

It Really Is a Wonderful Life

The phone alarm startled me. I was catapulted out of a deep sleep. Time: 7:30 am, normally a very civil (actually late) wake up time for me. But given that I did not fall asleep until 4 am, my transition to wakefulness was anything but gentle.

Earlier in the week, an email from the animal shelter indicated Bane – a one-year old pit-bull mix – who was a dog I knew well and had walked many times – might be a candidate for euthanasia given his growing difficulties after having been in the shelter for several months. With our dog Lila and Bryan out of town, I knew I needed to foster Bane, even for a few days, to give him a break.

Bane proved to be a whirlwind upon entry into the house. In a flash he jumped on our dining table, scattering papers everywhere, papers I had spent hours organizing to inform our end of year giving. Seconds later he jumped on a beloved chair that I had had lovingly reupholstered not a year prior, nearly knocked a handmade glass tray off our sofa table, and peed on the carpet all before I could respond.

Post Bane's dinner, accompanied by shelter-provided relaxants to help quell his anxiety, he spent two hours cuddled next to my thigh as I gratefully watched a movie and had some dinner. After a trip outside for a potty break, Bane jumped happily onto the bed and was velcroid to my side as I read; there he remained when I awoke the next morning. It was so very clear he wanted nothing more than someone to love.

Bane lacked basic manners and skills (potty norms) and was going to need someone (or multiple someones) who could provide guidance and love with great patience. Returning to the shelter three days later, when I placed Bane in his familiar room and stepped out to report to the front desk, I could see through the window as he shot up like a rocket, over and over and over again. I returned, sat down on his bed and he immediately lay down at my side and rested. I was a wreck when I needed to go.

On my way home I made the mistake of indulging in a late-afternoon coffee. Insomnia was the result. I grew increasingly frustrated and emotional as one attempt after another to fall asleep failed. I began to talk, some might say pray which is not common practice for me, as I questioned why there is so much pain in the world: the rampant cruelty of political leadership at this moment, the difficulties of my family of origin along with a stray dog needing to find a forever home.

After the alarm rang, I was up and out the door on route to Seneca Falls, New York. Historic Seneca Falls is home not only of the first U.S. women's convention in the mid-1800's but also was the inspiration for the beloved Christmas movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. Every December the town hosts a three-day event to celebrate the film with a plethora of crafts, food, music, theater and more.

I entered Bee's Cafe hungry for breakfast. Not surprisingly it was crowded so I chose to sit – being solo – at a communal table where a few other festival-goers were happily enjoying coffee. A woman sitting kitty-corner to my left, who was also solo, began chatting. I learned that Donna was in her early 70's and had grown up in Seneca Falls; she moved back less than a week prior after living in many places since leaving in her 20's. She was happy to be downsizing after very unexpectedly losing her super-healthy and fit husband during Covid. He came down with a strange illness in late 2019, before public knowledge of the virus, and never recovered.

We soon learned the couple at the end of the table – Mike and Phyllis – had been faithfully attending the festival weekend for more than 20 years. They shared while we ate breakfast and talked that they had lost their 20-something son to suicide just a few years prior and it was their faith, as well as the message of the film, that helped them cope.

There was a camera crew in the corner of Bee's Café when I first entered; I imagined it was the local TV station. It turned out the crew was from CBS News Sunday Morning and Ted Koppel was doing a piece on the movie and the town. Unexpectedly, Ted sat down at our communal table and began facilitating a conversation, asking about the relevance of the movie present day, what the movie meant to us personally and why we decided to come for the festival. The discussion ranged from immigration to the importance of community to the current state of U.S. politics. When I asked Ted what he thought about the immigration issue, he responded, "I'm asking the questions here." I laughed continuing, "I know you're in charge but I'm asking because with your long history in media, you've seen so much and I would be very curious to hear your perspective."

Soon after we finished the recorded conversation, Donna turned to me saying, "Mike and Phyllis have two extra tickets and invited us to join for the big celebratory dinner tonight. Want to go together?"

I responded, “Wow. That sounds terrific. But I am not sure I want to drive back to Ithaca after 9 o’clock along the lake in the dark with no street lights.

“Well, there are still boxes everywhere but the bed is set up in my guest room and I would be happy for you to stay with me.” Donna continued.

“Thank you very much.” I replied. “I think I will take you up on your generous offer.”

I learned at the celebratory dinner that Mike and Phyllis had become close friends with the actress who played ZuZu, George Bailey’s young daughter whose flower petals let him know he had returned from seeing a world where he had never been born. The actress Karolyn Grimes and her husband sat at our table. She is one of only three actors from the movie still living.

Monica Hodge Capra – the granddaughter of the movie director Frank Capra – spoke briefly at the dinner and in a presentation about her family the next day. Listening to her remarks deeply impacted me. I saw clear parallels between Frank Capra’s and my father’s Italian immigrant life stories, both with parents who grew up incredibly poor in southern Italy and saw the U.S. as the land of opportunity, both perceiving education as the guaranteed ticket to a better life and both egotistical and armed with great confidence, stubbornly seeing their way as the best way.

The most important part of hearing about Frank Capra’s story was seeing my father in a new, more expansive light. In the movie Bailey Park was the neighborhood of small starter homes welcoming Italian immigrants, made possible because the Bailey Building and Loan prioritized community as well as profitability.

My father was not a banker nor a movie director but a builder. He developed an expansive neighborhood just like Bailey Park in the town next to where I grew up. I imagined how proud my father must have felt, a young man himself at the time when he built this neighborhood. He was making it possible for his countrymen (and women) to own their own homes, something I suspect many believed would never be possible. With a six-month certificate in construction management and sheer pluck, my father built a successful business and helped make the American dream a reality for many families. Sadly, I never got to see my father in those early building days. My window into his life included far more broken relationships, emotional pain, decline and sadness.

When the Sunday morning episode highlighting the *It's a Wonderful Life* segment aired the weekend before Christmas, our conversation at Bee's Café did not make the cut. Yet despite a tad of disappointment, as I pondered the life-affirming weekend in Seneca Falls, seemingly a response to my sadness on the heels of caring for Bane, it reinforced that *It's a Wonderful Life*, indeed! P.S. A few days into the New Year Bane was adopted!