

*Inspirational antidote to loud, violent fare*

*Novel by Jim Stovall*

*Screenplay by Cheryl McKay*

*Directed by Michael O. Sajbel*

Drew Fuller ... Jason Stevens

Bill Cobbs ... Mr. Theophilis 'Ted' Hamilton

James Garner ... Howard 'Red' Stevens

Abigail Breslin ... Emily Rose

Lee Meriwether ... Miss Hastings

Ali Hillis ... Alexia

Brian Dennehy ... Gus

*Jason Stevens: Do you have butterflies?*

*Emily: No Jason. I'm looking at the stars.*

*Jason Stevens: You know, I set this whole thing up because I thought you wanted to go horse back riding, not your mom?*

*Emily: Get real. Horses are smelly and sweaty.*

*Jason Stevens: So what's your dream, if you could dream of anything?*

*Emily: My dream. My dream was a perfect day and I'm just finishing it. My dream is to be with people I love, that love each other and that love me.*

I know, I know, it sounds a little corny and saccharin. That's what I used to think about the 1970s television series *The Waltons*, before I actually tuned in one night and became absolutely captivated by the adventures of John Boy, Mary Ellen, and the rest of that poor West Virginia mountain family in the Depression era. It's fitting to contrast cinematic dramas such as these with what I decried in so much modern fare with my previous review of *Dark Knight*.<sup>[1]</sup> So many movies, especially in theaters appealing to the young, are full of so much special-effects clatter they leave no room for human beings and a story worth telling.

*The Ultimate Gift* is one such timeless story, about a man with a fortune—we're talking billionaire level here—Red Stevens (James Garner) who dies leaving instructions for carrying out the will for his several heirs. Most of his descendants have become accustomed to their high-living ways, and resent that all of Stevens' wishes are to be executed through his long time friend and attorney, Ted Hamilton (Bill Cobbs). In general, each heir is treated fairly, but none feels he/she has received the hundreds of millions due them; they bicker and quarrel at the reading of the will.

Except for Stevens' playboy-wastrel grandson Jason... who shows up late to the funeral smoking a cigarette and generally acting surly and uncommunicative through the entire proceeding. Then later, at the reading of the will, Jason slouches in his seat as his uncles and aunts are told their terms and then shown directly to the door by lawyer Hamilton and his assistant Miss Hastings (Lee Meriwether). Jason then is the sole remaining heir in the room, and grandpa Ted has a special deal for him, revealed in a videotape recording made shortly before his death.

Basically, the old man informs young Jason—the two have been estranged for a long time, stemming from the death of Red's son/Jason's father—that he's giving him a series of gifts, leading to the "ultimate gift." But if at any point Jason abandons the process, refuses the gift or walks away, then Jason will get nothing at all. What follows is a sequence of circumstances dictated through Lawyer Ted and Miss Hastings that send Jason hither and yon. It starts at Red's first big cattle ranch in Texas run by Gus (Brian Dennehy)—where Jason is to receive the gift of work (if you have the gift of work, you can do anything)—and runs through all the remaining 11 gifts:

- ❑ Money

- Friends
- Learning
- Problems
- Family
- Laughter
- Dreams
- Giving
- Gratitude
- A Day
- Love

... all leading to the Ultimate Gift. Which is, well, we'll leave it a mystery so as not to spoil the fun. The movie is based on Jim Stovall's best-selling novel, and both the movie and the book have acquired something of a "family values" following. Specifically, the creators have put together an Ultimate Gift Experience package (I'm assuming it's a combination journal and game) for families to achieve deeper realization of what really counts in life.

Jason, during his down and out phase, runs into a struggling young widow Alexia (Ali Hillis) and her daughter Emily (Abigail Breslin). These are the two who really begin to transform Jason into a man of character, facilitating his insights through the remaining gifts. And the story line fills out.

I suppose there are a number of subliminal messages in the relationship with Alexia and Emily to the effect that 'abortion isn't the solution' or even that 'God is (part of) the answer.' And frankly I was anxious that this movie might launch into some really drippy supernatural Christian proselytization— because it definitely has that aura about it—but it stays on the healthy side of the spirituality quality, leaving God as a properly diffuse abstraction that even atheists can find palatable.

The critics were not kind to this movie, and apparently the in-theater sales were dismal. But, as I state, *The Ultimate Gift* has captured the imagination of a wide audience... for good reason. Here I think the critics, by and large, have missed the boat in characterizing the film as "reeking of self-righteousness and moral reprimand, a hairball of good-for-you filmmaking (NY Times)" and other put-downs. I think as you watch the movie carefully—without your judgmental-reactive mind—you walk through the same discoveries as Jason in your consciousness. Fundamentally, as in *The Waltons*, *The Ultimate Gift* nourishes the soul.

You come away with a real feeling of self-discovery. And I have no idea what it may accomplish for more typical families-with-children, but it's definitely one of those movies that are equally pleasurable to adults and children. The acting is first-rate, the production values are high, and only once or twice did I see lapses into triteness or sentimentality. Speaking of the self-discovery angle, lately I've been checking out the work of Eckhart Tolle and looking at the world more and more in terms of essentials. *The Ultimate Gift* does a fine job concretizing what is essential in life (the gifts) and what is inconsequential (the superficial trappings of money, fame, and power).

Once again, critics 0, real people 10. Top notch flick.

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[1] I may have been a little harsh on *Dark Knight*; it's really more a personal preference for a certain sort of movie than a disrespect for the abilities of the DK moviemakers. At a level of simple artistic quality, I have to agree DK is "all right," even brilliant in some less important features. But I keep coming back to "way too much fuss about a comic book that doesn't rise to the level of graphic novel impact."

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*The Ultimate Gift* | James Garner | Abigail Breslin | *Quality of Life*