

Grappling with Seuss

by Rev. Michelle Collins, delivered March 2, 2014 (Dr. Seuss's 110th birthday)

When *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* was published, it only had two colors, red and green. Art director Cathy Goldsmith was assigned the job of creating a four-color version of illustrations from the book for a puzzle. This project ended up having an unexpected twist in it. When she first sent Geisel her sketch, he called her right back with a problem. "You know what's wrong? You need some color in the snow."

"What do you mean? Snow is white!"

"No," he says. "Look here, it's too white. You need a little color so it doesn't blind you." He grabbed his color chart and gave her a number for pale mint green for her snow. Green snow! What was he thinking?!? But she went with it, and put green snow into the puzzle picture. And the crazy thing is, it worked. The other colors in the picture dominated and the pale green snow was a soft snow-white.¹

Only Dr. Seuss could make green snow that works as snow! Today our celebration of Dr. Seuss in our service is in honor of today's being his 110th birthday. Theodor Geisel went by the pen name Dr. Seuss for most of his children's books, and occasionally Theo LeSieg for books that he wrote but others illustrated. He wrote 46 books as Dr. Seuss over the course of his life. Now while we love to "claim" people as UU's, Dr. Seuss isn't one of them, although wouldn't it be cool if he was! He wrote on such a range of topics, from beginning readers like *Green Eggs and Ham* to stories about dreams and imagination like *If I Ran the Zoo* to social and political commentaries like *Yertle the Turtle* which was about Hitler and anti-authoritarianism, *The Lorax* about environmental degradation, and *The Sneetches* about racism and racial equality. Geisel wasn't one to keep his opinions to himself!

The story that I shared today, *The Butter Battle Book*, was probably his most controversial book. It was the third to the last book that he wrote, followed only by *You're Only Old Once* and *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* He began working on it at a difficult time in his life. He had just had cancer diagnosed on his tongue and had compromised to half of the treatment for it. He was afraid that the other half of the treatment would affect his voice and speech. It was 1983, twelve years since *The Lorax* had been published, and Geisel's concern was focused on the mounting cold war and nuclear arms build-up and his fear for where it might all go to. He had said, "I'm not anti-military; I'm just anti-crazy." And so he plunged into work on the book with unusual intensity, consulting retired military friends as needed for questions and details. While

¹ Judith & Neil Morgan, *Dr. Seuss & Mr. Geisel: A Biography*, page 244.

his process was often more back-and-forth, the words came first with this book. It was an important message that he wanted to get across about his reservations about the buildup and nuclear arms race.

The questions and objections started almost as soon as the sketches were delivered to the publisher. Is this a children's book for adults or an adult book for children? The title, the cover art, the content, the hanging ending. All of it got fiercely questioned and challenged, far more than usual.² Geisel had raised a topic that touched a tender spot.

Geisel wasn't afraid to engage difficult questions with his work. Some of his books were his way of doing just that, and encouraging others who were reading his work to do so as well. In many ways, I think he pushed farther than many of us with these difficult and uncomfortable questions, he pushed us into uneasy territory, which is why it brought feelings of uneasiness, or outright challenge.

Some questions and topics are easier to grapple with, and some are more challenging and even downright uncomfortable. What I want to ask today is what helps us to grapple with these difficult and uncomfortable questions. Ted Geisel could work with these challenging questions and in turn get us to do so – what do we see in him that helps us to better grapple with them ourselves?

What makes questions uncomfortable in the first place? There are a number of things, I think. Questions that tap into feelings of guilt and shame are automatically uncomfortable to some degree. Now I want to take just a moment to distinguish between these two things, guilt and shame. This is a distinction that finally clicked for me when my sexual ethics professor explained it. Guilt is connected to feelings about something that you did, or didn't, do. It comes from the consequences for that action or your feeling that you should have done something differently. Shame is a feeling about one's self. It's an evaluation about one's being and is often deeper than guilt. So guilt is about one's doings, and shame is about one's being. And feelings of either one, guilt about what one has done or hasn't done about a topic, or shame perhaps from how one has benefitted from it, either one can make a topic an uncomfortable one.

Fear is another thing that makes things uncomfortable to grapple with. I definitely tend to shy away from things when they touch on feelings of fear, whether that fear is concrete and conscious or less concrete. Fear makes things uncomfortable. And cultural norms can get in the way or getting into certain topics as well. By these norms, some topics are not acceptable to talk about. Now since this definitely varies by culture, by generation, and by person, it isn't the same for everyone. But in a group, if it's

² Morgan, pages 248-251.

uncomfortable for some folks in the group to engage with, that's going to affect the whole group.

Lots of things can make questions difficult or comfortable for us to engage with. But Ted Geisel didn't shy away from them. At least in the end he didn't shy away from them. He still faced many very human struggles as he prepared his work. *The Sneetches* almost got abandoned entirely one day. *The Sneetches* was Geisel's statement against racism. It involves a race of cute teardrop shaped yellow creatures, some with green stars on their bellies and some without. In the beginning, the star-bellied Sneetches are different and better than those without, but by the end of the book, thanks to some Seussian mischievousness in the form of a sly machine-bearing salescreature, the Sneetches begin to see one another as Sneetches and not as different. A friend of Geisel's had walked into his studio one day as he was working on this story and Ted proclaimed that he had just abandoned the whole story. "Someone I respect told me it was anti-Semitic."³

The stars on the bellies. The book did get back on track, thanks to the support of the friend that day, who challenged Geisel to look past one comment to his vision and not get derailed by it. But Geisel certainly wasn't immune to the effects of uncomfortable topics either.

But he was able to go farther with questions than many others at the time, and his work still challenges us. I am guessing that *The Butter Battle Book* wasn't necessarily entirely comfortable to hear today. So what can we learn from the example of Geisel's work as Dr. Seuss? What are some of the ways that he made it easier to grapple with difficult questions?

First, he had to be able to ask the questions in the first place. This is often easier said than done. In the case of *The Butter Battle Book*, it took the respect and reputation that Geisel had established over the years. I imagine if someone unknown had submitted that book to Random House, it never would have been published in the first place. But coming from Dr. Seuss, it was able to be said. Not without difficulties, though. That started with the title. The publisher advocated strongly for a more innocuous title, "The Yooks and the Zooks" rather than "The Butter Battle Book" which was too upfront about the topic matter. Perhaps they thought it would make people too uncomfortable and get in the way of sales. But Geisel's advocates stepped in for him, and the title was restored. But it wasn't just the title. For the first time, the text of a Dr. Seuss story came into question, too. But in the end, because of Geisel's reputation, the respect he

³ Morgan, page 173.

had earned over the years, his vision was able to be heard.⁴ While not many folks have the reputation of Dr. Seuss, we do have circles and groups with whom we are in relationship. Through the respect and rapport we have in these relationships, we too can find the authority to be able to ask challenging and uncomfortable questions.

To do this though, we have to be willing to make others uncomfortable. This definitely isn't easy to do though! I bet I'm not the only one who shies away from making other people feel uncomfortable. It's something we've been socially conditioned about. But Geisel wasn't afraid of it. In fact, he liked the critiques of his social commentaries and the thoughts that they sparked. A concerned mother wrote the publishing house about her own efforts to get the book banned from schools and local libraries. I actually consider efforts to ban books, especially children's books, as huge compliments to the success of those books in touching strong feelings and ideas for us. My daughter doesn't know it, but I've gotten books for her specifically because they were on banned lists. Other critics didn't like the hanging ending, which I find one of the more delicious parts of the story. Geisel enjoyed the critiques as evidence that he had touched something tender in folks. He was known to have said that he would have been upset if the book had failed and was instead "pleased and proud" of how well it had done.⁵ Some of our monthly themes here at the church aren't comfortable themes. Folks have talked with me about this on occasion. Themes like Brokenness from this past fall or Evil from last spring; next month's theme is Confession. These aren't necessarily topics that we gravitate towards. But I think that because they are uncomfortable, they can push us even farther. I have heard from small groups that their discussions on months with these more uncomfortable themes are sometimes the best discussions. I think Geisel's challenge to us would be to keep asking these kinds of questions, especially when they are harder to ask.

There's magic that happens in the stories, too. Geisel has a magical way about him that shifts the subject but not the issue. He picks subjects that are safer feeling and therefore easier to talk about. *The Sneetches* is a story about racism, but the difference is that rather than skin color, the story is about the presence of green belly stars. *Yertle the Turtle* is a critique of Hitler and authoritarianism, but it's filled with cute turtles with rounded blue shells. Yertle makes the other blue-shelled turtles get into a huge pile so he can sit on top of them. By shifting the context, Geisel breaks us out of ruts in our brains so that we can talk about things that otherwise are more uncomfortable to talk about.

⁴ Morgan, page 251.

⁵ Morgan, page 255.

It's not just shifting the subject, but also the ridiculousness that Geisel brings into his stories that makes the commentary and questions all the more clear. This is where he is really genius in his work. The star-bellied Sneetches who go through star-on and star-off machines countless times until identities are irrevocably confused. The Yooks and the Zooks in today's story whose main identity difference is preference about bread consumption. A little story about two stubborn creatures called Zax who want to go different directions but are in each other's way and stubbornly stand there for years. By pushing things to the ridiculous, Geisel exposes the underlying issues and challenges our rational brains to reconsider. When I look at the Yooks and the Zooks and at the Sneetches, I am brought back to our common humanity and rethink my attachments to things that get in the way of my seeing that.

What does this mean for us now? How can we use some of these tools of Dr. Seuss to help us grapple with questions and issues that are difficult or uncomfortable? There are plenty of topics and questions today that are difficult or uncomfortable to grapple with. We are just starting up a new monthly theme, peace this month. Timely now, and probably timely most every other time too. Where in our work and in our lives could we use some more peace? What's getting in the way of that? But using the tools we talked about today, are there any ways that we could shift the conversation to make it easier to talk about without avoiding it. What about underlying issues that aren't being talked about – is it possible to make them even more ridiculous in order to bring them into the open or draw attention to them?

Ted Geisel made a mark in the world, and not just for beginning readers but for all of us. Fellow author Maurice Sendak said this about *The Butter Battle Book*: "Surprisingly, wonderfully, the case for total disarmament has been brilliantly made by our acknowledged master of nonsense, Dr. Seuss... Only a genius of the ridiculous could possibly deal with the cosmic and lethal madness of the nuclear arms race... He has done the world a service."⁶ We have many more questions that need to be asked and issues that need to be grappled with. And it is our religious and moral imperative to not take the easy path and instead to imagine what the world might be able to be and how we might help it get there. Let's join together with the continuing legacy of Dr. Seuss on this journey. May it be so.

⁶ Quoted in Morgan, 252.