

The Best Days are Ahead of Us

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Like many of you, one of the simplest yet best pleasures of the holidays is to watch with my family the classic film “It’s a Wonderful Life.” It’s undoubtedly my favorite movie, despite its initially somber tone. The film follows George Bailey’s intention to kill himself, but his guardian angel Clarence intervenes by showing George how the lives of his friends and family would be completely changed by his absence. The scene that sticks with me most comes when Clarence confronts George about his life, telling him: “You’ve been given a great gift, George: a chance to see what the world would be like without you.”

It is Clarence’s reminder of George’s “gift” that demonstrates “It’s a Wonderful Life” is more than a just a feel-good classic: it represents an intellectual exercise cutting into life’s deepest questions. Yes, the end result of the movie is a warming of one’s heart, but that result is only possible after a healthy dose of counterfactual thinking: in other words, how do one’s decisions in life change the future? What could have been, and what could be?

In the film, George saves his brother’s life by pulling him out of an icy pond. Clarence shows him that without him there, though, his brother dies. Without him, other bad things happen such as the collapse of the family business.

It is George’s realization of the counterfactual that sheds light on the significance of his life and puts a grand smile on his face by the end of the movie.

What moments and people will you appreciate most later in life? How do you envision your future? As students we think about the future a lot. Yet the mood looking forward I have found here is not the optimistic picture painted in “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

The other day at a party I was talking to a fellow senior about the next five years of our lives. I expected to hear positive thoughts about the tremendous possibilities available to us. Instead, the guy told me “Look, the next 5 years of our lives are supposed to be terrible. They’re supposed to suck.” The logic is that to advance your career, you have to endure painful years of long hours and grunt work in a junior position.

It reminded me of the same nasty tone of the villain of “It’s a Wonderful Life,” the mean banker Mr. Potter, who tells George Bailey that, according to his life insurance policy, he’s “worth more dead than alive!” Apparently we’ll all be working for the Mr. Potters of the world in the next five years!

I was sickened and angry at what I heard. And then I thought about it, and I began to understand the sentiment. I remembered the first day of senior year.

Personally I was thrilled – I got a spacious senior single, the sun was out, and friends were back on campus. Yet as I entered the dining hall to get dinner, I found a room full of sweaty seniors in business attire getting ready for a company networking event at the Charles Hotel. My excitement was crushed by an overwhelming encirclement of cold-hearted realism. The near future became a scary scene rather than a welcoming opportunity.

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 freshman entryway reunions, every activity seems to be a celebration of the past – a yearning for the so called good ol’ days.

As I stand before you today knowing that commencement lurks just 102 days away, I want to argue that our forward-looking idealism doesn't have to die at Commencement. I'm here to tell you that the good ol' days are nonsense. Yearning for the past isn't something you'd expect from college seniors. It's only something you'd expect from seniors citizens, right?

Wrong. I think of my grandpa, who, to my surprise, unequivocally denounces those at his age who speak glowingly about the so-called "good ol' days." Instead, he tells me, "We're living in the best days. The world has never been so great." My grandpa has many fond memories and stories he tells from his childhood, his working years, and his time raising a family. But my grandpa also grew up during the Great Depression. He watched his sister suffer from polio and other children die from it. Today, however, polio has been nearly eradicated and a second Great Depression never came to be. Rather than sitting on a rocking chair raving about the past, my grandpa finds hope in the present and the future. He summed it up by saying, "the best days are ahead of us." That's a remarkable statement for a man who's now 85 years old. If he can remain an idealist, surely we can.

You see, we are not only warranted to remain confident about the future; we *must* remain confident in order to drown out all those voices trying to paint a gloomy picture of a world that's actually never been better. Tell the next guy who says to you "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 seemingly overnight everyone suddenly becomes the cold-hearted realists I encountered the first day of senior year. Let's turn the notion on its head. I would argue we should be calling it 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?" That's the question Clarence poses to George, and sometimes I think we're 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 incredible outcomes that might have seemed impossible. In short, ponder how conceivable the inconceivable may be.

There are literally billions of people out there that could be touched by the choices we make. Just like George Bailey, we should seriously consider the counterfactuals of our lives – what decisions of ours can alter reality for the better?

I truly believe that we are capable of limiting the amount of "awful holes" in the world. We can and must sustain our idealism and optimism. We can and must produce futures filled with purpose, action, and service to others. It really is a wonderful life, and like my grandpa told me, the best days are indeed ahead of us.