WHAT’S GOOD ABOUT SNEETCHES IS THE THINGS THAT THEY TEACHES

On 50th anniversary, we still have something to learn from Dr. Seuss’ fat yellow birds

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By Steve Cocheo, executive editor

My parents were very big on reading and telling stories at bedtime. Some of what my brother and I heard were kid-friendly retellings of the original “Twilight Zones,” and some were the classical kid stories, like chapters from Lassie Come Home. My father used to do a mean take on Lewis Carroll’s poems “Jabberwocky” and “The Walrus and the Carpenter.”

Some of the stories I remember best, and which I took some lessons from, were those by Dr. Seuss. Especially “The Sneetches.”

The Sneetches debuted 50 years ago, in a Seuss collection aptly named The Sneetches and Other Stories. The story of the Sneetches is quickly told, but the lessons unfold over a lifetime.

Some of them relate very directly to what faces bankers, in general and especially in an election year.

Your basic Sneetch story

Theodor Seuss Geisel, writing as Dr. Seuss, combined goofy drawings with clever quasi-poetry to make memorable stories. Even as a kid, I sensed that Seuss’s work was a bit edgier than most kid stories of the time—I was born in 1957, so I was a first-generation Seussite.

Seuss stories always carried a message or two, but they weren’t the spell-it-out-in-bold-type morals of Aesop’s fables and other stories and they didn’t whack you over the head.

Some of them were obvious, some kind of snuck up on you. Some probably haven’t dawned on me yet.

The story of the Sneetches was the latter kind of story, one with an obvious but still unstated message, and other messages that didn’t hit home until I was much older.

The plot is simple. Sneetches are rotund, goofy-looking yellow birds who can’t fly. They come in two varieties: Plain Bellied and Star Bellied. They all live--but only one variety happily--by the sea.

The Star Bellied Sneetches--whose sole distinction is a small blue star--crowned themselves the elite. They “had frankfurter roasts, or picnics or parties or marshmallow toasts,” to which their plain-bellied brethren weren’t invited. Plain Bellies got left out of all the good stuff.

Enter McBean, the fixer

Then along comes an ape-like creature with a bowler, “Sylvester McMonkey McBean.”

The self-proclaimed “Fix-It-Up-Chappie” promises the plain Sneetches that his special machine will bestow stars on their bellies for only $3 each.

A cheap way into the club.

And McBean delivered.

They all had stars for their $3, and proclaimed to the original Star Bellies that now they could, literally, join the party, because they were just as good now.

The horrified Star Bellies were ripe for McBean’s next move. For only $10 each, they could enter another machine and have their stars removed, thus retaining their special status.

What happened next, of course, Seuss described best:

“All the rest of that day, on those wild screaming beaches,

The Fix-It-Up-Chappie kept fixing up Sneetches.

Off again! On again! In again! Out again!

Through the machines they raced round and about again,

Changing their stars every minute or two. They kept paying money…”

At that age, money grabbed my attention.

In the end, McBean parts all the Sneetches from every last cent, and drives off for fresh victims.

“And he laughed as he drove in his car up the beach,

‘They never will learn. No. You can’t teach a Sneetch!’ ”

More about that in a moment.

Lessons obvious and not so

As a kid, of course, you homed in on the Plain Bellies, you identified with them. Most kids have felt left out of the “in crowd” at some point, and wished for a magical solution. Perhaps the more discerning kids saw Seuss’ mission: To combat prejudice, racial and otherwise.

But over the years, my mind has come back to the Sneetches, and I found that as I grew older and more experienced in business and life, the story’s message grew and meant more to me. While we all can learn lessons about what makes us feel superior or inferior--and the often passing nature of such supposed distinctions--what meant more to me over the years was Sylvester McMonkey McBean.

I’ve met McBean in many guises, over the years. Sometimes I’ve recognized him right away, and put my hand on my wallet or my principles, depending on what he was after.

Sometimes, to my regret, not so.

Enough life has gone by that I also get itchy at anyone who promotes themselves, essentially, as a “Fix-It-Up Chappie.” Quick fixes, at home, at the magazine, in banking, don’t really exist.

At one level, McBean represents the hucksters who everyone should be on guard against. Sometimes we meet them in the person of a politician. Sometimes they are slick consultants pushing panaceas. Sometimes they are just a glib business acquaintance who starts by promoting a solution that you later find yourself paying for, one way or another, or delivering on. (One of my other childhood favorites was the very old fable, “Stone Soup.”)

I recall one consultant, whom I held in respect up until that time, who told me that it was critical for someone in his business to always have something fresh to sell each season, kind of a “flavor of the year.” (Star off, star on, star off…) Perhaps I judged him too harshly; I’ve certainly met plenty of honest consultants, too, mind you.

Basically, anybody who sells instant solutions should be suspect. Even if the solutions work--remember, McBean delivered on his promises--one has to consider the costs of the solution. And there are costs beyond money.

Indeed, picking up the cry for an idea is something a trade magazine editor like myself must be careful about. We lead and we also follow, sometimes simultaneously.

But the “printed” word--whether ink or pixels--commands sufficient respect that we can’t be too careful what we say, and, intended or not that way, appear to endorse. Understanding what we expose to the light of publicity is a must. Likewise, anyone in financial services ought to be able to understand clearly what they are dealing with, especially if they are selling it to others. And that includes internal “customers,” as well as the public.

A deeper meaning…

Hucksters, opportunist, and so forth—we all know they are out there. But there is also the type that profits by digging deeper. Ultimately, what is McBean but the sort of person who feeds on the discontent of others?

Today’s world--financial and the broader world--is full of characters who see discontent, divisiveness, and differences between groups as an opportunity. When they can’t find real schisms, they invent them.

Some of them we spot, but others are great salesmen and they can trick us. And some hide behind legitimate causes.

A good resolution for the new year for myself is to examine motivations more closely, before embracing the next hot idea.

We all have to be wary of Sylvester McMonkey McBean and be watching out for him. He’s certainly watching for us.

Dr. Seuss seems to have had faith that people were capable of wising up. In response to McBean’s “You can’t teach a Sneetch,” he concluded his fable this way:

“But McBean was quite wrong, I’m quite happy to say

That the Sneetches got really quite smart on that day.

The day they decided that Sneetches are Sneetches

And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches.

That day, all the Sneetches forgot about stars and whether

They had one, or not, upon thars.”

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