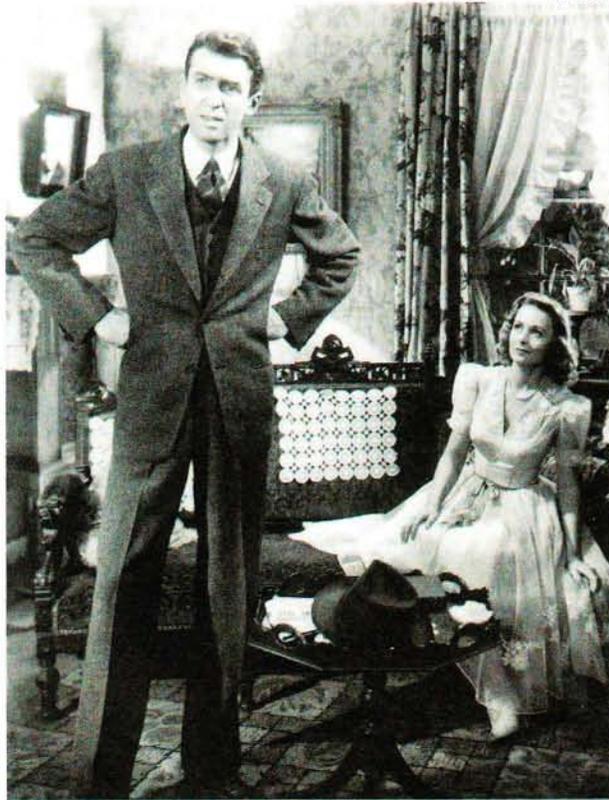


My George Bailey epiphany

'IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE' WAS REQUIRED VIEWING AT CHRISTMAS. FINALLY, ONE YEAR, I SAW ITS TRUE MASTERY.



James Stewart (l.) and Donna Reed star in 'It's a Wonderful Life' (1946).

It was the same every year. First, my mom whipped the Saran Wrap off some Christmas cookies we hadn't been allowed to touch until that moment. Then we turned the TV dial to Chicago's WGN, Channel 9. At 10:30, the first black-and-white frames filled the screen: "It's a Wonderful Life," starring Jimmy Stewart.

Hypnotized, I nibbled on almond crescents as the story unfolded. It's Christmas Eve, and George Bailey is teetering on the brink. He's spent his whole life doing his duty, keeping the family building and loan afloat, giving mortgages to cops and taxi drivers so they can buy decent houses. Then bumbling Uncle Billy loses an \$8,000 bank deposit. Facing bankruptcy and prison, George contemplates jumping in the river so his family can collect his life insurance. But a trainee guardian angel appears. Clarence persuades George to change his mind by letting him see what his hometown would have been like if he'd never been born.

It's a familiar formula today, spoofed everywhere from radio ads to "Saturday Night Live" skits. But to me, in grade school, it was sacred. "It's a Wonderful Life" was gospel, as true as the carols I sang at Sunday mass.

It wasn't until college that I began to doubt George Bailey. Somehow, my joy in watching his life unreal had worn thin. So I took a break from finals and sneaked into a late-night screening at the Student Union, thinking the novel setting would bring back the magic. But as the lights came up over the final strains of "Auld Lang Syne," I sat stewing in righteous indignation.

I had been betrayed. My beloved movie was clearly a piece of 1940s propaganda, designed to sell the masses

on conformity and the nuclear family. George wasted his life doing what authority figures told him to. No wonder he felt like jumping in the river! He should have followed his own dreams, gone off to build bridges and railroads in far-flung countries, had adventures. Now he was stuck in a decaying town with a leaky house, four whiny kids, and a matronly looking wife, and boy, was he ever sorry. I wanted to sit George down and ask him a few hard questions, such as: Why are you the only person capable of running the building and loan? But I knew he wouldn't have any answers for me.

The world kept turning. Every Christmas Eve, WGN showed "It's a Wonderful Life," but I wasn't around to watch it anymore. Like George, I'd set out to make a grown-up life for myself. I took a series of jobs that turned out to be lousy and moved around the country, looking for better ones. VCRs became affordable, and one Dec. 24, my boyfriend pulled one early present from under the tree: my very own copy of the film.

I unwrapped a plate of cookies, and we popped the tape in at 10:30 sharp. I settled in for the holiday propaganda I knew so well, as dense and comforting as my mother's leaden fruitcake. But in the years I'd been away, the movie had somehow morphed into a different picture.

That night, I watched a dark, dark film. How had this piece of raw angst ever become acceptable Christmas viewing? At the center of the movie

is a suicide attempt. Standing on that bridge in the snow, George decides to kill himself. He's been stalked by death and failure his whole life, and now he's finally lost the game. George lives in a world where your kid brother can drown if you're not careful, where your father dies too young and leaves you responsible for an alcoholic uncle and a penniless mother. This time, when George complained that Clarence looks like the kind of guardian angel he'd get — an angel who hasn't earned his wings yet — I silently agreed with him. This is the man's darkest hour, and divine intervention sends the office intern to help him out. It's just par for the course for George's life.

The tape went into a box with spare Christmas ornaments and stayed there. The next Christmas Eve, we watched my family's second-favorite holiday movie instead, the 1951 version of "A Christmas Carol," starring Alistair Sim. Christmases came and went. The boyfriend became a husband; I admitted that I hated my career and started over. I went back to school to study filmmaking. That December, I got an assignment to study a black-and-white movie and

write a paper about it. So one afternoon, I dug the tape from its nest of tinsel and watched it again.

I sat, notebook and pen forgotten in my lap, watching a movie I couldn't take my eyes off. I admired everything: the crisp pacing, the witty script, the raw emotions flashing across Jimmy Stewart's face. Over the years, I'd loved the film and hated it. I'd just never noticed it was a masterpiece.

Sometime during that viewing, it dawned on me that I hadn't really swapped stories when I switched from "It's a Wonderful Life" to "A

Christmas Carol." Far from creating a fable of conformity, I saw that Frank Capra had actually managed to retell the most famous Christmas story in the English language in his own words. George Bailey is an American Ebenezer Scrooge, visited by a supernatural being who shows him a different perspective of his own life. Both men discover what the world would be like without their participation — Tiny Tim dead, Uncle Billy consigned to the insane asylum — and realize their actions make a difference to the world. Like otherworldly therapists, the ghosts and angels don't perform any miracles. They simply deliver the gift of new eyes.

Dec. 24 falls just two days after the longest night of the year, a fitting time for George and Ebenezer to live through the dark nights of their souls. On Christmas, we string colored bulbs and light candles to remind ourselves that there is some kind of light in the darkness. The holidays are full of rituals to renew our faith, however we choose to define it. And at 10:30 on Christmas Eve, I know exactly which one I'll be following.

— Laurie McClellan