

Mr. Potter's Offer: Occupy "It's a Wonderful Life"

Written by Karoline Steavenson
Thursday, 15 December 2011 11:52

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This time of year the classic film *It's a Wonderful Life* comes out of storage and is broadcast on TV, or pulled out of a video collection. In some places, including the Quad Cities, it will be shown in a theater. It's showing at the Galvin Fine Arts Center at St. Ambrose University on Saturday, December 18, at 1 p.m., with audience response encouraged.

As was typical with director Frank Capra's later films, it wasn't made primarily to be a blockbuster the way Hollywood films are often planned today. It was made so that Frank Capra could teach a few lessons. His later films always included morals.

One crucial lesson in *It's a Wonderful Life* is taught when Mr. Potter, the most powerful and intimidating man in Bedford Falls, offers George Bailey, his do-gooder nemesis, a job. Potter wants to destroy George's family-owned company, the Bailey Building & Loan. So driven by that most basic of sins – greed – Potter offers to make Bailey his paid lackey.

He knows George's soft spots – how much he adores his wife and how he longs to travel – so Potter offers Bailey supposed freedom from the drudgery of a simple, middle-class life if George will only bow to his will. Mr. Potter's offer is very lucrative, and he encases it in "family" – the one word that will pierce the heart of a good man or woman every time.

Bailey knows full well the ramifications of the offer. His family will be showered with wealth, but

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his father's business will fold up and die without him leading it. There is no one in Bedford Falls tough enough, smart enough, or committed enough to the principles of home ownership to take over the business if he leaves.

George chooses the difficult but noble path. He chooses the well-being of his community over his own immediate gratification.

How opposite this Capra lesson is from everything our consumer society, our politicians, and our business leaders have modeled for us for the past 30 years.

We have all been taught by Wall Street practices and our consumer culture that greed is good and more is always the best choice. But that's not what George Bailey chose. He put his own salary second, placed his community first, and by doing so he defied the power structure of his town culture.

Perhaps that is one of the key reasons why this film is still a favorite? Compared to the rest of the role models our consumer culture serves up, the Baileys are quirky freaks – so quaint in their devotion to pulling their neighbors up with them as they prosper.

We all want to be powerful. When people search for support systems, network, or make a plan to climb a financial ladder, it's often because life is spinning out of control. We feel like we have lost our way, so we go through machinations to figure out how to get our power back.

But look at how powerful George Bailey was in this film – not because he was the richest man in town, not because he dominated people as Mr. Potter did, and not because he grabbed power at the expense of his principles, but because he served people.

We are all faced with Mr. Potter's offer at some point in our lives. We all have to ask ourselves, "Do I go for the money, sell out my beliefs and my truth and the truth I see, or do I remain content with what I have? Do I sell out my integrity and values, or do I stand up to cruelty? Do I save my family first, or can I help my family more in the long run by challenging the system?"

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A few thousand George and Mary Baileys are shivering out in the cold this holiday season as part of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Whether you agree with them or not, it's clear to see that they know full well the Mr. Potters of this world are making them an offer. The offer is: Be quiet, work for the system as it is, and hope and pray that the Mr. Potters will take care of you eventually. But first, leave your truth, the injustice you see, and your principles at the door.

The Occupy protesters have shouted "no." They have put their community first and are challenging the power brokers just like the fictional Baileys did.

This holiday classic is coming to life on our streets. It's not quaint, it's not in black-and-white, and it's not occurring in the inner offices of the richest man in town. Nonetheless the Occupy Wall Street protesters are shouting "no" to financial demagoguery.

What will we do with this life lesson now that's it's come down off the movie screen?

Karoline Steavenson has a few college degrees and is a former elementary school teacher. She recently moved to the Quad Cities to start a career in the news business and works at a local TV station.