America’s Prayers: A Brief Discussion of *It’s a Wonderful Life*

Molly Kuenzi
Wisconsin Lutheran College

Second Annual
WELS and ELS
Undergraduate Research Symposium
CHARIS Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran College
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53226

April 27 and 28, 2002
Originally titled *The Greatest Gift*, Frank Capra’s first post-World War II picture with Liberty Films, Inc. was *It’s a Wonderful Life* in 1946 (Capra 376). *It’s a Wonderful Life* speaks to the sacrifice and changes felt by all Americans as the men returned from war to a healing economy. *It’s a Wonderful Life* smoothly addresses the issues of the WWII generation who experienced the Great Depression, finding their niche during the war, only to have to redefine themselves upon the war’s end, and whose very outlook changed from trusting optimism to worried discouragement through changes in iconography.

The film company responsible for *It’s a Wonderful Life* began as a group of pre-war directors returned from the service including Frank Capra and William Wyler (Capra 372). These directors were determined to show-up the incapable directors who had taken over during the war (Capra 372). Sensitive to film making and national moods, Liberty Films, Inc. directors released the two top Oscar contenders of 1946, Wyler’s *Best Year’s of Our Lives* (the Oscar winner) and Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (The Oscar favorite), thereby beginning their campaign with a blast (Capra 378).

The format of the opening scene of credits provides a fairy-tale sense. The credits are delivered on book-like pages with Christmas scenes of sleigh rides and traditional music. The pages are decorated as one might expect to find in a children’s’ book. The music begins with jingle bells and smoothly transitions into “Buffalo Gals” and then slows into a serious epic swell. The sound and images evoke a sense of goodwill and fun, simple times that are about to be portrayed in a grand work of art. “Buffalo Gals’ is a distinctly American folksong.
Noticeably, the music at the start of the movie is a few ascending harp notes at the sight of the plain sign proclaiming “You are now in Bedford Falls,” which leads into the soft and simple melody of “Come All Ye Faithful.” The ascending harp notes remind one of the beginnings of a dream sequence. The use of a popular Christmas carol invites all believers to come and “adore” the work of God, new life in Jesus. Also, the carol recalls the simple, “joyful” holiday seasons in the past. Over the melody the prayers of believers, the loved ones are heard. As a result the audience becomes aware of a small town people with small town—Christian—values. Following a Christian notion, the ordinary is celebrated.

The opening scenes of the film work from the present into a flashback. The heavenly authorities are discussing the central problem with Clarence (Henry Travers) who needs background information to understand his assignment. Thus, the film is divided in half with, essentially, the first half being the flashback and the second the present where the conflict is confronted and resolved. The audience must remember where it came from and work forwards into the crisis and its resolution—the past must be recognized and dealt with because it is important. The importance comes in the shaping events of one person’s life and how that life has shaped others’ lives.

Also, during the opening, the point of view is established through Clarence, the “simple” angel who must save George Bailey (James Stewart). The audience witnesses Clarence and learns of his mission before even meeting George Bailey. As a result, the audience is swayed to view George’s situation
from a warm-hearted Christian standpoint. With Clarence the audience is allowed to transcend time with the Good Sam mindset. The audience moves with Clarence from the present full of worry, concern and suicidal feelings of worthlessness to a past full of childhood games and self-less familial heroism—a heroism that involves only saving and half-deafness or even a slap on the ear. Later, the understated heroism appears as his taking over the Bailey Building and Loan after his father dies and his giving up college and travel for the sake of his brother and the last bastion against the rich and powerful businesses personified by Henry Potter (Lionel Barrymore). The heroism changes when the story shifts to the present where heroism is killing people to save many people, by downing some planes in combat. The WWII experiences usher in a darker, more terrifying form of heroism from the past’s small, yet poignant personal heroism.

One aspect of George’s character is his deep-seated desire to travel and design skyscrapers. It manifests itself as a child subscribing to National Geographic to the newly wed with plans for his honeymoon to a table with small models of buildings he will never build and big cities he will never see. Again it is George’s self-sacrifice that illustrates the heroism of small town values. George’s dreams progress from the idea of a long and great adventure to a short jaunt to a fantasy that is destroyed ultimately by his own frustration and hopelessness. Strangely, this progression mirrors the events of the country. The prosperity of his childhood may be correlated to the wide adventure he plans while the down-sizing reflects the depression and the destruction of his dream
parallels the destruction of the land and people he had held so much hope for seeing. As the comfortable world disintegrates so do the dreams that give him the hope that has motivated his life thus far.

George’s relationship with Mary (Donna Reed) also demonstrates how special George is in his own, small town or average person, way. Mary realizes as a child that George is special and she sets her sights on him before he is even aware of it. In the dance scene he is asked to dance with Mary and the camera accentuates his height. In this shot he is literally head and shoulders above the rest (in contrast to Potter who is crippled revealing his inner sickness).

Throughout this interlude the couple dances and sings and dreams. Significantly, they end up wearing clothes that do not belong to them and do not fit them—they cannot be people they, fundamentally, are not. All that seems so right in its common awkwardness is left behind when George learns of his father’s stroke. He assumes the weight of his family’s well being once again which leads to his working for the benefit of the entire town by taking over the business. George is thrust into a situation of sacrifice for the common good. He fights the “battle of Bedford Falls” because he cannot go off to war and he cannot leave Potter to inhumanely oppress the citizens. George is fighting his own war. He may not be able to fight in Europe or Asia, but he will fight to protect the “little guy.” The war is about people’s lives and the freedom of a country. George’s war is also about the quality of people’s lives and the belief in people having a choice—the freedom to be treated as “human beings” rather than “cattle.”

George’s actions and name call forth images of St. George killing a greedy
dragon who ate villagers when mutton was scarce. He saved the people of the area and converted them to Catholicism. St. George was paid by the king and gave the money away to the poor.

All the while he is “fighting,” Mary, “the kind of girl that will help you [George] find the answers,” is providing him with a home and family, love and support. She sees the goodness that George cannot see within himself. He cannot achieve the grand results his brother and other friends do in the war. George’s contributions are not that grand or revered. As a result, he easily loses sight of where the true heroism rests—in the average man’s small life of sacrifice for others.

The enemy George must fight is similar to that of the nation as a whole. Henry Potter holds the power to oppress the citizens and make or break their lives. This “warped,” old, crippled man resembles Hitler. Potter with a mechanical side—the wheelchair—buys up most of Bedford Falls leaving his tenants in subjugated poverty where they are enslaved by Potter’s greed for their rent. George states that “most people say you ‘stole’ all the rest” when discussing how they were the only two to make it through the depression nearly unscathed. Similarly, Hitler, with outrageous ideologies in hand, kept his forces working like a machine that coldly oppressed people into lives of practical slavery as they stole European territory. Potter becomes the head of the draft board because then he is able to exercise power and authority over the citizens of Bedford Falls. He, in a sense, is forming his own little military like Hitler.
George, however, has something in common with Potter—he is also unfit for battle. Potter has his wheelchair and George has his bad ear. The idea that no man is entirely bad or entirely good is reinforced by this similarity. Thus, George’s increasing disillusionment becomes believable when Potter states that George has become a “warped” young man. The two are opposed, but not necessarily opposites. Suddenly, America must confront it’s own dark side (like George contemplating suicide).

Interestingly, when the final worldly crisis occurs and George’s Uncle Billy (Thomas Mitchell) loses eight thousand dollars George once again steps in to save the day. George reveals to Potter that “I misplaced eight thousand dollars” instead of letting Uncle Billy take the punishment. As a result, George is left feeling a failure because he can not see a way out of the debt that will destroy him, his family, and his community. He can no longer be of benefit to anyone and his dreams are shattered with the knowledge that jail comes next. The small town every-man has failed so George sees no point to all of his suffering and the suffering the scandal will inflict on those around him. He does not think that any of the past triumphs were worth the pain of the future so he decides to end it by committing suicide.

As the movie progresses toward George contemplating suicide, several important actions take place. George shuts out Mary who has always provided the stability and support he has needed to keep fighting. Mary keeps George’s faith and hope alive. At home, their son asks how to spell “frankincense” and “hallelujah” to which George snaps a “how should I know—go ask your mother.”
Her very name, Mary, echoes the remarkable wife of Joseph and mother of Jesus the Savior. She becomes the Christian model or center in the home. Supposedly, Mary will help George “find the answers.” George will not even explain to Mary what the trouble is; he wants no help because he cannot foresee a way out so there is no reason to bother—Potter has won. Mary lives for George—there is no one else for her. Thus, George is misunderstanding the depth of love she feels for him and the meaning he has brought to her life, instead he only sees the pain his “failure” will cause. Mary is no longer enough.

George’s next step is prayer. He admits he has not been a “praying man” but that he needs God’s help. Mistakenly, George interprets the very next action as the answer to his prayer: “a bust in the jaw.” George has lost not only his faith in Mary’s ability to help him, but he has lost his faith in God’s help. George has no one left to turn to for aid.

The film then moves into the present with the arrival of Clarence coming to save George. Clarence states that he saved George by giving George something to save. Clarence understands that George is a self-less person and utilizes that to begin making the point that George truly does value human life.

The suicide action takes place at night, which emphasizes the corruption Potter’s control would bring if George were not there to keep him in line and provide a haven for the citizens. The smarmy neon lights on every building in the downtown sell sin and the people there are rough and distrusting.

The sequence with Clarence giving George the opportunity to view what life in Bedford Falls without him would be takes on the quality of a dream. The
settings skip around with little or no warning and the emotion is intense. Bedford Falls is a nightmare as Pottersville. However, the filth of Pottersville and the disturbingly bleak changes in the ordinarily happy, trusting, friendly people of Bedford Falls does not make George a believer.

It is Mary who once again puts George on the straight-and-narrow. After Clarence points out all that he had planned the one issue left for George is Mary. The scene with Mary and the non-existent George is the only vision scene without Clarence. The reality of Mary’s love for him once again becomes enough for George to have faith. George decides he wants to “live again” and begs God for the opportunity. George’s need for Mary’s guidance is a common post WWII theme. After the disruption of the war the women have been keeping things running smoothly so the displaced man turns to the steady woman for guidance and “answers.”

George has realized that the “little things” accumulate and create an intensely powerful “big thing” in the end—no single action could replace the value of each person’s life. George revels in the small, the theatre playing The Bells of St. Mary’s instead of reading “Girls, Girls, Girls,” the loose knob on the stairs at home. George realizes that he can go home and he can be happy with his life.

Mary takes on the role as George’s savior, affirming his renewed belief in the power of goodness within people, as she stands elevated above everyone else in the living room. Mary did not know what George’s problem was, but she found out and set about fixing it. Each little kindness George ever showed anyone is repaid at the film’s end. His good-hearted actions and self-sacrifice
are appreciated and they come full-circle to save him. The every-man’s sacrifices are worth the pain and are perpetuated in belief in the good—which is rewarded with redemption.

As soldiers are coming home from the war—like George’s brother—the people need to believe that good not only can, but has triumphed over evil and that the nightmarish events of the war are only a small part of the value of each person. Being the “little guy” is where the real power and heroism exists, the war may be over, but the soldier has something bigger yet to accomplish.

George Bailey’s difficulty finding his post-war work satisfying and his subsequent realization that self-sacrifice and hope and belief in the power of good is what makes a man great, give the audience hope that the nation has triumphed and the sacrifices of each individual are of vast significance in the grand scheme of life. The Christian sacrifices made by George and the other good citizens were anything but insignificant, they were in fact what kept evil at bay. The Battle of Bedford Falls, i.e. good versus evil, is won by the foot soldiers—the every day people like George Bailey.
Works Cited