Culture



When planning "A Charlie Brown Christmas" in 1965, "Peanuts" creator Charles M. Schulz made the decision to quote Scripture in his script despite hesitance and concern from his team. (© Peanuts Worldwide)



by Michael Cavna

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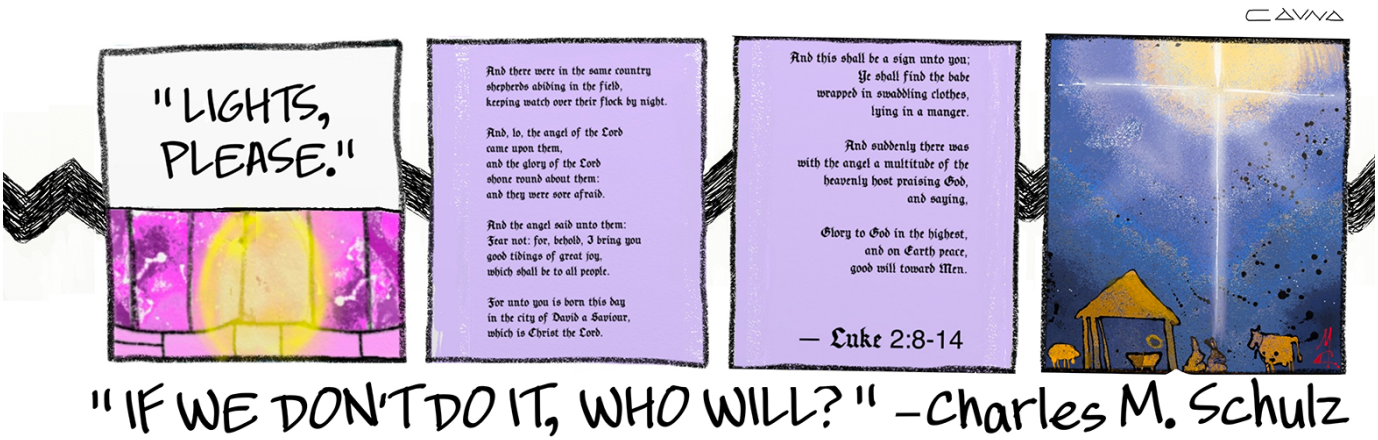
The brains behind a "Peanuts" tribute book called me several years back with an inspiring request: Would I be interested in picking an object from the life and art of Charles M. "Sparky" Schulz and penning a reflective insight for their work in progress? I said yes as my mind immediately went to one collection: the beautiful animation cels from "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Why? Because from concept to glorious completion, so much about that soulful and spiritual holiday classic resonates as an act of faith.

Schulz, the man who birthed the lovably hard-luck Charlie Brown, was known to have wrestled with self-doubt. Yet when it came to taking the reins of "A Charlie Brown Christmas" in 1965, the "Peanuts" creator was a thinker of unwavering confidence and cool-headed belief, his longtime screen collaborator and late producer Lee Mendelson — who wrote the lyrics to Vince Guaraldi's jazzy "Christmas Time Is Here" — used to tell me.

Foremost among the decisions Schulz made with conviction was to quote Scripture in his script. If he was going to make a December special, Schulz — who had regularly attended and then taught Bible study groups (first with a Church of God community in his native Minnesota, then at a Methodist church in Sebastopol, California) — was going to mention the reason for the season.

It bears underscoring that this was no low-key statement to make in the '60s. During that decade, not even "9 percent of Christmas episodes and specials [contained] any substantive reference to religion," according to *A Charlie Brown Religion* by scholar Stephen J. Lind.

Mendelson reminded me more than once that he and the third member of their leadership team, the animator Bill Melendez, initially felt very uneasy about the show's animated characters quoting from the Gospel, with the two men even asking Schulz: Are you *sure* you want to do this? Would this sink the show? Yet the "Peanuts" creator offered a clarion reply: "If we don't do it, who will?" Even when network executives considered cutting such a soliloquy, Schulz stuck to his belief that this special needed to be about something to make it worth airing — and his "something" was to dramatize the question: *What is the true meaning of Christmas?*



Many on the production team felt uneasy about the show's animated characters quoting from the Gospel, worried that it would sink the show. But Charles M. Schulz offered a clarion reply: "If we don't do it, who will?" (Michael Cavna)

Because of his strong sense of mission, Schulz — who had attended many a school pageant as a father of five — scripted the pivotal Biblical scene. Amid a sea of neon holiday commercialism, the beleaguered and melancholic Charlie Brown seeks answers while trying to shepherd a stage production, saying with an emotional build: "I shouldn't have picked this little tree. Everything I do turns into a disaster. I guess I don't really know what Christmas is all about. Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

Ever wise beyond his years, the blanket-toting Linus Van Pelt (memorably voiced by child actor Christopher Shea) steps up to a center spotlight and speaks from the Book of Luke, saying in part: "For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, which is Christ the Lord."

Once done, Linus walks back to his friend and says in the pure-hearted tone of youth: "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown" — capping a scene that Mendelson would say to me became "the most magical two minutes in all of TV animation."

That moving moment was just one way in which the creative team steered against Hollywood convention and expectation of the era. They also employed sparse and

limited animation, hired child actors (instead of adult performers to voice child characters), used slower pacing than was typical and eschewed a laugh track.

All that hewed to Schulz's profound trust in the truth of his characters. One week ahead of the show's big debut, CBS executives screened the special and were disappointed and anxious over all these nontraditional facets, even saying, "The Bible thing scares us." Mendelson, who had worked with an ad agency and sponsor Coca-Cola for backing, became dejected. Yet Schulz — who also created the church-themed cartoon feature "Young Pillars" and a Bible-quoting one-shot "Peanuts" strip commissioned by Better Homes & Gardens magazine — retained his deep belief in the honesty and authenticity of their message.



Debuting Dec. 9, 1965, in prime time, "A Charlie Brown Christmas" (now streaming on Apple TV+) was watched by nearly half of all American viewers and received rave reviews. (© Peanuts Worldwide)

The result: Debuting Dec. 9, 1965, in prime time, "A Charlie Brown Christmas" (now streaming on Apple TV+) was watched by nearly half of all American viewers. The reviews were glowing and the creative collaborators soon picked up Emmy and Peabody Awards, sparking their decades-long partnership on animated "Peanuts" projects. Yet looking back, just what fueled Schulz's assurance all along?

"This may be a situation where we have to thank chutzpah, naiveté, timing and complete earnestness," says Jean Schulz, the cartoonist's widow and shepherd of the Peanuts legacy, noting that "Sparky was stubborn" in challenging the tenets of television — and proved right in his instincts.

"It was an immediate success. It was truly a fairy tale," adds Schulz, who also heads the Charles M. Schulz Museum in Santa Rosa, California. "And the naiveté — of what TV had to be like — and the earnestness and honesty are beloved and appreciated to this day."

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Jason Mendelson, son of the producer and multi-hyphenate keeper of the Mendelson production studio flame, says the depiction of Charlie Brown's frustrations surrounding Christmas strikes an emotional chord. "Seeing everybody having a good time around us and not having that good time ourselves, or feeling like we're supposed to feel a different way than we do, is a timeless and unheralded thing that we don't talk about much," Mendelson says. "But Charles Schulz did, and he did in that special, and that resonates with children and adults for all time."

Pete Docter, the Oscar-winning director and chief creative officer of Pixar ("Up," "Inside Out"), tells me that the special's form and function worked together to create a powerful poetry: " 'A Charlie Brown Christmas' does not have the pizazz and high production values of other high-budget [productions], but hits all the harder because of it. The 'graphic blandishment' [the actual credit given to the animators] may look simple, but it brings a profound power to the sincerity of Schulz's message."

Charlie Brown is initially mocked for buying a bent, emaciated Christmas tree, yet Docter views that tree as a perfect metaphor for us all — "flawed, overlooked and seemingly undeserving of grace."

"Yet like the tree, we are transformed when we are surrounded by love and acceptance. This small, scrappy tree — rejected by everyone else — is a poignant reminder of the humility and beauty at the heart of Christmas," Docter says. "And all elements of the film — the straightforward animation, the unsophisticated vocal performances, the plain visual and sound design — serve to underline this much-needed message."

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Gene Luen Yang, the bestselling Bay Area-based graphic novelist (*American Born Chinese*, *Boxers & Saints*) and two-time National Book Award finalist, says he can view the special through the lens of being a practicing Catholic. "Christianity at its best is the proclamation that God chose the foolish to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong. In other words, it's good news for sad sacks, and Charlie Brown is the ultimate sad sack."

Yang is also moved by Linus' quoting of Scripture, a speech so affecting, he says, because this "ancient text about divine power" is expressed through humility.

Yang appreciates that the soliloquy also uses a modern art form in the most humble of ways: "It's being read by a child's voice. The cartooning is simple, minimalist even. The animation is limited. And the scene itself — a group of unsupervised kids on an elementary school stage, next to the most pathetic Christmas tree of all time — what could be more humble than that?"

"Ergo, what could be more divinely powerful?"

It's worth noting, too, that after the debut aired, religious sisters at St. Sebastian Parish in Belle Vernon, Pennsylvania, thanked the soda-pop sponsor for portraying the "real spirit of Christmas, which is so often obliterated by a false one," according to *A Charlie Brown Religion*. The sisters added: "It is our hope that 'Peanuts' may find a permanent place in the TV realm."