

Leaving 'bah humbug' behind: A psychological phenomenon

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It's a tale celebrated across generations each holiday season. A grouchy rich man named Ebenezer Scrooge learns the true meaning of Christmas, after a supernatural encounter on Christmas Eve. Yet, beyond the three

ghosts and Tiny Tim, "A Christmas Carol" is the basis for an unexplored psychological phenomenon.

UNM Professor Emeritus William Miller became one of the first psychologists to start cracking the code behind the tale.

"I've always loved the Dickens story, and my question was, does this happen in real life? I have encountered enough examples that seem to suggest that this can happen to [ordinary people](#)," he said.

For Miller, this story, and the transformation Scrooge experiences at the end of his emotional journey, represents something called quantum change.

"It's just a dramatic sudden change, but the psychologists had no other way of trying to make sense of what they experienced," Miller said. "But it was a quite dramatic and well documented change, so quantum change was the name that I gave to this because we didn't have a term for it."

Quantum change, as coined by Miller, represents a profound change in a person's life and demeanor from a major life event. It is broken down into two key evolutions—the first of which coincides with changes that come with aging, and is done through gradual approximations.

"Type one change is what most of us do, with two steps forward, one step back and so forth," he said. "In my own field of treatment, that's the kind of change that you see that people gradually work toward the lifestyle that they want to have, as an escape from addiction."

The second is completely disparate.

"It's people who, in a matter of minutes or hours, experienced a fairly dramatic and permanent change in their lives. So I set out to ask, well,

can we study this somehow?" Miller said.

You may have also recognized such a description in other holiday classics—"It's a Wonderful Life" or "How the Grinch Stole Christmas." Miller says certain autobiographies also depict shifts throughout the course of people's lives.

"These folks know they have changed. They don't take credit for it themselves. In fact, the question that they often ask was, why me?" he said. "Of all the people having this kind of life experience, why did I have the fortunate experience of this kind of change? I didn't deserve it. I didn't earn it. I didn't do it."

Still, 30 years later, he believes the psychology community has only scratched the surface of this.

"Really nothing more has happened with it in psychology. I think it's just that psychologists don't know what to do with it," he said.

Miller began his research into the topic in the early 90's. The pioneering thought, he said, had not generated much other analysis, since a publication from William James in 1902.

"I didn't find any other psychologists who really had picked this up," Miller said. "But reading James, I thought, you know, here's something at the beginning of the 20th century talking about a different kind of change that happened."

Starting in 1991, Miller sought to change that perception and then some through a [qualitative study](#) focused on what was behind "A Christmas Carol," "It's A Wonderful Life" and "How the Grinch Stole Christmas": stories and experiences. The study was officially underway 30 years ago, in 1992.

"We wanted to try to understand the phenomenon itself, and the best place to start was to hear stories from people themselves," he said.

"There are lots of examples of these in people's life stories, but we just haven't recognized that they are tied together in a way. And there's something about these kinds of experiences that just happened to people over the years."

Miller and his team spoke to 55 people for hours at a time. Many of these participants felt like he once did: unaware there was a way to define what they went through. Others were equally as shocked to know there were others like them.

"These folks were fascinated that this happened to other people and they had also told no one about it, or maybe just one or two people about it. Mostly they had kept it to themselves," he said.

Although each of these people lived entirely different lives, all of them agreed: everything had changed. There were two major types of these quantum changes. Miller said one centered on insight, and having an 'aha' sort of experience.

"Half of the people were in one of the worst situations of their life," he said. "They got to the end of the rope and then the rope broke. They know that feeling was in the midst of that kind of crisis, and that this happened unexpectedly."

The other participants reported a Scrooge, Grinch or George Bailey encounter. It was something mystical and inexplicable.

"The person knows something out of the ordinary is happening. Nobody feels like they are doing this themselves is a passive experience of it happening to them," he said. "Sometimes it comes with revelations or experiences, but the people that have that kind of change say it's not like

coming to a conclusion based on your own logic. It's more like something being revealed to you from the field, like from outside of profoundly benevolent experiences."

Miller also found people's values were also transformed. What was once most important became less so, and what was once unimportant became prominent. Men's and women's values also both moved away from sex role stereotypes.

The study was published in 1994, and included in a full length book "Can Personality Change?" Miller also published a book on the newly named "Quantum Change" in 2001 with co-author and Albuquerque psychologist Dr. Janet C'de Baca.

"It was a wonderful experience to do this study," he said. "The real story is in the stories themselves."

Perhaps equally as interesting, Miller believes, is his 10-year follow-up study with the same groups. He found the lifestyle, emotions and beliefs from their monumental change had remained.

"Indeed the change had not reversed. It had continued. So these are very stable experiences with certain common themes in insights or revelations that people experienced, even though these were very different people," he said.

Although references to Miller's original work have appeared throughout the years, he thinks more work should be ahead on this topic.

"It just kind of sits there and may sit there for another century with," Miller said. "It just seemed to me that this really happens. It's clear to me now that it does, that people can change in fundamental and permanent ways for the better in a matter of minutes or hours. Shouldn't I be

interested in that as a psychologist?"

For now, he hopes for holiday movie viewers to understand what they see on their screens is not just a jolly fable.

"It's profoundly hopeful stuff—that people can change that much of this magnitude. It's not just fiction, that this really happens," says Miller.

Provided by University of New Mexico

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