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The Best Days Are Ahead of Us

Many of you have experienced the ritual that’s always been a highlight of the holidays for me: sitting down with family to watch *It’s a Wonderful Life*. It’s a classic movie, and undoubtedly my favorite, despite its initially somber tone.

The film tells the story of the attempted suicide of George Bailey, whose desperate act is foiled by his guardian angel, Clarence. When George jumps off a bridge, Clarence intervenes and pulls him from the water. He goes on to help George see, through the fog of his
despair, how the lives of his friends and family would be utterly unrecognizable without him.

In the scene that sticks with me most, Clarence explains to his flabbergasted charge:

“You’ve been given a great gift, George: a chance to see what the world would be like without you.”

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The nature of this “gift” demonstrates that the film is not merely a feel-good classic: it represents an intellectual exercise cutting into life’s deepest questions. Yes, the ending warms the heart, but that result is only made possible by a bracing dose of counterfactual thinking. In other words: How do our decisions in life change the future? What could have been, and what could be?
In the film, George’s encounter with a terrifying counterfactual sheds light on the significance of his life. As viewers, we’re invited to consider our own case. What moments and relationships will you most appreciate later in life? How do you envision your future?

As students we think about the future a lot. But the mood of expectation I’ve found here is nothing like the hopeful, optimistic picture painted by It’s a Wonderful Life.

The other day at a party I was talking with a fellow senior about what lies ahead for us.
I expected to hear positive thoughts about the tremendous possibilities available to us. Instead, this guy told me: “Look, the next five years of our lives are supposed to be terrible. They’re supposed to suck.”

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The logic is that to advance our careers, we first have to endure painful years of unforgiving grunt work.

It is a logic familiar to us all. Sometimes it goes by the name of cost-benefit analysis. Sometimes it’s falsely called “being realistic.”

In the movie, it’s a logic personified by Mr. Potter, the banker whose ruthless approach to money-making leaves careers and families—including George Bailey’s—in shambles. In one horrifying scene, Potter tells Bailey:
“You’re worth more dead than alive!” We watch in dismay as, almost instantaneously, George gives mental assent to the false solution of suicide.

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Back at the party, I was disgusted at what I heard. And then I thought about it, and I began to understand the sentiment. I remembered the first day of my senior year. Personally, I was thrilled: I had a spacious senior single, the sun was out, and friends were back on campus. Yet as I entered the dining hall for dinner, I found a room full of nervous, sweaty students in business attire. They were preparing for a networking event at the Charles Hotel.
Trust me, I’ve been there. But my excitement was crushed. I was suddenly surrounded by cold-hearted realism. The near future became an occasion of dread, not excitement.

Instead of embracing the future, we seniors often rely on the past for happiness. Just look at the way senior year is set up. Whether it be the slideshow from senior kickoff or the reunions of freshman entryways, each activity seems to express a yearning for the so called “good ol’ days.”

As I stand before you just 102 days from Commencement, I want to argue that our forward-looking
idealism should not be laid to rest. And I’m here to argue that we should *resist* the escapism of the “good ol’ days.”

Here I think of my grandpa, who grew up during the Great Depression. He watched his sister suffer from polio and other children die from it. Yet he has lived in hope, and continues to find hope in the present and the future. He summed it up by saying, “the best days are ahead of us.”

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That’s a remarkable statement from an 85-year old. If he can remain an idealist, surely we can, too.

You see, it’s not just that confidence about the future is warranted. It’s *imperative*! Tell the next guy who says “the next five years are supposed to suck” to shut up!
As soon-to-be graduates, we always hear that we’re about to enter the “real world,” and we’re pressured to adopt that myopic, so-called “realism” that I encountered the first day of senior year. Let’s turn the notion on its head. For us, what we’re entering is the ideal world!

“Each man’s life touches so many other lives, and when he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?”

In the film, that’s the decisive question Clarence puts to George. Sometimes I think we ourselves are leaving “awful holes” in the world when we allow our optimism and sense of imagination to wither away.
We create awful holes when we go for the safest option rather than taking riskier paths than can produce outcomes of profound significance. The inconceivable is always inconceivable—until it’s not.

There are literally billions of people out there who could be touched by the choices we make. Just like George Bailey did, we should seriously consider the counterfactuals of our lives—and not with the economic logic of Potter, but the angelic logic of Clarence.

I truly believe that we are capable of preventing more “awful holes” in the world. We can and must sustain our optimism. We can and must produce futures filled with
purpose, action, and service to others. It really is a wonderful life, and as my grandpa tells me, the best days are indeed ahead of us.