Self & Society, 2016
Vol. 44, No. 3, 226–233, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03060497.2016.1228241

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

PEER REVIEWED PAPER

'It's a Wonderful life': a portrait of a man in crisis

Hank Earl*

Centre for Gender Psychology, London, UK

(*Received 30 March 2016; accepted 30 June 2016*)

Drawing on the classic film *It's a Wonderful Life* and my own experience of participation in and facilitation of men's groups, this article seeks to appraise the central character's emotional range and intensity, charting parallels between George Bailey and Parsifal, the Grail Knight, whose story forms the spine of Robert A. Johnson's book *He: Understanding Masculine Psychology* (1991).

Keywords: father; men's groups; emotional presence; moods

A little on the film and my responses to it

It's a Wonderful Life (Capra, 1946), the archetypal Christmas movie, compulsively broadcast during the holidays in America since its copyright expired in the mid-1970s, making it free to air, was originally deemed too depressing for a Christmas film when it opened in December 1946, in a notoriously cold winter.

I've watched this film between five and 10 times during my adult life, and my response has become increasingly defenceless – as if some Pavlovian response has been triggered – and I am emotionally overcome by the same and then further scenes with each viewing. It had seemed to me that the strongest element affecting me was the emotional intensity and range that James Stewart brings to the role of George Bailey. That, and the alchemy between his emotional expressiveness and Donna Reed's full-hearted radiance in the role of Mary, who loves and marries George. Stewart, in his final interview broadcast soon after his death, thought his realization of George to have been his best screen acting. And I had intended to use this article to praise him, and by implication George Bailey, as an exemplar for masculine expression, to break the mould of the white, Western male. With further reflection, I came to consider that George's emotions frequently fall prey to mood and to the darkest of the arrows we fire at ourselves, self-pity. This seems to me to be more in accord with typical male responses to setbacks, and so I've undertaken to reappraise his expression and seek to understand and propose alternative responses as a man, nearly 70 years later.

The troubled hero

George's heart-felt desire to explore the world, to do something 'more important', is repeatedly thwarted. He is not even permitted a honeymoon outside of Bedford Falls,

*Email: hankdavidearl@blueyonder.co.uk
This article was subject to double-blind peer review and in accordance with the journal's editorial and reviewing policy. (See Aims & Scope, www.tandfonline.com/RSEL).

the small town he is required by the film to protect from the evil machinations of diabolical arch-capitalist Mr Potter. The final crisis, landed on him by a combination of his uncle's incompetence and Potter's venality, is to drive him to contemplate suicide.

His relationships: father, mother, wife

Atypically, according to my experience, the crises in George's life are visited upon him; he is not their architect. He is a truly honourable man, and his complicity arises from an inability to refuse responsibility, to deny duty. He is shown to have been lovingly raised, and his relationship with his father – whose business and role he sorrowfully inherits – is touchingly depicted in what emerges to be their final conversation (his father has a stroke and dies). He tells his father, 'I think you're a great guy'.

This, in my experience both of my own life and from having participated in men's groups for the past 16 years, is unusual: it is more often that a loving appreciation of one's father is something that re-emerges in a man, this having been buried since childhood, as in adolescence and young adulthood the father is insufficiently present, or tyrannical, or perceived as failing in some other way. So George is fortunate to have his father as a loving pillar of support, a father who embodies integrity and compassion – the polar opposite of Potter – and who has dedicated his life to the betterment of others – a proto Jeremy Corbyn, perhaps.

He also has a loving and vivacious mother, who endorses him as a loving and sexual young man, steering him towards the woman he will marry, Mary. Mary is the dazzling consolation in his life sentence in Bedford Falls, his only real peer in the striking absence of male peers in his life. His younger brother Harry is generally away, living the life that could have been his, and his childhood friend, Sam Wainwright, is also in another city or country, a feckless, yet successful buffoon – a proto Boris Johnson, perhaps. His other male friends, Bert the cop and Ernie the cab driver, are stalwart, but generally akin to the 'rude mechanicals' who appear in Shakespeare's tragedies, offering light relief.

The first crisis

George's plans to travel around Europe, and his first dalliance with Mary, are interrupted by his father's stroke and subsequent death. However, he is still set to go away to college a few months later. But he is prevented by making a barnstorming speech to the board of his father's business, withstanding Potter's characterization of the poor as a 'discontented, lazy rabble'.

He is nearly out of the building when he is called back and informed that the business will only survive if *he* agrees to be executive secretary, his father's position. The call to his values, to honouring his father's life's work, is irresistible. There is no sense of personal pride in his acceptance of this position. But there is self-sacrifice, and George's sense of martyrdom begins. Stewart fills him with sadness, and sudden shocked defeat. I am not suggesting that this is confined to men: my own mother frequently played the martyr card. But his containment of it, his secret nurturing of it, does strike me as traditionally masculine: to be uncomplaining – the masculine carapace restraining the feminine gloop of feelings. But George doesn't go so far as to disown his frustration to himself.

The second crisis

Four years later, George is waiting at the station for Harry to return from college. He is still looking forward to expanding his horizons. He's delighted to see Harry, and is introduced to Harry's hitherto unannounced wife, Ruth. George moves from formality to warmth, but on hearing from her that Ruth's father loves Harry and has offered him a job, Stewart brings real darkness to George, and shows him to be assailed by worry and doubt, before reinfusing him with warmth. He questions Ruth about the offered job, and we share with him the realization that Harry's prospects will eclipse his own ambitions, and he will remain saddled with the family business (despite Harry's protestations about George having served his time).

We then see George smoking wistfully, musing on more lost opportunities, before casting his maps sullenly aside, symbolic victims to his self-sacrifice. We see him with his mother, who seems happy that Harry will be kept on his toes by Ruth. George ruefully replies: 'She'll keep him out of Bedford Falls'. The darkness that is now an undercurrent to his emotional spectrum seems to be nurturing incipient bitterness. But mother has good news: Mary has returned from college. But what about Sam Wainwright, George's old pal and Mary's intended, he asks. 'All's fair in love and war', says sagacious mother. 'I don't know about war', quips George. Mother points him in the direction of Mary's abode, but he disobeys, and heads off to town, to her evident concern.

We eventually see him marching back and forth in front of Mary's home, irritably whacking the fence with a stick. Mary calls to him from an upstairs window, full of pleasure at seeing him – she asks him if he's picketing. He is truculent in response. He remains truculent. 'What did you come here for then?', she asks. 'I don't know, you tell me!' Mired in bitterness and thwarted ambition, he is emotionally disconnected from everything but his self-pity and resentment, and is actively hostile. He leaves. The phone rings. Mary is thoroughly disheartened and angered by George's petulance and obstinacy. Her mother urges her to pick up the phone: it's Sam Wainwright.

The tyranny of mood

What is it that enables mood, centred on self-pity arising from persistent frustration, to triumph over the emotional reality of what is actually happening in the moment? This is a story that comes up repeatedly in men's groups, wherein men effectively abandon their women cleaving to their inner misery, and have to be chased down, often repeatedly, to face what is actually going on, and acknowledge the emotional reality of others. Robert A. Johnson (1991, p. 47) writes:

> Women who have to deal with the exotic creature called the male of the species should be easy on him when he is in a mood, because he is nearly helpless in the face of it. He needs help. If there is one rule that should be understood in marriage, it would be that when a man is falling into a mood the woman should withhold all judgment and criticism for the moment if she possibly can. Then later, when the man is himself again, they may be able to discuss together what was bothering him so much. Waiting like this is hard for a woman to do, of course, but if she remembers that the mood is basically his problem, and not her fault, then she can usually find the wisdom to wait for the right moment to see what the problem is.
>
> As for the man, he cannot realistically expect never to succumb to a mood, but he can remember, even when he is possessed by it, that he is being taken over by something …

the battle is half-won as soon as the man recognises that it is a mood which is possessing him.

The triumph of feeling

George re-enters, as he'd forgotten his hat. Mary has an inspiration: she tells Sam that George is there, and Sam says put him on. We are shown that Sam is clearly with another woman in New York. George and Mary are at the phone together, faces nearly touching, while Sam burbles on about opportunities in plastics. George and Mary seem to be melting into each other, but he finds himself speaking on behalf of Bedford Falls, his essential decency re-emerging. Sam rabbits on about the 'chance of a lifetime'. Mary repeats: 'He says it's a chance of a lifetime'. George grabs her, shaking her, his voice breaking: 'Now you listen to me. I don't want any plastics. I don't want any ground floors. And I don't wanna get married to anyone. I wanna do what I wanna do'. They are kissing and crying, burying their faces in each other's shoulders.

The deeper truth of his feelings for Mary and hers for him, and her sensual presence, overcome him and wrench him into vivid and direct experience. Marriage follows hot on the heels of this scene, and the thwarted honeymoon is in fact rich with silver linings – a funny and moving wedding night.

The Fisher King wound

We move to a scene of George in his pomp. The business has clearly flourished. He and Mary are there to help a family move into their new home in Bailey Park, an idyllic estate of lovely new bungalows. This is revealed to be a dent to Potter's pride, when one of his aides mocks: 'Ninety per cent of home-owners at Bailey Park used to pay rent to you'. Potter responds ominously. There is still a shadow in George's moment of apparent fulfilment: Sam Wainwright is there with his fancy wife and his fancy chauffeur-driven car, flaunting his plastics wealth. George sinks back into ruefulness, kicking shut the door on his (far less fancy) car.

This could have been me! The dark arrow of comparison is fired, puncturing his sense of fulfilment. His deeper ambitions, perhaps a longing to experience his greatness in a 'more important' way, have again been pricked.

> All men are Fisher Kings. Every boy has naively blundered into something that is too big for him, gotten half-way through, realized that he couldn't handle it, and collapsed. Then he is wounded … and goes off to lick his wounds. A certain bitterness arises in the boy because he tries so hard and actually touches his salmon – his individuation – yet he cannot hold it. It only burns him. (Johnson, 1991, pp. 12–13)

One frank version of the Grail myth has it that the Fisher King was wounded by an arrow that transfixed both testicles. But it is not quite adequate simply to say that it is a sexual wound. It is a wound to his maleness, his generative capacity, his ability to create. A man suffering in this way is often driven to do idiotic things to cure the wound and ease this desperation that follows him day and night. Usually he seeks an unconscious solution outside of himself, complaining about his work, buying a

new car, even getting a new wife, all of which can be his unconscious attempt to heal himself of the Fisher King wound.

And this thwarted ambition is in the film serenaded by Potter, who admits defeat to him and then shrewdly elicits George's self-evaluation, offering him a huge salary increase, lavish holidays etc. George swallows the bait, until he comes to shake on the deal. Again, physical contact brings him back into reality, and his own shrewdness kicks in, recognizing manipulation. His values reassert themselves, albeit with a torrent of invective, damning Potter as a 'scurvy little spider'.

He returns home, assailed by voices of ambition: Potter's and his own. Mary is in bed, radiant as ever. George asks her, with stinging self-doubt, why she married him. 'To keep from being an old maid … I didn't want anybody else in town … I want my baby to look like you'. George's mood soars. 'A baby! Is it a boy or a girl?' Mary nods in assent.

The dry years

The dry years appear to follow. We are told in voice-over that George never leaves Bedford Falls. He has two children, a boy, then a girl. Night after night he is back late from the office, Potter bearing down hard. World War II. George and Mary have two more children. Sam Wainwright made a fortune in plastic hoods for planes. Potter is head of the draft board. All of George's circle do well, but Harry excels, saving a transport full of men, shooting down 15 planes. George, being 4F due to his 'trick' ear, fought the Battle of Bedford Falls, raising money through paper drives, rubber drives. Along with countless others (we are told), George wept and prayed on VE day, and again on VJ day.

The final crisis

It is on a day of jubilation that the greatest crisis arrives: Christmas Eve 1945. George is ecstatic about Harry's imminent return as a war hero who will be decorated by the president. Pride animates every atom of his being. He radiates triumphant joy, as he makes his way to the Bailey Building & Loan, where waits the cussed figure of the Bank Examiner, impatient to be done there and get home for Christmas, and distinctly unimpressed with George's largesse with a long-distance reversed charges call from Harry and, indeed, Harry's decoration.

Meanwhile, in an unbeatable instance of pride going before a fall, uncle Billy crows to Potter as they cross paths on their way to the bank, Potter being pushed in his wheel-chair-cum-throne, about Harry's glory, snatching from Potter a copy of the newspaper. Potter disparages 'slacker' George, and Billy walks off to the counter in a state of euphoria, to deposit $8000. He is gently reminded by the cashier that it's customary to hand over money when making a deposit.

Disaster. Panic. Uncle Billy, who has the habit of tying strings on his fingers to ameliorate his chronic forgetfulness, cannot be saved by them now. For we have been shown that Potter is in possession of the money, a free gift with the newspaper returned to him by Billy. Vengeance is his. Billy rushes to the Building & Loan in a state of distress and distraction, and pulls George from the clutches of the Examiner.

George fully recognizes the enormity of what has passed. He is frightened and furious. Back home to the bosom of his family, all in upbeat preparation for the

evening's party. Clearly distracted, he tells Mary that nothing's the matter. The children attempt to engage him. He grabs his youngest son, sobbing and kissing him feverishly. George is scared, but lashes out in irritation at his daughter's piano practice, and at the prospect of the families from Bailey Park visiting. 'It's been another big red-letter day for the Baileys', he tells Mary sarcastically. He chastises his older son for praising a neighbour's new car. He hears about his youngest's cold, and takes it out on the house. He then goes nuclear with Mary: 'Why do we have to have all these kids?'

The hideous damsel

Johnson (1991, p.72) speaks of the hideous damsel:

> This is the hideous damsel. This usually happens at the apex of a man's career, at the time of his greatest success … within three days the hideous damsel will walk in on him. This is the anima gone absolutely sour and dark. There is often some correlation between the amount of fame and adulation one gets in the outer world and the condition of the anima. They often have an inverse relationship to one another. When a man really succeeds, then he is often in for trouble with his anima … that destroying, spoiling quality in a man about middle age.

The hideous damsel's confrontation to Parsifal, the Grail questor, is, 'It's all your fault!' And this is generally true in a man's life: it is he who through acts of commission and omission has brought his life to its current pass. The sleight-of-mind of blaming others allows no growth, but rather retrenches the needy boy within the man, perhaps longing to return to the womb, or at least throw a sickie. As I mentioned earlier, the irony is that George has, in many respects, had this crisis foisted upon him by his uncle and Potter, although he repeatedly watered Potter's animosity. But he has to grow … . After torturing his family in an increasingly unhinged manner, he departs. The children recognize he's in trouble.

The lack of a men's group

Instead of talking with Mary, or a sympathetic board member, or even the police, as he would have had he been in command of himself, he throws himself on the mercy of the chief engineer of his downfall, Potter. This is a mistake because, instead of taking advantage of George's vulnerability and having him as an indebted vassal, he decides to finally ruin him, telling him he's worth more dead than alive and that he's going to swear out a warrant for his arrest.

George leaves, and goes to a bar. If only he'd had a men's group to turn to. The possibility of support and challenge from his fellows to help bring his thinking and feeling into alignment, and restore some sense of realistic self-worth to enable him to properly regulate himself, rather than flail about chaotically.

But he is defeated, deeply anxious, panting, praying. 'I'm not a praying man … show me the way … I'm at the end of my rope … show me the way, oh God.'

In answer to his prayer, he is punched in the face by the husband of a teacher he'd reduced to tears over the phone while acting out at home. He is bitter at this response from the universe but, of course, he must go on. He must deepen the crisis. He drives off into the night, and crashes into a tree. Staggering off into the steady snowfall, he

makes it to a bridge. He looks down into the torrent below. His eyes stare intensely and wildly. He looks utterly mad.

The mother complex and the guardian angel

In his film *In Search of the Holy Grail*, Johnson (2011) talks of the mother complex, a Jungian concept relating to the unconscious relationship between a boy and his mother, which develops alongside the conscious parallel. This, in its negative manifestations, can be what Johnson describes as 'poison in a man's psyche' (2011). It is like wanting to pull the covers over your head rather than face the day. It is a longing for illness, or an accident. I have heard a man in a group speak of hoping to be run over when on holiday with a new partner, in order to escape the insecurities he was feeling. So, rather than face his troubles, with the support of his wife, his children, his mother, perhaps, George contemplates the ultimate day off: suicide.

Enter the actual answer to his prayer: Clarence, trainee angel, who throws himself into the river. George dives in to rescue him (as he had his brother when they were kids) and, of course, himself.

Clarence's verbal attempts to raise his sense of self-worth, and of the insignificance of money, fall on barren ground. George eventually says, 'I wish I'd never been born'; this wish is granted.

Bedford Falls has gone to hell

At this point the film becomes a supernatural horror movie, as George is shown what the world – or at least Bedford Falls and many of its inhabitants – would look like without his imprimatur. And it is, indeed, hellish.

Bedford Falls is transformed into Pottersville, a neon-lit strip of joints offering girls, drink, pawnbrokers, gambling – more closely resembling post-war America than had Bedford Falls – and encounters, *inter alia*, his brother's grave, his mother, an embittered widow with no surviving son, and finally Mary, an 'old maid' whom he frightens with his desperate pleading. Bizarrely, she wears glasses in this alternate universe. She evades him, screaming, and in the ensuing ruckus he punches Bert the cop, who then shoots at his fleeing figure, fortunately missing.

A fine mess that would have been; to be unborn yet gunned down. Where would director Frank Capra have turned? Have George reborn, so he can fail again? Fail better? Or cut to The End, and make the all-time feel-bad Christmas movie?

George has, nevertheless, survived the fusillade. He has finally had enough. He runs back to the bridge, calling to Clarence: 'Get me back, I don't care what happens to me! Get me back to my wife and kids! I wanna live again! Please God, let me live again!' He weeps.

Emotion or sentimentality?

Again, his wish is granted. While it is intriguing to imagine what the impact of a self-shaped hole would have on the world, this sequence does George a disfavour in terms of his growth. He is essentially tortured into accepting that his life had value – and his influence on Bedford Falls is shown to have been immense.

His return to the 'real world' is equally out of balance, as he is now in rapture, returning home to find Mary proclaiming a 'miracle', as the community has rallied round to bail George out (Potter gets to keep his ill-gotten gains, unpunished). And although I am unable to refrain from weeping, I suspect that I am now being manipulated, and we have moved from emotion into sentimentality. The switch from wild-eyed despair to glorious jubilation is too swift to be properly grounded in my being. So it remains unclear whether George would have taken the next step from his abject state, which had arisen from acute self-pity and panic – why didn't he contact the police, for example? – without divine intervention.

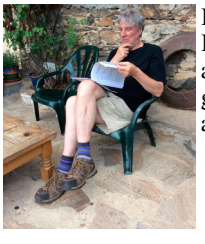
Invoking father

It would be more fitting, I believe, if he'd invoked the memory of his father: an intervention often employed in the men's groups in which I participate. He could have 'earthed' himself through this, perhaps through conversation with him, and uncovered a more proportionate response to the crisis. Because none of the men I have met have been delivered from suicide by the intervention of a guardian angel granting their wish to have never been born. Although I have to acknowledge that I have met men who pray, and have found succour from doing so.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor



Hank Earl retired in 2015 after working for the London Borough of Hackney for 37 years, predominantly as a social worker in the field of adult mental health. For the past 13 years he has been co-leading men's groups with Nick Duffell and, more recently, Manu Bazzano, under the aegis of the Centre for Gender Psychology.

References

Capra, F. (1946). *It's a Wonderful Life*. DVD, film, 168 mins. Los Angeles: Universal Studios.
Johnson, R. A. (1991). *He: Understanding masculine psychology*. New York: Harper and Row.
Johnson, R. A. (2011). *In Search of the Holy Grail*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSSoVZQMEIU.