

# A new twist on the Capra classic

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

One of the most frequently aired films on television during the Christmas season is Frank Capra's classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*, starring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed.

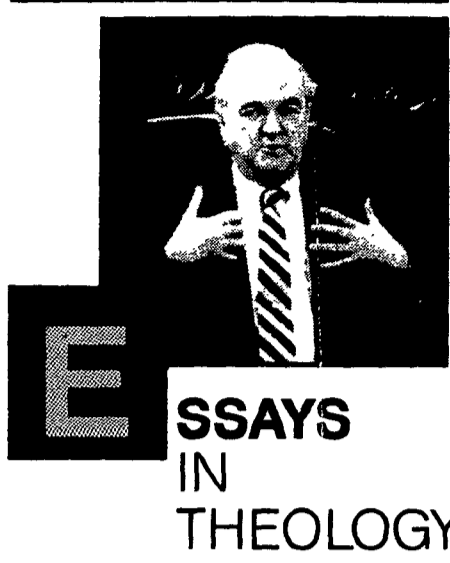
It is the story of a young, desperate man who is about to jump from a bridge. An angel "second class" by the name of Clarence Goodbody is sent down from heaven to prevent the suicide. If Clarence succeeds, he'll earn his wings at long last.

The central character, George Bailey (portrayed by Jimmy Stewart), is missing \$8,000 from his accounts at the small savings and loan he runs in Bedford Falls. (For the sake of younger readers, I should point out that \$8,000 was big money in 1946.)

In fact, the money had been misplaced by George's absent-minded Uncle Billy (played by Thomas Mitchell) and then subsequently stolen by the town's richest and meanest citizen, Henry Potter (played by the great Lionel Barrymore).

Clarence tricks George out of committing suicide by jumping off the bridge before George does. George dives in, not to end his own life, but to save Clarence from drowning.

While their clothes are drying in the bridge keeper's office, George and Clarence strike up a conversation about George's life and his reasons for wanting to end it all.



He blurts out that he wished that he had never been born. That gives Clarence an idea. If he could show George how much poorer the world would have been without him, he might convince George that he had "a wonderful life" after all.

Clarence makes George a non-person. He was never born.

It doesn't take George very long to discover that things are very different. The town is now called Potterville.

The kindly druggist for whom George worked as a young boy is the town drunk, having served 20 years in prison for accidentally poisoning a customer. (Distraught with the news that his son had died, he took to drink and put the wrong ingredients in a

prescription.) In real life, young George had detected the mistake and prevented Mr. Gower from sending out the deadly medicine.

George's mother is running a boarding house, his Uncle Billy lives in an institution for the mentally ill, and his wife, Mary (played by Donna Reed), is an unmarried librarian. Of course, she has no children.

His younger brother, Harry, whom George had rescued from drowning at age 9, never grew up to become a war hero, so the hundreds of men whose lives Harry would have saved on board a ship all died.

By the time Clarence finishes showing all of this to George, George is ready to give up any idea of suicide. He finds himself back on the bridge begging God to give back his life and family. God hears his prayer. George races home, expecting to be sent off to prison. He doesn't care. His life and family have been restored to him.

Meanwhile, Mary had gotten wind of George's trouble and alerted his many friends around town. They raise the cash to bail him out.

The film ends with a bell ringing on the Baileys' Christmas tree. George's daughter Suzie relates that her teacher said that an angel gets his wings every time a bell rings. George winks toward heaven. Clarence has finally made it.

The moral of this sentimental story is that we shouldn't underestimate our worth because our lives touch

those of others in ways we cannot begin to fathom. What would happen if we were to substitute "faith" for "life" in the title, and then make it our own story?

Can we imagine what our own lives would have been like if we had never accepted the gift of faith?

Specifically, what real difference has our faith made in the way we have related to our spouse, our children, our parents, our brothers and sisters, and our friends throughout the course of our lives, or in our choice of occupation, or in the way we conduct ourselves in our work, or in our attitudes and behavior toward people of other races, ethnic backgrounds, economic statuses, sexual orientations?

For some of us, perhaps not much of a difference at all.

Oh, we might have slept longer on Sunday mornings and we would have saved the money we spent on Catholic school tuition or dropped in the collection basket.

But would our lives really have been any different?

Are others, like those in George Bailey's world, actually better off because we have lived by faith? Has our faith moved us to service, generosity, sacrifice, forgiveness, mercy, justice, peacemaking — that otherwise we wouldn't have shown toward others?

If Clarence came down this week on our behalf, would he earn his wings?

A thought for Lent.

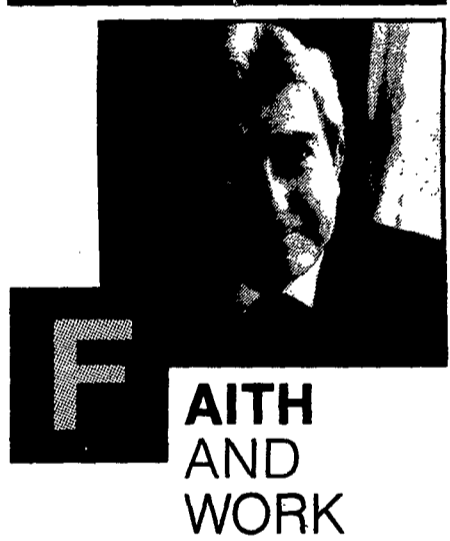
# Book provides good grist for spiritual mills

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
Syndicated columnist

"Writing about the realities of work was my survival tool," explains Sue Doro, author of *Blue Collar Goodbyes* (1992, Papier-Mache Press, Watsonville, Calif.), a book of poems and stories about her work as a machinist at the former Milwaukee Road Railway and Allis Chalmers Corporation Tractor Shop in Milwaukee.

"If I could get it down on paper, I figured we could see it for what it is — and I believe that's the first step toward changing it for the better," she writes.

In "Here's One for the Soo Line Crew," she celebrates the slightly anarchistic attitude of many working-class people: "... Soo Line second



shifters/ smirk at the foremen's

backs/ muscling their hammers and air guns/ driving bolts in and out of boxcar frames/ cutting torches sparking red hot dots of burning steel/ working hands guts and hearts/ for a paycheck every fifteen days."

In "Facts: Dedicated to my sister Tradeswomen," she reflects on the special difficulties of women in blue-collar jobs:

"... and the fact is it's work to go to work and/harder when you get there and harder yet/when you're the only woman and you're forced to/ make careful daily decisions including even the clothes you wear ..."

One of the themes of Doro's book is the devastating effect plant closings have on workers. After 13 years with her company, Doro, along with hundreds of others, lost her job.

"You can't minimize the effect of plant closings on people and communities, and say everything is going to be all right," she argues. "Everything is not going to be all right, for a lot of people. Everything wasn't all right for me."

In her poem "May 22, 1985," she recalls workers' feelings waiting to be laid off: "ninety-three days/ after the sale/ and still/ waiting/ we are moths/ caught in an oil slick/ on the diesel house floor ..."

One of the difficulties in exploring the connection between faith and work is getting workers to reflect on or write about their experiences — even if, like Sue Doro, they do not use religious language to do so. She has given us here some excellent grist for our spiritual mills.

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