



INVITED SUBMISSION

## *Symmetry in the Charlie Brown Christmas*

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### ABSTRACT

*The televised Charlie Brown Christmas tale and its bawdy Peanuts characters taught me important lessons while growing up as the awkwardly drawn, “blockhead” sibling. This essay explores the down and dirty deities that reside in each of us, including Brown and Pig Pen, at once seen as contemporary symbols of the globally inter challenged-being and surprising instruments of sacred expression. Ruminations on the Bhagavad Gita, Immanuel Kant, Jessye Norman, bell hooks, and Thich Nhat Hahn encourage us to reimagine contexts for power and authority, racial mistrust and injustice, and restoring our slumping spirits.*

KEYWORDS: interbeing, Peanuts, sacred knowledge work, Kant, consciousness

More than any other pop-culture zeitgeist, the iconic Charlie Brown personality that distinguished author Charles Schultz’s imagination, was fundamentally responsible for the philosophical underpinnings of my adolescent development in tolerance, character, and humiliation. Especially the humiliation part. A *Charlie Brown Christmas* (Schultz 1965) animated feature was the one television event that I looked forward to with glee annually. Who am I kidding? I still cherish the story and over the years have continued to record the broadcasts. Consider this a personal ritual if not an entirely contradicting custom that rationalizes my impatience with the unregulated expectations that drive this revered holiday season.

I have found a multiplicity of familial characterizations between my sister and myself when studying the metaphors that inform and shape the Charlie Brown mythos. Growing up, I was the smart, awkwardly drawn, “blockhead” sibling. My sister was pretty, self-assured, and bossy like Lucy. I was reminded

of this troubling schism that we've struggled with our entire lives, in mostly unspoken ways, when gleaning a book review on sisters Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf. Vanessa's agonized confession to her younger sister Virginia revealed, "*Your face is prettier than mine, your features finer, your eyes a whirligig of light*" (Sellers 2010, 4) (Figure 1).

Then and to some degree now, much like the famed Bloomsbury siblings, we remain prescriptive elements for sisterly angst. I'm less interested, however, in deconstructing the *whys* of our differences. Rather, when contemplating the Schultz classic, I grapple with the story's ability to speak to me as an independent whole, and through acts of forgiveness and reconciliation. But first, I simply struggle with the wounds. In part, because of what is appealing in friendships and recurring in familial longing, the wounds and affection that each bond engenders have produced some of the weirdest behaviors over my lifetime. Much like Schultz's posse of bawdily drawn characters, as adults, we recycle ourselves "twice a child," fraught with "whirligig" episodes of thumb sucking while grabbing madly at the well-worn blanket to quell insecurities: Charlie Brown and his most agonizing squeals of angst and uncertainty, Lucy's inflation-steady therapy sessions, Schroeder's self-absorbed piano study, and Linus's philosopher's composure.

Yet the character that cautions us most instructively to guard the care of the psychoemotional and spiritual life is Pig-Pen. Seen as Brown's poorer cousin, and positioned as an alter-ego, he's also a cautionary reminder to the



FIGURE 1. PAMELA BOOKER ON THE HUDSON. [THIS FIGURE APPEARS IN COLOR IN THE ONLINE ISSUE.]

viewer of the Jungian “shadow” figure (Campbell 1971) or disorderly “aspect” of suburban life contentment or containment depending on the gaze. When Schultz initially drew this character, in the backdrop of the world’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Great War, he symbolized the Eisenhower-era *Newsie* boy that hawked papers and mowed lawns for extra money. He was honest, thrifty, upright, white. All-American. In the new millennium, he’s the street-smart kid who hustles whatever he can to support his family. He’s no longer necessarily a white, suburban kid, though, tethered to a postwar American ethos, which now appears as fantastical and naïve as Schultz’s original series. Instead, he’s a threatening motif, the immigrant child of Mexican, Chinese, or Islamic parents, or an African American boy or girl, whose character is framed as undermining to American values, lesser valued. To my observation, they are all symbolic of Pig-Pen’s tattered abandon. The clouds of dusty soot that follow them personify the down and dirty deities that reside in each of us.



#### CHRISTMAS EVE. ANYWHEREVILLE, AMERICA

At the top of the story, it’s Christmas Eve in a generic-looking suburb of “middle” America. With Charlie Brown as the director, he and his friends are preparing to stage an “authentic” production of *The Nativity* that hopes to utilize live animals and lush scenery. Soon enough, absolute chaos sets upon the cast, and Charlie is fired for his inability to take on the in-fighting and multiple agendas that consume his “players.” In many ways, Charlie emerges Prince Arjuna, central to the Hindu tale of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He is at once conflicted with his sense of duty as a warrior and the deeply felt ethical responsibility and moral virtue that propel him. Arjuna deliberates with the higher authority of Krishna, and for Brown, it’s Linus who delivers his “profound communion with life” (Nhat Hanh 1991, 18).

Lucy, of course, assumes the director’s role following Charlie’s demotion, and issues a sharp discharge—find a robust Christmas tree. Brown is roundly humiliated when he returns with his pitiful looking selection. Even his hipster dog Snoopy is baffled by his caretaker’s unwavering belief in the tree’s obvious slumping spirit. Schultz’s modern fable, in this regard, looms an enduring symbol of a rightful intention gone sadly wrong. Charlie Brown reminds us, albeit from a place of compunction initially, of subjective beauty in the sparseness of life. In the sagging oddities and atypical “internal forms” and “fetters or knots” (Nhat Hanh 1991, 64) of the quest, a desire for a shared humanity, dignity, and selfhood lurks in the shadows of an era that’s ripe with material craving and superficiality. Brown demonstrates through his hopelessly impoverished tree that beauty in its highest form, whether seen as twisted and deformed or as a combination of esthetically pleasing qualities, is the preserve of the beholder’s reflection.

Often, the quest for symmetry, for balance, can be blinding and compete directly with the reclamations of common sense. Our tendency, at least mine, has been to see the deficiencies first and then to address them as independent parts in need of repair. We question our drive when we feel unenthusiastic about meditating *on demand* or when failing to complete the eight sets of sun salutations that we set out to do. (Bad Yogi!) Furthermore, we question the Soul's rigor, a source in constant jeopardy of ego flight or fright when threatened by anything or anyone who resists or contradicts our belief systems, routines, conventions. And flesh, little more than interconnected "cutaneous membranes" (*The Free Dictionary* 2017, "skin"), a physiological construct, seems to require more from us than could ever be mollified over lifetimes with salves, touch, tenderness.

The writing of such terrific thoughts thrives as ongoing response to calls that underpin our sense of power and fears. Countless sacred knowledge workers from bell hooks to Thich Nhat Hanh help us to champion if not gently humor our most disparaging ruminations, even as we actively create mysteries of our intentions and avoid deeper questioning. Their mindfulness teachings also suggest that we are all uneasy in our tensions that wrestle with how to be our own valuable sites of an emergence. My search for creative independence reminds me of a meeting with the legendary opera vocalist Jessye Norman, in my first job as a very young arts assistant at the Philadelphia Orchestra. This was also my first encounter with notions of the "terrifying sublime," when, in that distilled backstage moment, Ms. Norman regaled, "*What is it that you do here, young lady?*" Then and now, her question sounds bigger than my reach. It has haunted me over the paces of my past, current, and ongoing years. Over time, her once fitful question became a sacred chant, a spoken ritual, a challenge to remain curious and engaged with others as an artist and educator. All of which leaves me clamoring for more reliable instruments of authentic expression beyond social media systems that interlink and platform our narratives and confessions. Maybe the act of "deep listening," for example, could serve as a powerful tool in the dismantling of aggressive "trash talk." Or, dedicating time for face-to-face contact with friends, might lead to enriched relationships. Cultural scholar M. Jacqui Alexander suggests that "pedagogies," what we are "prepared to teach," and, by extension, prepared to learn are the first step "...in the task of demystifying domination" (Alexander 2006, 8).

Immanuel Kant, the 18<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, remarked with exceptional deliberation on the embodied nature of knowledge, morality, and esthetics (Piper 2007). Today, we might consider his principles as underpinning the necessary steps for a more democratic, just, and egalitarian society, even as Kant was by no means an advocate for social justice, cultural diversity, or PDA—"public displays of affection." Nevertheless, his embodied

principles could be used to redress the aggregate complexities that burden us as a nation while radically altering malevolent acts of power and authority used in racial mistrust and injustice, poverty, disregard for the planet's health and related conditional biases. All of which would be measurably consoling.

Clearly, the impasses that produce globally *inter-challenged*-beings and constituent communities are much too demanding for simplistically “positive” results. Our ability to heal and transform our “analytic” and “synthetic”—also known as seen and felt—truths and the more insightful, mindful behaviors that could *potentially* emerge is essential to our survival as a human species. Sensibilities, Kant also reminds us, are not so transparent. They are prone to abstraction and often hard to grasp. Perhaps this is why so many of our emotional self-portraits are painted by disillusionment, misalignment, and shame. (Bad Yogi!) Yet when we shift in our ability to see ourselves as “phenomenal” (here as much in Maya Angelou’s poetic grace as with Kantian reasoning) and worthy of examination versus scrutiny and accountability in lieu of judgment, we are challenged to demystify our co-existences. Challenged again when we allow ourselves to think, see and see again, the existence, the *inter-being*, as a gift.

Often we speak to needing more “space” and “time” while negotiating the parts and pieces of life that don’t seem to fit. While there is some debate as to why Kant does not address these concepts specifically in his discussions, what he does formulate for us are components of “natural intuition” (Piper 2007). Intuition enhances empirical knowledge. Moreover, when the objective of the most highly expressed interdependent self is fashioned of deeply intuited experiences and impulses in which the “I” is forced to see, care for, and engage as “We”—and also used to cultivate viable pathways, mindful systems, and empathy rather than cynicism—we equip ourselves with generative remedies and tools. When reimaged, tools of sacred expression serve to reform the *needfulness* within us that aches for reason and grace, yet knows that both often disappoint or, rather, do not satisfy until bound up with a substantial meaning or verifiable outcome. Outcomes that allow for the critical examination of our predisposition for hierarchies and domination serve as the point of entry. But when the motives that spur these convictions reveal the human formation as perpetually imbalanced and loopy, then full-out elimination of those predispositions must be the goal. Like most creatively mindful people, I also recognize that we owe it to our personal legacies to live beyond the tragic; to reach for the substantive causes in the haziness of the abstract and violent. Knowledge and the ability to set it into action underpinned by goodwill, justice, and love will either set you free or implode your brain. Perhaps then, the search for symmetry, for balance in our lives, becomes less the “pitifully” floundering needles of the evergreen and more the sinewy entanglements of the banyan tree.

In my adolescent wonder at the end of Charlie Brown's animated tale, I was always delighted by the renewal that the "little Christmas tree that could" magically delivered by transforming from its neglected skimpiness, into a figure of thick, sprawling branches and glistening trimmings. Oh, but that was a televised fable, a masterful allegory, a sweet, candy-cane parable informed by the Gospels. Somehow, even as a child, I knew that the chorus of voices that heralded the coming of a baby savior, a new bike, and skates would never satisfactorily answer the questions that sprinted through me after watching the holiday feature cartoon.

Charlie Brown's imperfect tree resides in my memory as a potent touchstone for the retrieval of an interdependent *being* that is universally whole and indispensable. It also becomes the derivative of a vital system that is implicit in the sacred. To shift my gaze and thereby alter the patterning of the disruption, necessitates that I navigate the hurts and discomfits. Within these perimeters, I've learned to humbly embrace intention, meaning, compassion, and form. In astonishing moments, they became expressions of a fully actualized life.



#### NOTES

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