

We'll Miss You, Charlie Brown (Sigh!)

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Last Sunday up at Unitarian House, I asked the children gathered for our worship service if they read the "Peanuts" comic strip. Lots of eager hands shot up, and there was some murmuring about how the strip was ending. From the looks on some faces, I could see it was like a dear friend had moved away and would never be seen again. It was a loss. This surprised me because, as I went back over the file folder of old "Peanuts" strips, I thought, these cartoons were written for adults. Adults never appear in "Peanuts," but it's *not* about children. More nearly, it's about the inner child we always carry with us. The humor is subtle and is mixed with pathos, or wistfulness, or some such "adult" moods, so I rejected the idea of giving a children's version of this sermon last week.

Instead, I told some different short-short stories, two parables of Jesus -- the "You are the light of the world" parable about the lamp and the lamp-stand, and the parable of the sower -- a parable of parables themselves, the way they puzzle and surprise us, and sometimes reveal what had been obscure to us before. They tell "what life is like." Not is "supposed to be like," or "we wish were like," but truly is like. Erika Mumford's poem, "What There Is," ends with a marvelous line: "What we call *beautiful* is what there is." Suppose we think of the "Peanuts" strips as parables, tiny stories that elude explanation but call to mind, in unexpected ways, "what there is." We may think of truth as something solid and unchanging, but I rather agree with Charlie Brown: Truth is as wishy-washy as he is. Truth is an imaginative story that touches us in unexpected ways and may move us to feel and even to say, Yes! *This* is what life is like.

Today, after almost a 50-year run, "Peanuts" is vanishing from the scene. Even *The New York Times*, which never published it, editorialized on the sense of loss that comes with Charles Schulz's retirement. "Peanuts" was a cultural phenomenon of our time. Perhaps the sadness is tempered by the way the "Peanuts" characters, who never grew a day older or wiser in all those years, enjoy a kind of immortality. Charlie Brown will always be the same round-headed little kid, always trying, never quite making it. He will never learn, so long as he is Charlie Brown.

"She's got to be kidding," he is saying. "She must think I'm really dumb." Lucy Van Pelt is holding the football for him to kick, as she does every year when football season comes 'round. "Here we go, Charlie Brown. I'll hold the ball and you come running up and kick it." "What you really mean is, you'll pull the ball away and I'll land on my back and kill myself!" At last, he's facing her down! "Well, I have news for you," he says. "Never again. Forget it." "Wait!" Lucy calls, as Charlie walks away. "I said forget it!" he yells back over his shoulder. "I'm just glad you're the only person in the world who thinks I'm dumb enough to fall for that trick again..." In the last frame we see Charlie Brown

looking, nonplused, at a whole field full of friends -- Patty (his would-be girlfriend), Marcie (her sidekick), Sally (his little sister), Snoopy (his own dog), all holding footballs for him to kick. They are all smiling broadly. Even Woodstock (the bird) is smiling and holding a tiny football.

Every kid who has ever played football knows this trick, and has suffered it. Schulz is tapping into something as universal as ... games children play. The whole world knows Charlie Brown, literally. And loves him, too -- right? In the first-ever "Peanuts" strip, from Oct. 2, 1950, Patty and Shermie are sitting by the sidewalk. "Well, here comes ol' Charlie Brown!" Shermie says. "Good ol' Charlie Brown. Yes, sir!" he says. As Charlie passes by, Shermie repeats, "Good ol' Charlie Brown." Now he has gone by, and Shermie says to Patty, "How I hate him."

What do you say? Shermie is two-faced? Or, if we see the whole story as what's going through Charlie's own mind: Charlie Brown is profoundly insecure? Which is the truer reading of the human condition: hostility and lies, or insecurity and gullibility? Careful: The latter may be more disturbing than the former, because in the face of the former, hostility and lies, at least you can be righteously indignant. You can even hate right back! But if the problem is something within *us*, well, how confusing life can be.

The second interpretation occurred to me only after I read about the origins of "Peanuts." A childhood photo of Charles Schulz shows him looking remarkably like Charlie Brown. It's the same round, bland, smiling face. "The trouble with you," Lucy says in the musical comedy version of "Peanuts," "is your face." "My face? What's the matter with my face?" Charlie cries out. "It's such a -- well," Lucy says, "it's such a *face* face." Charlie Brown is everyone. We can all identify with him, readily, *because he suffers*.

Some years ago, Robert Short wrote a book, *The Gospel According to "Peanuts."* He interprets many of the strips in biblical terms. (I know -- here we go again!) For instance, "the wages of sin is A-A-A-U-G-H"-- the almost unspeakable cry of pain when something awful happens. Schulz often introduced theological themes, and occasionally used biblical texts -- often cited by the precocious Linus. He seems to have mellowed over the years, in a liberal direction. Schulz confirmed this impression when he said, "My theological views have changed considerably over the past 25 years, and now I shy away from anyone who claims to possess all of the truth."

He comments that the original theme of "Peanuts" was precisely the cruelty of children. But he also notes that, in time, his strips became more "abstract"-- more open to imaginative flights. Originally Snoopy went on all fours. Then he got up and walked around on his hind legs -- human-like, yet not quite. He ceased being merely a dog, and became something more -- perhaps the mythic "hound of heaven," forever faithful to us and forever pursuing us. Schulz says people often ask: How can Snoopy lie flat on the peak of his doghouse? To which he replies: "When he lies down, his brain sends signals to his ears which pin him there securely."

The doghouse itself has become an abstraction. It is not a literal doghouse; it is Snoopy's cockpit on the world. He is wiser than the children, Schulz says. He does not talk; he thinks. First frame: Snoopy, on his doghouse roof perch, sighs deeply. "My life has no meaning. Everything seems empty ... Even my bunny books seem meaningless ... I search the skies but find no meaning!" This is his guise as bewildered existentialist. "No meaning!" he thinks, and sighs again, lying supine on the rooftop. Then a sound catches his attention. It's Charlie Brown with his supper bowl brimming full. With wild enthusiasm Snoopy thinks, "*Ah, meaning!*"

Some good things in life are very simple to understand. And much of our suffering is self-inflicted. Most of it is not forever, especially when people fulfill their responsibilities, as Charlie Brown does to his dog, and gladly do so, because they really care.

Sometimes we do not see the help that is right at hand. In one strip, Lucy sits and utters a sigh. Snoopy sits by quietly. "Sometimes I think no one is ever going to love me," she says. "Sometimes I think no one is ever going to lean over and kiss me." Snoopy looks up. "No one loves me," she says, staring blankly. Snoopy thinks, "Look over here, sweetie." "No one even likes me," she says. Snoopy now stands, and leans way over toward her, poised and puckering: "Look at me, sweetie ... I can't stand this way forever." But she is oblivious, her eyes with those little out-of-focus lines around them. "I'm falling," Snoopy cries, "kiss me! Hurry up! I'm falling!" He goes KLUNK on his snout as Lucy, unnoticing, says, "No one cares. I don't think anyone is ever going to love me." Holding his banged nose, Snoopy thinks, "You're probably right, sweetie!"

When it comes to reciting Peanuts cartoons, there is no end. You could pick almost any of them and have a conversation piece. (When big sister Lucy denounces Linus for clinging to his notorious rag of a security blanket, he lamely pleads, "You could look at it as a conversation piece, couldn't you?") The first truth of "Peanuts" is virtually the First Noble Truth of Buddhism: Life is suffering. The second truth of "Peanuts" is equally Buddhist: There is a way out of suffering. It is variously called compassion, understanding, "a little leeway," kindness, and love.

Linus is watching TV and chants, "Go, go, go!" "Fantastic!" he shouts, and runs outside where he meets Charlie Brown. "Charlie Brown, I just saw the most unbelievable football game ever played ... What a comeback!" he enthuses, and goes on to describe the play-by-play action and the wild celebration among the winners. "It was fantastic!" he says, smiling. In the final frame, Charlie Brown says to Linus, "How did the other team feel?"

What is life like? It is suffering, but we can rise above the suffering with compassion, and with laughter. That is the second great truth -- for those who can do it, and not only talk about it. Among those things Charles Schulz says "I've had to learn over and over and over" is this: "A hug is better than all the theology in the world."

Woodstock the bird carries a placard that reads: "MOM?" He goes out and picks daisies, flies back to his nest, which is empty, then flies to Snoopy's doghouse (is it some kind of

church?), where he perches next to Snoopy and sighs. Then he perches on Snoopy's head, looks about the empty sky, and then comes down beside him, still clutching a bedraggled clawful of daisies. Finally, he leans his head against Snoopy, and Snoopy, looking a little bewildered, says to himself, "I've never really thought of myself as a mother-substitute."

Woodstock looking for his mother is one of the repetitive themes in "Peanuts." Charles Schulz lost his own mother in childhood. And, contemplating this cartoon, I cannot help but feel, again, the incurable sadness of the premature death of my own mother. But there is more than sadness here. There is also Snoopy's compassion, the grace of what is given without even a thought.

Life may always entail the suffering of pain and loss, but it also offers relief from suffering. This can't be proved, and many resist it and resist it. It is a matter of faith. My teacher Arthur Darby Nock used to characterize the religious outlook of preliterate peoples this way: "The god who made the earthquake makes also the incantation to avert the earthquake." If we get hung up on the idea on an incantation, we miss the point, which is this: Even the god who made the earthquake has a merciful side. And we can say, on almost as little evidence: The life that brings you suffering brings also the spiritual and moral resources to heal the suffering.

Once you have moved beyond the immediacy of the pain and anxiety of life, laughter may come. Or at least a little chuckle. Schulz asks, as if talking to himself out loud, "Why does the cartoonist see something funny in all of these anxieties? Perhaps it demonstrates a certain character trait, as with the person who makes what starts out to be a serious statement but then, realizing what he has said, qualifies it or steps back slightly, adding a self-conscious chuckle."

His success must have brought him great wealth, but he has remained as self-effacing and as easily embarrassed as Charlie Brown is. He steps back, self-consciously, from too much seriousness, or from taking himself too seriously, and finds something better: laughter. This was among his last cartoons: Charlie Brown sits in a big easy chair at home, baseball cap cocked sideways, and says: "This is my Joe Torre look. I'm going to use it next season." His eyelids are lowered, his mouth has a grim set. "I'll manage the team from the bench like Joe Torre, and I'll stare at everybody like this. And we'll win every game." Sally is on the phone, nearby: "No he can't come to the phone now," she says, "he's cracking up." Same expression on his face, Charlie Brown says, "This will be my Joe Torre look."

We all need to step back from, say, a moody pronouncement that "Life is meaningless," or our assumed "Joe Torre look," and laugh at ourselves. Or from our sighing, for whatever reason, to find again life's true pleasures and great gifts ... like the joy that lies in a dish of hot food.

The parables of "Peanuts" are small tales that tell in a thousand different ways what life is like. But there is one message that ties the many truths together. The final great truth of "Peanuts" is laughter, and what is even better than laughter, joy. Another of his last

cartoons shows Snoopy sitting in the rain, fantasizing, "Sometimes if you sit in the rain, a rich lady will come by in a limousine and take you home." Charlie Brown, the literalist, walks by and says, "Rich ladies in limousines don't drive through our back yard." Snoopy continues to sit there in the rain. He thinks, "If you sit out front by the curb, they splash water all over you." This when water is already running all over him.

After all the hurts and pain, after the endless ways in which we take ourselves too seriously, after the loneliness and longing and all the rest, joy remains, and love endures, and the dance of life itself goes on. "Dance, then, wherever you may be!" I leave you with a quintessential Charles Schulz image:

Snoopy bouncing wildly while he dreams, "To dance is to live." Now he dances with Lucy herself, first in circles, then beside her, and she dances, too. In the final, ecstatic panel, his nose pointed in the air while his back feet wildly thump the floor, he dreams on: "To live is to dance."