It is that time of year. Television will show, probably twice around Christmas and once on Christmas Eve, Frank Capra’s now classic film, It’s A Wonderful Life. When it
first appeared in late 1946, the film was not a best-selling standout. It actually initially lost money. Now it is regarded as a kind of annual Christmas treasure. The story, set in Bedford Falls, New York shows George Bailey (played by James Stewart) as deeply troubled. George had sacrificed much of his life to help others, his brother, Harry; his father; his uncle Billy. A near run on his bank is stopped when George and his new wife, Mary, forego their honeymoon and put up $2,000 of their own money to stave off the bank run.

George saves a distraught pharmacist, grieving a loss of his son, from mistakenly putting poison into a prescription. He offers low cost loans to working families to buy or save their homes. A Scrooge-like villain of the piece, Mr. Henry Potter, tries to buy out George and, thus, get greedy control of the town. George resists but, at one crucial point, he loses $8,000 (which Potter has come across, serendipitously, and pockets so he can cause George to fall into bankruptcy.) In near despair, George contemplates suicide until his guardian angel, Clarence, comes to his aid. George had said he had wished he had never been born but Clarence, then, shows him how many people would have been worse off if he had not been born.

The Marin Theater Company in Mill Valley put on an excellent version of this famous movie which I saw recently as a live radio play. It is worth reflecting a bit on differential reactions to the story. I have friends who would never miss the T.V. version of the film any Christmas. I have other friends who never want to see it again. The original film opened to mixed reviews. Time thought it a pretty wonderful film that had only one rival for the academy award for best film of the year, The Best Years of Our Life, (which did win the academy award for 1946 films). The New York Times, while
complimenting some of the actors, concluded that “the weakness of this picture, from this reviewer’s point of view, is the sentimentality of it—its illusory concept of life.” Wendell Jamieson, in a 2008 article for *The New York Times*, pointed out that the film “is a terrifying, asphyxiating story about growing up and relinquishing your dreams; of seeing your father driven to the grave before his time; of living among bitter, small minded people. It is a story of being trapped, of compromise, of watching others move ahead and away and becoming filled with rage.”

Why, then, the perennial attraction to this story every Christmas time? *It’s A Wonderful Life* rather closely parallels the classic Dickens’ tale, *A Christmas Carol*. In both stories, a man revisits his life and potential death (or non-existence) with the help of supernatural agents, culminating in a joyous epiphany and a renewed view of his life. Not surprisingly, Lionel Barrymore who had made a name playing Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* got cast as the Scrooge-like Mr. Potter in the film.

One of the reasons *It’s A Wonderful Life* (the movie or the excellent Marin Theater Company play based on it) resonates so deeply with many of us is that we all probably know some semblance of depression, as George Bailey did, at Christmas time. Part of that stems from early socialization when, as children, we came to be told Christmas is only glowing and magical and wonderful. Yet in our often imperfect—even dysfunctional—families and surroundings we know it is not. Many, many people, actually, get quite depressed during the Christmas holidays. Their expectations of perfection are simply and unrealistically way too high.

Like George Bailey, we have to ask ourselves two questions at any Christmas. First, do we have some kind of guardian angel like George’s Clarence who watches out
for us, even in hard times? We may scoff at the notion of a guardian angel but Jesus did say that “even the hair on our head is numbered”. God does have a care for us, in up times as well as in down. Again, like George, we might well try the experiment of asking what life would have been like if we had never been born. George’s goodness to others is, in the end, repaid by the townsfolk dipping into their savings to bail him out. Also like George, we may have to proclaim “It’s a Wonderful Life”, even if (as they usually are for most of us) not all of our dreams and hopes got fulfilled in life. Goodness and real joy is, usually, only found in the midst of something less than sheer bliss. It isn’t until George becomes disheartened by his circumstances and considers suicide that he is given a chance to change his perspective—by being shown that the value of a life can be measured in many ways besides money, fame and power.

Let its famous director, Frank Capra, have the last word on what he thought the story of It’s a Wonderful Life was really about (from a 1971 memoir): “I didn’t give a film-clip whether critics hailed or hooted, Wonderful Life. I thought it was the greatest film I ever made [as, by the way, James Stewart also thought]. It wasn’t made for the oh-so-bored critics or the oh-so-jaded literati. A film to tell the weary, the disheartened, and the disillusioned, the wino, the junkie, the prostitute; those behind prison walls and those behind Iron Curtains that no man is a failure! To show those born slow of foot or slow of mind, those oldest sisters condemned to spinsterhood and those oldest sons condemned to unschooled toil that each man’s life touches so many other lives. And that he if isn’t around it would leave an awful hole. A film that said to the downtrodden, the pushed around, the pauper: “Head’s Up, fella. No man is poor who has one friend. Three friends and you’re filthy rich”. A film that expressed its love for the homeless and the loveless;
for her whose cross is heavy and him whose touch is ashes; for the Magdelenes stoned by hypocrites and the afflicted Lazaruses with only dogs to lick their sores. I wanted to shout to the abandoned grandfathers staring vacantly in nursing homes, to the always-interviewed but seldom-adopted orphans, to the paupers who refuse to die while medical vultures wait to snatch their hearts and livers, and to those who take cobalt treatments and whistle—I wanted to shout, “You are the salt of the earth. And It’s a Wonderful Life is my memorial to you.”

I had these feelings, too, when watching the radio play version of It’s a Wonderful Life at the Marin Theater Company. Because, also, the radio play version (based on a play by Joe Landy which premiered at the Stamford, Connecticut playhouse in 1997 and has since been produced to critical acclaim around the country) had a few actors playing multiple parts with ingenious shifts of voice and personality and a symphony of noise in its sound effects, the story came alive in new ways.

Despite any deferred dreams or dashed hopes in our life, this Christmas we might do well, like George Bailey in the movie and play, to count our friends and blessings and turn to those winos, downtrodden, paupers, homeless, older spinsters, weary, prostitutes, those in prison, the disheartened and disillusioned for whom Capra said he directed the movie. After all, at least for the Christian understanding of Christmas, it was to such that the word was made flesh and entered this disheveled and imperfect world and dwelt among us. The angels said that his coming was “good news”. Putting ourselves in that same locale as Jesus came to, we too might look at our imperfect, often flawed lives and yet still be able to proclaim: Despite it all and even in it all, it’s a wonderful life!