

It's a Wonderful Life

by Kathleen Smith

Have you ever wondered what the world would have been like without you? We all remember Jimmy Stewart in his award-winning role as the distraught banker whose uncle has lost a deposit of eight-hundred dollars which puts him (George Baily) into an impossible predicament where he is forced to grovel at the feet of the man who has belittled him all of his life and who can't wait to take advantage of George and even put him out of business entirely. Ultimately, George prays and is given the unlikely opportunity to see the world as it would have been, without him. He realizes that he actually had a wonderful, useful, productive life. But more than that, he realizes that without him, there were dozens and even hundreds of lives lost or broken. This final realization causes him tremendous remorse and he wishes with all his might that he might just have his old life back, even with all the trouble he might have to face.

I have often reflected on the power of the information that George was given. He KNEW whose lives he had changed and even who would have been dead, but for him. That knowledge gave him the courage to face persecution, financial ruin and even prison with a cheerful heart. So, I asked myself: how can I gain access to that same knowledge in my life? How can I know who I have helped, what good I have done or whose life I may have saved? If it really is a Wonderful Life, how can I know it?

When I was a child, I had a lot of trouble. My dad was an alcoholic, my mother worked, and my brothers took advantage of the fact that I had no one to protect me. I tried to stay out of everyone's way and just be a fly on the wall, so to speak, but I also wanted to help my Mother so she wouldn't have to worry about the house. I wanted to help my Dad stop drinking and smoking because I knew it was killing him. I wanted to be safe from the trouble and pain that surrounded me. Many times as a child and sometimes even as an adult, I have felt like George Baily, standing on the bridge wondering if his life was worth anything at all.

Not too long ago, I went to the hospital. I was clinically dead, they said, but I was still talking, so they kept taking my vital signs until they got a reading other than 'dead'. I had lost so much blood that I became unconscious on my ride to the hospital. They could find no pulse and I was not breathing, as far as they could tell. After a few moments I regained consciousness with a jolt, like an electric shock. It felt as though I had been kicked awake. I don't remember anything about when I was unconscious, but I do know that after I woke up, I knew what George knew. What follows is a small part of that knowledge:

One of my older brothers was in high school when he got into a fight. He was so upset by it that he got into his car to get away. I was about fifteen. I don't know how I managed it, but I jumped into the car with him. We drove down a dirt road for several miles at top speed. After what seemed like a long time, he finally stopped. "Why did you come?" he asked angrily. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know why I had come. Then he said, "If you had not been here, I would have driven off the road and killed myself. I just wanted to die." He then began to cry and we talked until he felt better and we went home.

Today, my brother loves people. He helps anyone who needs it, whether they have money to pay or not. He has a large family. His sons and daughters have traveled the world, performing, dancing, teaching. Thousands of lives have been touched and blessed by this one man alone...and I saved his life.

When I got out of the hospital, my brother was at my home. He had driven five hundred miles that night to be at my bedside. "I love you, Kathy and wouldn't want anything to happen to my baby sister" he said. It really is a wonderful life.