

Spirit(s) of the Season

by SHERALYN ROMAN

This isn't a column about the three spirits who came to visit Scrooge on Christmas Eve, nor is it a reference to the kind of spirits one might imbibe this time of year. Rather, it's an opportunity to remind us all that the real 'spirits' of the season are kindness, compassion, giving and hope.

No matter the holiday you celebrate, the deity you worship (or don't) December is a month whose focus is on our humanity and on hope - of which the spirit of both is in desperate need of reviving.

Were you to look up the word 'humanity' in the dictionary, the standard definition is what you might expect. However, it's followed closely by these words: 'humaneness; benevolence.' I find that interesting. The fact that we have attempted to further define our humanity by referencing words like benevolence, compassion and dignity speaks to the importance and value we place on human life. It follows then, that it would be at this time of year we might naturally place a greater emphasis on caring for our fellow humans. Factor in that some parts of the world are currently experiencing the absolute worst of our human nature and I might suggest it is all the more reason to truly embrace the spirit(s) of the season to the best of your ability and to share kindness, compassion and hope where, and how, you are able to.

For our Sikh neighbours, who recently celebrated the birthday of Guru Nanak Sahib, such kindness and compassion often takes the form of serving the community through Seva, a key pillar in Sikhi, ensuring that all members of society have their basic needs met like shelter, food and water recognizing their dignity and sovereignty. Visit a Gurdwara and know that you will be cared for because it was Guru Nanak, along with subsequent Guru's, who institutionalized the idea of a free kitchen for all in established community spaces like the Gurdwara, a practice that is still solidly in place over 550 years after Guru Nanak first walked this earth.

Jewish families celebrate Hanukkah, beginning tonight through December 15th, a festival of lights that reflects the Jewish reclamation of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and the miracle of a one-day supply of oil used for candles lasting eight instead. Representing the miracle of the oil is the Menorah and it's a time of families gathering, prayer, lighting of the menorah and often too, a time of giving - in this case - Hanukkah gelt, gifts of money, to children. These cash gifts might be considered a reward for things like good behaviour, but are also an opportunity for children to practice 'tzedakah,' (charity).

For Christians, of course, the tradition revolves around the birth of Jesus and here too the themes - at least before the arrival of Santa Claus - were that Christ's arrival in the world brought hope, joy, peace and love. Christians are encouraged to reflect on their faith and the messages Jesus' arrival symbolizes, 'to give up one's very self' ? to think only of others (and) how to bring the greatest happiness to others in the world.

If you are sensing a theme, it's because there is one! Common amongst each of these celebrations (and the many others that all take place at this time of year) is honoring our humanity and caring for our fellow humans. It's the same wisdom the three spirits visiting Scrooge were trying to impart, that this is a season of giving - not gifts in the commercial sense but the gift of caring, the gift of providing for those who need, given without expectation by those who have. The spirit(s) of the season are meant to remind us that charitable acts are both necessary, and good - and for many families might just mean the difference between a joyous holiday season or a miserable one.

If you are able, help to share in the spirit(s) of the season with the donation of food, an unwrapped gift or gift card (for those older teens who are often forgotten) or cash. Locally, Caledon Community Services, the Orangeville Food Bank, Salvation Army's New Hope Church and a variety of other groups including community led initiatives like Santa for Seniors or the Milo Foundation (named for local resident Milo Yekmalian who tragically lost his life in a car accident) and a myriad of similar social service agencies are all coordinating the care of so many families in need this year. There is still time to make a difference in the life or lives of your friends and neighbours and our fellow citizens of the world. Show your understanding of our shared humanity. Demonstrate

kindness, benevolence and compassion - spread hope, not hate. And finally, another way to show you care; if you imbibe too many actual spirits this holiday season, use Home James, run completely by volunteers, another great example of caring for others