



## It's a Wonderful Life, a UU Christmas Carol

Clay Nelson@18 December 2022

I don't consider it Christmas until I have watched *It's a Wonderful Life*. I ticked that off last Sunday. So, for me, it's now Christmas.

I don't know when it became one of my treasured Christmas traditions, but I can't remember when it wasn't. When my kids were teenagers, there was lots of eye-rolling when I insisted that watching it was a family event. Something about it appealed to my Unitarian heart, and I wanted to inoculate theirs. They would ask me when I would find a new tradition. My answer was, "When I stop tearing up at the end."

While now it is a favourite of millions and is ranked eleventh best film of all time, it had a difficult birth and a long gestation. It was conceived in 1849 when Charles Dickens returned from visiting America. America disappointed him, but visits with Waldo Emerson and William Ellery Channing inspired him. Upon his return to London, he joined a Unitarian church and wrote *A Christmas Carol*, a Christmas story that does not mention Jesus or God. It was not about supernatural events and miracles. It was about our capacity to transform ourselves into compassionate and loving human beings.

Now our tale jumps ahead nearly one hundred years to when Philip Van Doren Stern spent six years writing a short story entitled *The Greatest Gift*. There is no disputing that he drew heavily from Dickens. Stern could not find a publisher. Instead, according to Wikipedia, he sent 200 self-published copies to friends as Christmas cards in December 1943. His daughter, Marguerite Stern Robinson, recalled, "I was in the third grade, and I remember delivering a few of these cards to my teachers and my friends ... My father, who was himself from a mixed religious background, explained to me that while this story takes place at Christmas time, and that we were sending it as a Christmas card to our friends, it is a universal story for all people in all times."

Its transformation from unpublished short story to film began when it came to the attention of Cary Grant, who convinced RKO, his movie

studio, to purchase the film rights for \$10,000. Eventually, RKO shelved the project, happily selling it for \$10,000 to Frank Capra, who saw its possibilities.

When the film was released, it opened to generally negative reviews, and it lost money at the box office. It even came to the attention of the FBI. On May 26, 1947, the Federal Bureau of Investigation issued a memo stating, "With regard to the picture *It's a Wonderful Life*, the substance of the film represented rather obvious attempts to discredit bankers by casting Lionel Barrymore as a 'scrooge-type' so that he would be the most hated man in the picture. This, according to these sources, is a common trick used by Communists. This picture deliberately maligned the upper class, attempting to show the people who had money were mean and despicable characters." Film historian Andrew Sarris observed as "curious" that "the censors never noticed that the villainous Mr Potter gets away with robbery without being caught or punished in any way."(Wikipedia)

Considering I have watched the film 50-plus times, I thought there were few insights left to be had. How wrong I was. Before my viewing last Sunday, I generally focused on the selfless service of George Bailey to his community, his willingness to speak truth to power, his unwillingness to be bought off by Potter, and his commitment to getting Italian immigrants out of Potter's slums and into their own homes. These are all Unitarian values that resonate with me, and since there is no mention of Jesus or God, it is a Unitarian Christmas story worthy of Dickens.

This time I saw a story of transformation which wasn't told directly in the film. The film conveys many messages beyond having faith in one another. It portrays Hollywood's view of American values 76 years ago when it was released. The framework Frank Capra used to tell the story involved historical events: The Spanish flu epidemic kills the druggist's son. The Great Depression is depicted by the run on the Building and Loan scuttling George and Mary's honeymoon. Henry Ford's efforts "to grow a car" using agricultural products for industrial purposes is alluded to in Sam Wainwright's using soybeans to make plastic. During WWII, both good and bad human characteristics are explored. Henry Potter uses his position as head of the draft board to protect those of privilege and exploit the marginalised while the rest of the community sacrifices for the war effort.

Clearly our values are transformed by the times in which we live. We only have to look at the Covid pandemic to know the truth of that.

What isn't shown in *It's a Wonderful Life* is diversity. The film falls short of giving an accurate picture of the racial diversity of the past. It struggles with presenting a multidimensional story of women in America in the first half of the 20th century. The portrayal of Mary and other women in the film is the film's greatest weakness. Donna Reed brought everything she had to this role, which was considerable, but Mary isn't portrayed as a real person.

Mary is presented as an ideal of "republican motherhood" that centres women's roles on domestic affairs and educating children. She does break out of that mould in many parts of the film to be a more authentic and empowered character. In the end, it's Mary who saves George. She's the one working at the grassroots level to save her family.

When Clarence finally shows George what the world would be like without him, this plot line takes all the agency from Mary. Without George, Mary is alone, weak and an unfulfilled old maid, closing up the library on Christmas Eve.

The portrayal of early 20th-century women in *It's a Wonderful Life* is further complicated by its lack of dialogue with race in America. The character of Annie is a middle-aged Black woman and the Baileys' domestic worker. Her time on screen amounts to about 2 of the 131 minutes of the total movie's run time. In that short time, Annie's role, and by extension the place of Black people in this story, is presented as service to, and comic relief for, the white characters. Lillian Randolph, a supremely talented actor and singer, took the roles she was offered, usually one-dimensional and demeaning characters. The Annie role holds to that paradigm.

Annie is portrayed as a fixture for years in the Bailey family, as she is seen preparing and serving food, assisting in Harry Bailey's wedding reception, and engaging in family politics and discussions. In one scene, as George and his father sit at the dinner table deep in conversation about the future of the Bailey Building and Loan, Annie pauses from clearing dishes to eavesdrop on George's reply about delaying college to

continue working there. George, noticing her interest in their conversation playfully but in a way that clarifies her inferior status in the household, invites her to “draw up a chair. Then you’d be more comfortable, and you could hear everything that’s going on.”

The interactions between Annie and the Bailey family contain even darker themes. On the night Harry Bailey graduates from high school, Annie has been busy making desserts for the graduation party and dinner for the family. As Harry prepares to leave for the dance, he chases Annie around the dining room table, playfully asking her for a kiss and saying, “Annie, I’m in love with you. There’s a moon out tonight.” The stage directions in the screenplay depict what happened next: “As he pushes her through the kitchen door, he slaps her bottom. She screams. The swinging door cuts off the noise.”

This assault and violation of a Black woman by a white teenage boy are presented just for laughs, which is telling. Capra must have felt the World War II-era audience would see this as just a playful moment and were unconcerned that Annie was seen as somewhat accepting or even welcoming of getting slapped and chased around the house by a high-school boy. Just imagine the difference in perspective here if you put a single white woman working in this same job in a Black family, and the 18-year-old Black male is chasing around Mary, and how an audience would have reacted to that. It does show the double standard in these constructions of gender and race.

Lastly, while Frank Capra created a propaganda film for the United States government in 1944 called *The Negro Soldier*, which presented an inclusive history showing Black involvement in U.S. wars, politics, and culture since the Revolution, a far less flattering picture of African Americans emerges when Clarence grants George’s wish never to have been born. Bedford Falls, his hometown, is transformed into the vice-ridden Pottersville. Capra’s hints at the degradation of the town come in the form of the Black music and jazz heard pouring out of the taverns and Dime-a-Dance halls. Mary’s fate as an old maid in this alternative universe, is portrayed as hideous and sad, yet as perfectly fine, appropriate, and desirable for Annie in the real world.

Unitarians today find these attitudes highly objectionable. This is not to say we have not shared them in the past. Nor have we fully

addressed systemic racism and gender inequality in the present. What we can say is since *It's a Wonderful Life* was released our consciousness has been raised. We are not the same faith we were 76 years ago.

**Meditation / Conversation Starter:**

How does Christmas transform you?