

Gospel of Capra

Humans who have died, of course, cannot become angels, i.e., spiritual, non-corporeal beings created by God to protect us.

In that regard, “It’s a Wonderful Life” is flawed, what Mr. Potter would describe as sentimental hogwash.

Yes, but ...

Is there a better depiction in popular culture of the spirit inherent behind the Sermon on the Mount than George Bailey? Can you supply a better fictional example of being a light to the world, going above and beyond in works of charity, than the character who produced and provided the glue that held together Bedford Falls?

IAWL has become part of the fabric of the run-up to Christmas, its message a welcome alternative to the mindless commercialism in which many are already mired. Forty years ago, however, before DVR and DVDs, when even VCRs were rare, the movie was a novelty, something to fortunately stumble upon on late-night TV.

Like most, I was smitten with IAWL from my first exposure, to the point in the late 1970s, when staffers of the Maryland Gazette in Glen Burnie were asked to share what Christmas meant to them, my entry in that editorial was simply to find the movie and watch it; it’s all there.

While never as desperate as George, my faith was equally fickle. Despite friends and a large family, I nonetheless felt disconnected – most importantly, from Christ – and lonely.

Like George Bailey, I fell in love with a girl named Mary. A date in December 1982 took us to a church basement on Roland Avenue, where IAWL was being screened. She had never seen the movie, and its love story, along with hot chocolate and sugar cookies at intermission, proved more romantic than any Valentine’s Day chocolate and roses.

I carry a reminder of the movie every day, as Mary had “Be Happy It’s a Wonderful

Life" inscribed inside my wedding band. Our 35th Christmas as a married couple will include an infant granddaughter, Zuzu, her name another nod to IAWL.

It wasn't until last spring, however, when the written word was too difficult to focus on and documentaries became a diversion after open-heart surgery, that I gained a fuller appreciation for the man behind IAWL.

"Five Came Back," initially a book by Mark Harris, explores the Hollywood directors who produced propaganda films for the U.S. during World War II. I knew the bravado and work of John Ford and John Huston, but the other three men were revelations.

Before the war, George Stevens created lighthearted rom-coms. After filming D-Day and the Dachau concentration camp, he made "The Diary of Anne Frank" and "The Greatest Story Ever Told," his take on the life of Jesus.

The first post-war picture from William Wyler, a Jew who had emigrated from Europe, was "The Best Years of Our Lives," still a relevant depiction of the challenges soldiers face when they come home. He also gave us "Ben-Hur."

Born in Sicily, Frank Capra was not yet an American citizen when he served the U.S. during World War I. He had won three Academy Awards for best director when he joined the war effort under George Marshall, who would only go on to rebuild Europe.

After directing the famed "Why We Fight" series, Capra came home and made "It's a Wonderful Life." The third act includes some terrifyingly dark scenes created by a man who had seen the horrors of war.

While his masterpiece about the impact of an everyman - and the Gospel message of welcoming the stranger - topped the American Film Institute's list of the 100 most inspirational films in 2006, it flopped at the box office and was forgotten into the 1970s. Some of Capra's politics didn't age well, and he was viewed as a has-been at age 55.

He wasn't perfect, but Frank Capra did make a perfect film - theologians' objections aside.