



**Lone Wolf**  
Theatre Company

## Resources

More resources section will be added over time. Our archives will include links, PDF articles, photos, and more samples of Mr. Thorson's writing.

### Lone Wolf Howl: IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE...

(Originally published in [Calgary Country](#): December 2004)

Calgary Country — Jimmy Stewart said himself that it was his favourite movie. He's not alone.

As we all prepare to celebrate Christmas, complete with rituals both unique and collective, there is one tradition that has become as much a staple as midnight mass. Perhaps even more so in a secular age. Families the world over will gather 'round the hearth of their television sets, and enjoy a film that struggled to find an audience in its first week. I'll watch it – again – and I'm an actor/writer. I know the tricks of the trade. But every time I curl up on my sofa to re-live "It's a Wonderful Life", I cannot hold back the tears.

Why? What is the force behind this cultural phenomenon that after terribly mixed reviews and initially poor box office receipts; after half a century in release and crimes of coloration; after seeing it for the tenth time and quoting lines in perpetuity, it still casts its spell over us?

Most think of Frank Capra's 1946 classic as a Yuletide yarn, but it's actually more of an Easter story. George Bailey is the heroic savior of Bedford Falls, and like his biblical counterpart he undergoes full emersion baptism, quests for his lost father, suffers, dies, is resurrected, and saves his people.

"It's a Wonderful Life" is more than a timeless classic. It's a contemporary re-telling of one, and whether these stories are drawn from religion, myth, or celluloid; whether their heroes go by the name of Jesus of Nazareth or George of Bedford Falls; they are all identical in this respect: they represent us, today, as we struggle through our own lives.

I set out to explore the mystery of this creation, and with "Clarence-like" innocence watched the life of George Bailey unfold:

"Mary... I know what I'm gonna do tomorrow, and the next day, and next year, and the year after that. I'm shaking the dust of this crummy little town off my feet and I'm gonna see the world!"

George Bailey never saw the world, but the world saw George Bailey. And through him, in him, and with him, we ultimately see ourselves.

The first time we meet our hero, he is jumping into a frozen pond to save his kid brother: his first of three baptisms. Jesus began his ministry with a baptism by John in the river Jordan – a preparatory cleansing, a rite of passage. The hero of our story is baptized and loses hearing in one ear. Again, a rite of passage but with the added bonus of a sacrifice. Like any young man around the age of 12 or 13, his body is physically altered from the passing of a threshold (compare with the puberty rites of a primitive society – they definitely leave their marks).

Deaf in one ear, the trusty sword of his National Geographic magazine rolled up into the sheath of his back pocket, our hero proclaims his role in life:

"I'm going out exploring some day, you watch. And I'm going to have a couple of harems. And maybe three or four wives. Wait and see."

He confesses this to the girl Mary, his future wife (and contrary to his youthful boasting, his only wife), inside Gower's Drug Store. When Christ was discovered in the temple as a boy (12 or 13 years old), he told his mother "Why did you search for me? Did you not know I had to be about my father's business?" (Luke, 2:49)

He spent his life doing his "father's business". The discovery of George's adventurous vocation to visit "Tahiti, the Figi Islands, the Coral Sea" sustains him into adulthood.

Christ entered the geographical wasteland of the desert after his baptism, was tempted by Satan, and emerged victorious 40 days later to begin his ministry. George Bailey, after his baptism in the frozen pond, is tested by the drunken Gower with an order to deliver the pills.

George knows something is wrong, but no one listens to him. Gower's too inebriated, and dad's too busy. Our hero is in the wasteland and is forced to seek the answer to his dilemma within his own heart. He passes the test, but pays a price. This time payment comes by way of a few good smacks on the side of the head, and Gower hits pretty hard. So hard, in fact, that it causes George's ear to bleed afresh.

Just as the gospels leave a large gap, our story also skips through the hero's adolescence and catches up with him as an adult. He's about to commence on his journey, but first has to partake in a ritualistic dance with his mate then kill his father.

While George and Mary do the Charleston, the floor splits apart and they are hurled into the watery depths of the swimming pool. And what do they do? They continue the dance! Not only does George say yes to the dance that is life, he says yes to a life with Mary... albeit unconsciously. But why does our hero need a second baptism?

#### HIGHLIGHTS

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Carl Jung recognized water as a universal symbol of the unconscious. George is not only going through a rite of passage (marriage), he is visiting his unconscious self. He must do it a second time because that is the only way he can fully hear the urgings of his spirit. Our lives unfold as a result of listening. Christ listened. George has listened well but he's missing out on half the broadcast. His disability cuts off one channel, so he's not listening with the full experience (spend a day with cotton stuffed in one ear and you'll get the idea). This is what separates George from his divine predecessors and unites him with the common man. He longs to fly, but something is keeping him tied to the ground. As long as he's deaf in that trick ear, he will suffer. And we will watch him suffer, and identify ourselves with him. Why? Because we all long to fly away, but are tied down. We're all deaf in one ear. And until we find a way to listen with the full experience to our own unconscious broadcasts, we will suffer.

"It's a Wonderful Life" is divided into three acts. The ending of act one is signaled by some kind of change in the life of the protagonist: the death of Peter Bailey. On a symbolic level, the death of the father figure is a necessary mythological occurrence sending the hero into a new phase.

Christ, Hercules, Hamlet, Luke Skywalker, Superman... all are on some quest for their father. The father symbolizes your character. The search for the father is a search for self. However, before George can quest after his father, he needs to kill him off (this is good, old fashioned "Oedipus Rex" stuff). As the two sit at table before the dance, Peter asks his son to take over the Building and Loan. George, who clearly knows his path in life at this point, issues the death blow with his reply: "I couldn't face being cooped up in a shabby little office... If I didn't get away, I'd bust."

Dad has a stroke, and son takes over the business. Every time George is ready to fly from Bedford Falls, his wings are clipped. Months pass, he's ready to go to college, but remains to battle with the dragon named Potter. Like George, Potter is physically disabled. He hears and sees perfectly well yet does not move. He's stuck. Stuck in the trap that eventually gets to George: money. Our hero stays.

Four years pass, and George is refused take off once again. As the family celebrates the nuptials of brother Harry, Ma Bailey admonishes her wayward boy to seek out young Mary Hatch, just returned from college three days previous.

The struggles that George Bailey faces are never more clearly displayed than in the "proposal" scene with Mary:

"Now you listen to me. I don't want any plastics and I don't want any ground floors, and I don't want to get married ever to anyone. You understand that? I wanna do what I wanna do."

But George Bailey no longer has any idea what that is. He knows it isn't traveling the world or going to college. These dreams are dead. They belong to an old George Bailey.

They get married, but don't go on a honeymoon. The war comes, but our boy stays home. Harry is decorated as a war hero, but his big brother remains unsung. George is facing trial after trial, struggle after struggle.

Our savior has been betrayed. He must die and be reborn. Now begins the Passion of George Bailey. It is Christmas Eve, a celebration of the winter solstice, the coming of light, the birth of Christ. George is not preparing for death by suicide, but birth by resurrection. He's in his Gethsemane, unable to accept his cup:

"God... God... dear father in heaven. I'm not a praying man, but... if you're up there and you can hear me... show me the way... I'm at the end of my rope. Show me the way, God."

He finishes his plea, and is welcomed back with a punch in the jaw by an angry husband. Our savior receives a bloodied lip, his crown of thorns, and with it the spiritual suffering he has endured for so long is made physical.

Through his act of prayer, George Bailey has asked to be admitted to the unconscious world once more. He's on the bridge. Beneath him lies the same pool of mystery that he jumped into as a boy and fell into as a young man.

Now he is facing his third, final, and most crucial baptism of all. It is in these waters that our hero meets his father figure, his unconscious self, his guardian angel (second class). Clarence provides George with an answer to his prayer in that he enables our hero to experience the hearing he has missed all his life. Harry is dead; Mary is an old maid; Gower is a drunken derelict. Our desperate hero has learned that through the fulfillment of his destiny, he has enabled everyone around him to fulfill his or hers.

George Bailey has been resurrected. Like his biblical prototype, he has traveled to the land of the dead and has been reborn to the world as an enlightened mortal.

As he runs through Bedford Falls, cheerfully saluting the town and its people, he is the returned savior with a boon for all his community. Nothing can shatter this strength - not the villainy of Mr. Potter, prison, or even death - for he has conquered all these forces. George Bailey is a new man.

So why not end the story there? Was it not this journey that the film was all about? Was Christ not crucified in order that mankind may be free?

A hero must return in order to bring about the gift to his people. That gift is given during the final scene .. the scene that a 1946 issue of Variety labeled "slightly overlong and a shade too cloying for all tastes".

One by one, every person that George Bailey had some contact with throughout his life gives back. He has opened the hearts of his fellow man to compassion. The very bonds that

held our hero (money) holds them, and when he is released from these bonds, so are they. Therein lies the secret to the staying power of the film. The credits rolled, and I rose from the comfort of my sofa, eyes wet with tears once again, and experienced a sense of resurrection with the hero of our saga. I somehow need it. Millions of others seem to as well. Our journeys, for we all have one, are no different from that of George, Christ, or any other bold hero that has gone before. We are all one and the same in that sense, and though we may feel a strong pull to travel and do what we want, we must also dive into the waters of our own unconscious and have our deaf ears unplugged. Only then will we begin to listen with the full experience. [www.lonewolftheatre.com](http://www.lonewolftheatre.com)

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