

***It's a Wonderful Life***  
**The Liberal Meaning of Frank Capra's Iconic Holiday Classic**

By  
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One of my favorite sitcoms is *The King of Queens*, starring Keven James and Leigh Remini as Doug and Carrie Hefferman, a blue-collar working couple living in Queens, New York, along with Carrie's obnoxious father, Arthur Spooner, played by the hysterical and now late comedian Jerry Stiller, the same actor who played George Costanza's nutty father in *Seinfeld*. One of the funniest and most memorable episodes for me is the one in which Arthur begins watching famous movies he'd never heard of before, including *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Noticing this as she walks into the living room, Carrie says, "Oh, *It's a Wonderful Life*, pretty great, huh?"

"Actually, I think this one's a swing and miss," Arthur says, disappointedly.

"What are you talking about?" Carrie says in disbelief. "It's one of the greatest movies of all time!"

"I don't get it," Arthur responds. "With George Baily, the town couldn't be duller. Without him, there's nightclubs, casinos, it's fabulous. I wish he never had been born."

Art is always a matter of interpretation, which may be especially so of what has become director Frank Capra's most beloved and famous film. Following its release in 1946, *It's a Wonderful Life* was nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Director, which would have been Capra's fourth as director and his fourth for best picture. His first picture to do so was, *It Happened One Night*, released in 1934, which was the first film in history to win Academy Awards in five major categories: Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Actor, Best Screenplay, and Best Director (the only other two to have done so are *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Silence of the Lambs*). Capra's other two Best Picture awards were for *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, in 1936, and *You Can't Take It With You*, in 1938.

Despite its nominations, however, what has become Capra's most remembered movie didn't win a single Academy award in '46 and was a box office bomb. It lost over half a million dollars, which was a tremendous amount in those days, especially considering it didn't cost much more than two million to make. It was so unpopular that its existence quickly disappeared from the minds of most and would have remained in the scrap bin of forgotten films were it not for a clerical mistake in 1974, 28 years after its disappointing reception by moviegoers.

That's when Republic Pictures, its owner at the time, unintentionally failed to renew its copyright, which placed it in the public domain. Thousands of local TV stations around the U.S., eager for new holiday programming, began broadcasting it royalty free, and continued doing so for the next twenty years, which is how it became the familiar Holiday classic it's now considered. Today, however, thanks to a 1993 Supreme Court decision, Republic

Pictures has regained its rights and has since given NBC an exclusive license to show *It's a Wonderful Life* twice a year. Nowadays, of course, people can rent it online or even own it themselves for a few bucks and watch it without commercials whenever they want.

Republic Pictures was able to regain its rights because it had retained the rights to "The Greatest Gift," the short story that inspired the film. One morning in 1938, toward the latter half of the Great Depression, a man named Philip Van Doren Stern was getting ready for work when he got the idea for a story about a man who, on the eve of Christmas, is prevented from committing suicide by a stranger. The encounter ultimately restores his faith in humanity and renews his love for life. Stern couldn't sell the story, but he liked it enough to turn it into a pamphlet that he printed about two hundred copies of, most of which he sent to his friends as Christmas cards.

That was in 1943, five years after Stern got the idea. Two years later it was printed in *Good Housekeeping* magazine, upon which RKO Radio Pictures bought the film rights for ten grand. Although Frank Capra, who had been making movies since the days of silent film, was the most successful director of the 1930s, and had already served during World War I, didn't stop him from joining the military again just four days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. It then became his job to produce propaganda films to improve morale among the ranks. He worked directly for the senior officer in charge of the Army, General George C. Marshall, who would eventually become President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, and President Harry Truman's Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense.

Despite being awarded a Distinguished Service Medal, presented by Marshall himself, Capra was more than ready to come home and get back to his career. "It was my first picture after being in the army for about five years," Capra recollected. "I was scared to death. I had not looked through the eyepiece of a camera at an actor in all that length of time. What would my first film be about?" One thing he did know, he said, "It certainly wasn't going to be about war. I'd had my belly full of war and I came out a perfect pacifist. So what would it be about?"<sup>1</sup>

This is where Stern's short story comes in. Capra worked for RKO, which, again, owned the rights. According to Capra, three of its best screenwriters attempted to adapt it, but he said they all missed the story's main point. They missed "The idea I got when I bought this Christmas card," he said. "In about nine paragraphs there was this story: a man was a failure, was given the opportunity to come back and see the world as it would have been had he not been born. And he finds out no man is a failure. Well, my goodness, this thing hit me like a ton of bricks. So I wrote my own script and that's the story of *It's a Wonderful Life*."

Nine paragraphs aren't much to base an entire feature film on, and Capra added a lot to the original story, but he never veered from its main premise. Instead of George Bailey, *The*

*Greatest Gift's* protagonist is named George Pratt. It begins with Pratt standing at a bridge, preparing to jump off.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a quiet voice beside him said.

George turned resentfully to a little man he had never seen before. He was stout, well past middle age, and his round cheeks were pink in the winter air as though they had just been shaved.

"Wouldn't do what?" George asked sullenly.

"What you were thinking of doing."

"How do you know what I was thinking?"

"Oh, we make it our business to know a lot of things," the stranger said easily.

Before long George admitted his true feelings:

"I'm stuck here in this mudhole for life, doing the same dull work day after day. Other men are leading exciting lives, but I—well, I'm just a small-town bank clerk that even the Army didn't want. I never did anything really useful or interesting, and it looks as if I never will. I might just as well be dead. I might better be dead. Sometimes I wish I were. In fact, I wish I'd never been born!"

The little man stood looking at him in the growing darkness. "What was that you said?" he asked softly. "I said I wish I'd never been born," George repeated firmly. "And I mean it too."

The stranger's pink cheeks glowed with excitement. "Why that's wonderful! You've solved everything. I was afraid you were going to give me some trouble. But now you've got the solution yourself. You wish you'd never been born. All right! OK! You haven't!"

With that, the stranger gave George a satchel full of hairbrushes, explaining, "It'll open a lot of doors that might otherwise be slammed in your face." Soon thereafter George realized he must pose as a salesman just to talk to his friends and family because none of them recognized him anymore. His wish had come true. George Pratt had never been born and soon discovered many of the people he loves were in serious trouble as a result, including his wife Mary, who ended up married to an abusive husband, and that his brother had drowned as a child because George wasn't there to save him, just like in the movie.

One important difference between the movie and the short story is Capra's introduction of an antagonist to the mix, robber baron Henry F. Potter, played memorably by Lionel Barrymore. Potter is the antithesis of George Bailey, played, as you know, by Jimmy Stewart, who, incidentally, had also just come back from the war and wondered if he could ever act again. He wondered, after all the horrors of war, if acting could lead to anything important. This desire to do something meaningful for humanity was a desire of Stewart's that mirrored the character he played. It was the underlying ethic that prevented him from becoming like Mr. Potter, a selfish individual who cared only for himself, regardless of how doing so impacts the welfare of others and one's own community.

In one memorable scene, Potter invites George to his office, to entice him into giving into his own self-interests.

"What's your point Mr. Potter?" George asks.

"My point? My point is I want to hire you."

"Hire me!"

"Yes. I want you to manage my affairs, run my properties. George, I'll start you out at twenty thousand dollars a year."

That was a lot of money back then, as evidenced by George's wide eyes and open mouth, out of which the expensive cigar Potter had given him promptly drops.

"Twenty thousand dollars a year?"

"You wouldn't mind living in the nicest house in town, buying your wife a lot of fine clothes, a couple of business trips to New York a year, maybe once in a while, Europe? You wouldn't mind that would you George?"

Would I?" George says. "You're not talking to somebody else around here, are you? You know, this is me, remember me, George Bailey?"

"Oh yes, yes, George Bailey whose ship has just come in," Potter replies with a wink.

"Providing he has enough brains to climb aboard."

"Wholly mackerel. How about the Building and Loan?" He asks, referring to the family business he's been trying to save for the sake of the entire town.

"Confound it man, are you afraid of success! I'm offering you a three-year contract at twenty thousand dollars a year starting today! Is it a deal, or isn't it?"

This encounter was only the worst of many similar temptations George faces throughout the movie. At its very start, when still an adolescent, he walks into the pharmacy where he works and says, "I wish I had a million dollars." He then shows the latest National Geographic magazine to young Mary, who would become his love interest and wife later in life. "I've been nominated for membership in the National Geographic Society," he brags, "I'm going out exploring someday. You watch." Upon graduating from high school, he also tells Mary, "I'm shaking the dust of this crummy little town off my feet and I'm gonna see the world."

George's greatest wish is to leave Bedford Falls behind and to become free and independent. But each time he plans to leave, something gets in his way, his own sense of responsibility to others, his own sense of moral duty. His plans to leave must be delayed after his father's sudden death so that he can stay long enough to manage the business. Upon completing this task, and finally saying goodbye, Mr. Potter, a Board member, announces his plan to take it over. George protests but tells the board members to what they want and heads for the train station, "Providing," that is, "he has enough brains to climb aboard." Excited as he is to leave, he knows he can't, discards all the wonderful travel brochures he'd collected over the years, and reluctantly turns toward town to settle down, feeling as if he'd finally been defeated.

George personally suffers each time he makes this same decision to put the needs of others before his own wishes. As a child, he loses his hearing in one ear after risking his life to save his brother from drowning. His drunken boss beats him after George saves him from making a deadly pharmaceutical mistake. When there's a run on the bank, he has to cancel his own honeymoon. George isn't made happy by doing the right thing, but happiness doesn't seem to be his main motivation. Maybe it's his own integrity that most drives him. Maybe it's his compassion for others. Or his sense of duty to his community.

"Well Mr. Potter I know I ought to jump at the chance, but I just, ah, I wonder if it would be possible for you to give me twenty-four hours to think it over?"

"Sure, sure. You go on home and talk about it to your wife."

"I'd like to do that."

"Yeah. In the meantime, I'll draw up the papers."

"Alright sir."

"Okay George."

"Okay Mr. Potter," George says, shaking the old man's hand. Afterward he looks at his own hand and his demeanor changes to one of shame. He wipes it on his coat. "Alright, I'll ... Now, now, wait a minute here. Wait a minute. I don't need twenty-four hours. I don't need to talk to anybody. I know right now, and the answer is no, no! Dawg gone it! You sit around here, and you spin your little webs, and you think the whole world revolves around you and your money. Well, it doesn't Mr. Potter. In the, in the whole vast configuration of things I'd say you were nothing but a scurvy little spider."

George marches out the door, but after this latest moral decision, things on become worse, to the point that he's ready to commit suicide. This may be why the film wasn't well received by its initial audience, because the suffering it portrays was still too close to home. People were still feeling the worst impacts of the War and the Great Depression, and all the loss of life from both. During the Depression alone, suicide rates increased almost twenty-three percent during just its first four years.<sup>2</sup> Portraying this on film may have still been too much for many people to watch.

Fortunately, George doesn't take that final leap, thanks to Clarence, a befuddle angel who is sent to help him. We all know what happens then: George gets a chance to see what life would be like had he never existed, which enables him to recognize his value, and to return to his life a happy a grateful man. Here's how it goes in Stern's original short story.

He hurried down the hill and broke into a run when he neared the river. George was relieved to see the little stranger standing on the bridge. "I've had enough," he gasped. "Get me out of this—you got me into it."

The stranger raised his eyebrows. "I got you into it! I like that! You were granted your wish. You got everything you asked for. You're the freest man on earth now. You have no ties. You can go anywhere—do anything. What more can you possibly want?"

"Change me back," George pleaded. "Change me back—please. Not just for my sake but for others too. You don't know what a mess this town is in. You don't understand. I've got to get back. They need me here."

## It's a Wonderful Life

"I understand right enough," the stranger said slowly. "I just wanted to make sure you did. You had the greatest gift of all conferred upon you—the gift of life, of being a part of this world and taking a part in it. Yet you denied that gift."

Yet, being Christmas, and, more importantly, because George had learned his lesson by leaning how valuable his own life was, the magical stranger granted his second wish and things returned to normal, and George happily returned to his family and friends.

Capra said *It's a Wonderful Life* finally expressed what he'd been trying to say in all his movies. But "I had never heard or seen this plot used," he said, "in which a man was allowed to see how his little world would have been had he not been born. This was to me novel, new, and a wonderfully human way of pinning this idea down, on the importance of the individual which has always been the main theme of all my films."

Ultimately, then, *It's a Wonderful Life* is an homage to our most important liberal principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But it's also about the kind of person we will choose to be, the selfish kind who only thinks of oneself, or the kind who holds to the humanistic ethic, that we each have the moral responsibility to do what we can to look out for the welfare of others. Upon realizing this, George is happy at the end of the film, even though he's returning the way things were, to the very same problems, and stresses, and challenges he was ready to kill himself over. But now he runs back to town shouting Merry Christmas to everyone he sees. "Merry Christmas Bedford Falls!" "Merry Christmas movie house!" "Merry Christmas Emporium!" "Merry Christmas you wonderful old Building and Loan!" "Merry Christmas Mr. Potter!" "Merry Christmas wonderful old drafty house!"

There are lots of ways to throw our lives away. Mr. Potter, George's alter ego, threw his away even though he was the richest and most successful person in town. He threw it away by giving up his humanity and disregarding the humanity of others. Each of us must find the balance between freedom and belonging, between our own happiness and the happiness of others. But it is not as important to know what life would be like without as it is to wonder what life will be like because of us. The question is not what is the meaning of life, but what is the meaning of my life? What difference can we make to our friends, to our family, to our community? What must we give up? What must we endure? When we understand the answer to these questions, we gladly take on whatever challenges befall us, because we know the purpose of our lives, the truest source of all wealth and happiness.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GV9ADLvHiiU>

<sup>2</sup> Luo F, Florence CS, Quispe-Agnoli M, et al. Impact of business cycles on US suicide rates, 1928–2007. *Am J Public Health*. 2011;101(6):1139–1146. [PubMed CrossRef Show Abstract](#)