

The High Ability Carol

By Rhonda Cheney 2011

(With sincere apologies to Charles Dickens)

Once upon a time, in a district not so far away, there was a superintendent of schools who counted his pennies carefully. His name was Clutch, and he had not always been the unapproachable miser that the people of his district knew him to be. Clutch started as superintendent when money for educating the children of the district was plentiful, but then both state and federal funding was significantly lowered years ago. The death of his healthy budget left him bitter and unwilling to support any programs he deemed unnecessary. In fact, the only programs that were funded under his authority were those mandated by the state. All programs to meet individualized student needs were banished, and any additional money that was once earmarked for professional development was squirreled away. Clutch found little support for his heavy handedness in the district, but there was a lowly teacher named Barley who agreed with Clutch's decisions. Clutch promoted Barley to assistant superintendent, but after a short amount of time, Barley died of cold heartedness.

Soon, the season of evaluating high ability programs across the state came around. It's that glorious time of year when the people of the district rejoice in what is being done to meet the needs of the most able students. Although the people knew that so much more could and should be done, they were grateful to be celebrating the successes of the few children who were achieving and growing. Clutch was not one of those celebrating; he considered the program completely unnecessary. If these kids were so smart, why couldn't they educate themselves? At the time of the celebration, one brave soul came to request a donation for identifying more students with high abilities. Clutch quickly responded, "The students who are not identified are lazy, or we would have already seen their intelligence and ability. I refuse to help those who will not help themselves." The brave soul staggered away from the unreasonable theory, and went elsewhere for funding. Unfortunately, those working in Clutch's office bore the brunt of his indignation at being asked to help. He ranted and raved about how students with high abilities should take less of his precious resources, not more.

Clutch left the office that day in a foul mood, ate a cold dinner of pork and beans, and readied for bed. He settled into his lumpy mattress, but before he could relax into sleep, a ghostly image appeared before him. The face resembled his old comrade, Barley, and it began to speak.

"Clutch, my old miserly superintendent, I made horrible mistakes in my life and have come to warn you! You will be visited by three spirits: the Ghost of Individual Impact, the Ghost of Social Impact, and the Ghost of Global Impact. Each will attempt to teach you a lesson about the importance of appropriately educating students with high abilities." With those words, Barley's form dissolved. Clutch sat in fear for a moment, but then chalked what he saw and heard up to the questionable quality of the pork and beans he had ingested earlier. He had just begun to doze, when a small hand tapped him lightly on the stomach. "Mr. Clutch, sir. I am the Ghost of Individual Impact and I've come to show you what I could be with the right education."

"You are but a child. How can you be a ghost?" stuttered Clutch.

"My dreams and hopes for the future died at a young age because no one ever showed me what I could be capable of in life," replied the Ghost of Individual Impact, "But I have come to show you what

could have been.” With that, Clutch was whisked away to a classroom in his district. There he saw the small child who had awoken him. The child was sitting at the back of the room, and only glanced up to listen to the teacher on occasion. The teacher repeated instructions multiple times, and covered material from previous grade levels. The curriculum was appropriate for the majority of the students, but clearly, this particular child was bored and ignored. The scene shifted and the child grew into a high school student who was belligerent to teachers and distracting to other students. Again, the scene shifted, this time to a high school graduation. There was an empty seat where the child should have been. Clutch turned to the Ghost of Individual Impact and asked why the seat was empty.

“Elementary school was always so easy for me that I didn’t have to try. I was never challenged. In the higher grades, I thought I could slide by the same way. When things got too hard, I just stopped going to school. I wasn’t playing sports or in any academic clubs, so it was easy to just walk away,” the ghost explained.

“But you could have graduated at the top of your class,” blurted the astonished Clutch, “If you had just tried to do the work.”

“No one helped me learn study skills. No one introduced me to higher level thinking skills. No one told me that effort had to be applied to ability.” With that, the Ghost of Individual Impact returned Clutch to his drafty bedroom and disappeared from sight.

Clutch drifted back to sleep when the sound of breaking glass shattered his peaceful rest. He sat up in bed, just in time to see a young adult enter his room through a broken window.

“Good, Old Man Clutch. I’m glad you’re awake. I’ve got a lot to show you. Step lively, geezer.”

“You broke my window! Who are you and what are you doing here? What is it you want?” Clutch pulled the covers higher over his chest and demanded answers of the young adult.

The Ghost of Social Impact rolled his eyes and responded, “I’m pretty sure you can answer all those questions. Barley told you I’d be coming.”

Clutch opened his mouth to respond, but was carried to the following scene before he could get a single word out. Before him, he saw the young man wearing a Burger Barn uniform and flipping meat patties on a greasy grill.

“See me there at the grill? Do you think that’s all I’m capable of?” the Ghost of Social Impact questioned Clutch.

“No... I’m sure you could be doing more with your life, but maybe you enjoy this work.”

“Wrong, Old Man Clutch. I flip burgers because it’s the only job I can get. I’ve been in and out of jail for things I thought I could get away with...challenges I thought I was up to solving. With my record, no place that matches my abilities will hire me. I’m not satisfied with my life, but what else am I supposed to do? My background of poverty, behavior issues in the classroom, and achievement test scores all hid the fact that I was a student with high abilities. No one identified me for what I could be.”

Without another word, Clutch found himself back in his bedroom. As he began to cover the broken window, a voice behind him spoke. Startled, Clutch turned to see what could only have been the Ghost of Global Impact. Dressed in a torn overcoat and tattered suit, the bearded man slumped onto

Clutch's bed. Now well familiar with the procedures of these visitors, Clutch asked the man to show him what he needed to see.

"You can't handle it. The future of the United States is too dismal for you," whispered the bearded ghost.

Clutch shook his head and said, "If there is something I can do to stop what I see in the future, you must show me!"

"Very well. Step closer." The Ghost of Global Impact opened his overcoat and scenes from within the folds of the garment appeared. The affects of not educating high ability students at an appropriate level were far reaching. The United States could no longer compete in a global market because of a lack of workers with problem solving skills and creativity. Businesses moved to other countries where they could find the employees they needed. Civil and individual effort towards improving lives dissipated as cultural apathy grew. Scientists no longer looked for cures to diseases, and entire cities were eliminated by viral infections. Institutes of high learning closed their doors with so few applicants. Those looking for more education had to find it in another country.

Clutch turned away from the images that represented what could and would be if education for high ability students was not promoted and supported. When he turned again, the Ghost of Global Impact was gone. No matter. Clutch had work to do! He dressed quickly, nodded a 'thank you' to the photograph of Barley hanging on the wall, and returned to his school office.

Remembering that tomorrow would be a day of celebrating student success, Clutch opened the spreadsheet files on his computer that showed how money in the corporation was going to be spent. He would be adding to the celebration. First on the agenda would be funding to develop rigorous curriculum for students with high abilities. The curriculum writers would need materials and professional development to learn how to develop critical thinking, self-reflection, cooperation, effort, and perseverance. Next, he wanted to make sure teachers in this district could identify this population. They would need some specific professional development for that, along with the measures that could be used to identify all students with high abilities. Not one student should slip through the cracks. What was being done for extracurricular activities for these special students? Clutch added lines to his spreadsheet for chess clubs and academic bowls, and then leaned back in his chair to survey the results. Yes, more money was used, but when he considered what could be, the cost was well worth it. Never again would Clutch question the importance of educating students with high abilities. Tomorrow would be a day of celebration, indeed.