy, sat back, took a gulp of it that seemed to satisfy him, and looked at me for a minute or so without saying a word.

"The world that we live in has got to be organized. This isn't any virtue; it's a necessity. Organization means that some bastard has got to be at the top of the heap, that a lot of poor yokels end up carrying baskets of brick around, and there are two sorts of people that are unhappy with the deal. One of these groups, while they usually find some way to dress it up, basically want to substitute themselves for the birds who are enjoying the cookies". "I can't blame them; but to the degree", he said, holding up his brandy glass and looking through it at the light, "that I am getting a good share of the cookies, I am willing to join in fighting to hang on, and I don't see any reason why I shouldn't try and keep from being organized out".

"Now the other bunch of unhappy people, the beatniks and peaceniks and, in spite of you, the early Christians: that's another kettle of fish. These aren't people that want up. They're people that want out. They are people who have a vision of what the world might be if, instead of making a virtue out of necessity, we used

virtue itself as our necessity. These are the kind of people who don't get the joke when they read the Beatitudes. These are the kind of people that end up on a cross, and when they say, 'My God, why has thou forsaken me', they sound puzzled".

"Now we're animals with a big brain and an opposed thumb, and we have always liked to think that we are something more. But if we are something more and all that something is -- is shopkeepers and politicians, that's not so much. At least these people don't think that's so much because they think there ought to be a way out of the rat race and they keep trying, generation after generation, to tell everybody else. And we keep building bigger and better Colisseums to throw them into".

And he sat there and took another sip of his brandy. And he smiled and big tears rolled down his cheeks. And either I went to sleep or he just sort of dissolved, for the next thing I remember my wife was standing in front of me holding an empty brandy bottle upside down and saying, "my dear husband, I have always admired and respected your acuity and sagacity, and I am so pleased that you handled the question of inviting the Murchisons over with that great tact for which, Sir, you are so noted among us humbler members of the family".

I didn't say a damn thing.

Robert H. Allen

---

3      Charity Suffereth Long and is Kind

"'Tis the season to be jolly". It is difficult to imagine a sentiment more likely to spark suicide. Prolonged jollity is not required or even suggested at times other than Christmas. Persons in a bleak frame of mind don't have their modd brought to attention with such poignancy, conditioned by residues from childhood including Christmases long past. Jollity is not to be recommended even at Christmastime to anyone balanced on a base that is apt to be tilted by the impossibility.

A sense of humor takes some edge off tragedy. This disposition is devoutly to be wished. Excepting

des. my own children, I would not presume to foist it on anyone. But I trust that the development of humor can be fostered rather than foisted. Humor is traditional medicine. In ancient medicine humor determined disposition or temperament according to the essence considered to be dominant - blood, phlegm, yellow bile or black bile.

l  
1  
o". Considerably more constructive than jollity, Christmas urges one to be charitable. Charity may be defined as good will to the poor and the suffering or alms, which occasions public provision for the relief of the poor. How differently one feels in himself about these forms of charity! The one is a personal act of affection or benevolence, occasioning the best of feeling, the other at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum, gives rise to eleemosynary institutions prone to bring out the very worst in people. Those who administer them are prone to the occupational hazard characterized by Shakespeare as "the insolence of office", and the clientele to baring their souls for a few pieces of silver. And those who look on are not likely to remember that, "There but for the grace of God, go I".

5  
3,  
r". In dealing with complex human problems, generalization is a refuge for the lazy or obtuse mind. The fine art of generalization is highly developed in bureaucracy. At the risk of glibness, I would say that a sense of humor has been of inestimable aid to me in a lifetime of dealing with poverty and suffering, in each of the roles already mentioned. Compassion is fostered by graceful humor, although grace is an even more elusive trait than humor.

de. I suppose the correspondence of charity organizations in any large city of the United States could form a basis for psychological study. You may have run across the excerpts gathered from letters received by a welfare department, occasionally amusing without meaning to be. They may be apocryphal. I don't present these excerpts in a perjorative sense, but rather to illustrate a facet of the business of charity. As might be expected they almost invariably concern money, a by no means unique indication that it is among the primary emotions. I trust some of you have been involved in the settlement of an estate, an amazing business particularly if there is more than a single heir.

h  
l  
e  
ty.  
y.

Most of these letters to the welfare department mention children, proffering them as reason for needing more money, for example: "This is my eighth child, what are you going to do about it?", or "I am writing to say that my baby was born two years old, when do I get my money?", or "I cannot get sick pay. I have six children, can you tell me why?" or "In answer to your letter I have given birth to a boy weighing ten pounds. Hope this is satisfactory", or "In accordance with instructions, I have given birth to twins in the enclosed envelope".

The illegitimacy problem so ubiquitous in publicity concerning public charity is touched on in some letters. Here is an example: "I am forwarding my marriage certificate and my three children, one of which was a mistake, as you will see". And another, "I am very much annoyed to find you have branded my boy as illiterate as this is a dirty lie. I was married to his father a week before he was born".

The man's role in the family on relief is depicted in some of these letters. A matriarchal trend has been commented on in work with welfare clientele. One of the letters to the welfare department reports: "I have no children as yet as my husband is a bus driver and he works day and night". Another says: "I am glad to report that my husband who was reported missing is now dead", and another more plaintively: "Please find for certain if my husband is dead. The man I live with now can't eat or do nothing until he knows". Then there is one reporting: "My husband got his project cut off two weeks ago, and I haven't had any relief since".

The clergy comes in for a share of attention in these pitches for charity. Here is one such: "Mrs. Jones has not had any clothing for a year and has been visited by the clergy regularly". A line from the next letter illustrates the uses of slips of speech or pen "Unless I get my money very soon, I will be forced to lead an immortal life".

A physician cannot be expected to escape involvement in these pleadings. The following example is as good as any. "I want money as quick as I can get it. I have been in bed with the doctor for weeks and he doesn't do me any good. If things don't improve I will

have to send for another doctor". I trust this sampling will sufficiently flood your soul with the spirit of charity at Christmastime.

In I Corinthians (Chapter VIII) charity has been translated as love in most felicitous expression:

Charity suffereth long, and  
is kind, charity envieth not;  
charity vaunteth not itself;  
is not puffed up,  
Doth not behave itself unseemly,  
seeketh not her own, is not  
easily provoked, thinketh no  
evil; ...

Perhaps some of us can reconcile this lovely sentiment with experience. If not there is always Falstaff's "rusty curb of old father antic, the law". During the past few years there have been appearing in the lower courts suits against welfare officials won by the clients in almost every case. The theory is that although the Constitution does not require that the government provide welfare, once a system is established, clients have a right to receive their benefits without interruption except for good cause and a fair hearing, free of intrusion by welfare officials into their private lives and without discrimination. I would favor this biting the hand that feeds if it will in any way ameliorate the awful insolence of office and establish the sort of charity that suffereth long, and is kind.

Excerpts from the letters of clients - apocryphal or not - cast a little light on an aspect of charity in the raw. The viewpoints have been touched on of client, social worker, and onlooker, the latter sometimes referring to himself in a snit as a taxpayer. If I have failed to clarify the problem to your taste, I trust I may refer to you those immoral words from the final letter, to wit: "to send for another doctor".

Charles D. Aring

---