

It **is** a wonderful life

by [Mousey Brown](#)

It's a Wonderful Life. You know the story: George Bailey, a young boy, then a man with an adventuresome spirit, time and again sets aside his dreams to care for the people in his community. And when it all starts to unravel (absentminded Uncle Billy, mislaid money, opportunistic Old Man Potter), he learns that his years of sacrifice and generosity have amounted to something. He longed to see Tahiti and travel the world, and he felt the loss of that keenly at times. In the meantime, he built the very life he'd wanted to escape, and discovered it contained riches he hadn't anticipated.

I especially want to understand that part of the movie, the part where George Bailey sets aside his dreams, over and over. What did the director, Frank Capra, mean for us to make of this? In a more do-your-dreams, you-can-have-it-all, American-type movie, George would have made it to Tahiti in the end. The reward for his kindness and selflessness would have been everything that happens in the movie, plus somehow he'd wind up in Tahiti.

But that's not what happens.

Instead, we're given to believe that he can live with his lost dreams as he learns to cherish what's in front of him.

As teenagers, didn't we all believe that to become an adult meant giving up one's dreams? Most of us knew or heard about the things our parents had longed for and given up on. Flavored with a little contempt, didn't our adolescent selves wonder how grownups could so easily give up on themselves? And didn't we believe that we weren't going to give up on our passions the way our parents had? We'd stay true to ourselves.

Rather than hearing about our parents' lost dreams, perhaps it would have been helpful to hear how they made peace with that loss. It would be like George Bailey saying to his kids, "I thought to live a good life I needed to travel, but it turned out by doing what I was good at, I built a rich life. I thought I was living a life that amounted to less than what I'd dreamt of, but it turns out it was more."

What would George Bailey need to do before he could think of his lost dreams this way?

This question is not academic to me. Every holiday vacation, or on unexpected days off, my plan is to write, to make good on a dream I first had when I was 8 years old. Most times, I manage barely a toe-dip in that lake, and certainly nothing like the full immersion I long for. Nearly every time, a tension is created between the writing plans I make and what I'm able to actualize.

This vacation, I find myself wondering if it's time to give up on this writing dream? It's unpleasant and painful, the tension between longing and reality. Maybe that's what all the adults were doing when they "gave up." Maybe they needed to drop their dream because it seemed the only way to resolve that tension: Maybe I won't feel so bad if I stop wanting what I want.

But even while I feel discouraged, I also wonder if there's a way to resolve the tension without dropping the dream?

I'm a student of Buddhism, and a foundational Buddhist concept speaks to the tension I'm describing by suggesting that we cultivate a stance where we neither cling to our dreams nor push them away.

Doing this is hard.

Of course I'm thinking of giving up. Because it's one thing to know the stance I need to cultivate and it's another to actually manage to do it. How do you want something, and yet not want it so much that it causes distress, that it makes you wish for a life other than the one you lead?

This kind of suffering - called dukkha in the original language of the Buddha - is like any other suffering. Dukkha describes how life is like a wagon wheel that's out of true, and so it wobbles, one moment achieving balance, the next falling out of balance, and so on and so on. If it feels like just when things are going our way something happens to mess it up - well, that's just life being life. It doesn't mean something's wrong, though we will suffer doubly if we think it should be otherwise.

Maybe George Bailey was secretly a Zen master. At every moment in the film when he wants life to be other than it is, he remembers that life is a wobbly wagon wheel, so if it wobbles - if he thinks he'll finally be able to leave Bedford Falls and travel around the world - he understands it's life being itself when that's suddenly snatched away by his father's death, by his brother's out-of-state job opportunity, by love.

If I were such a Zen master, I'd remember that if it didn't work out for me to write quite as much as I'd hoped, or if I sat down to write but felt everything I wrote was crap - well, that wagon wheel is wobbling. It doesn't mean it's time to let go of my dream. It means our dreams are also part of life, and so they're subject to being like life is.

It is a wonderful life, but wonderful doesn't mean perfect or without trials. Wonderful might be possible only if we also notice what exactly is wonderful in our lives. When George Bailey gets his life back, as his friends and neighbors pile into his home to add their money to the overflowing basket, no part of his brain in that moment is wishing he had been able to travel more. He is simply present to the life he has.