

Daydreams By Geoff Wood

Driving his wife to the hairdresser, Walter Mitty drifted into a fantasy. He imagined he was Commander of an eight engine Navy seaplane. A storm raged all around him. His crew was nervous. But not Mitty. "We're going through . . . Rev her up to 8500." The crew revived: "The Old Man will get us through." It took Mrs. Mitty's "You're driving too fast!" to snap Mitty out of his daydream. But no sooner did he drop her off than - passing a hospital - he now fancied himself a famous surgeon. The patient was a millionaire friend of the President. He was suffering of obstreosis of the ductal tract. The anesthetizing machine had broken down. No one knew how to fix it. Mitty did. Then the specialists pleaded with Mitty to take over the operation, which he did nonchalantly. Until somebody shouted, "Look out for that Buick!" and Mitty suddenly returned to the real world.

James Thurber's story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" is about this fellow who escapes his prosaic life by imagining himself a hero, perfect in every way. In other words, he's just like you and me. I have lived much of my own life in a dream world. My boyhood fantasy was to be a Saturday matinee hero like Ken Maynard or swashbuckling Errol Flynn or a comrade of Jimmy Cagney in "The Fighting 69th" - heroically charging a German trench - or as a tenor or baritone like Alan Jones or Nelson Eddy serenading a starry eyed soprano - or as Pat O'Brien playing a heroic priest.

We're all subject to such reveries to transcend our anonymity, possessed of all the answers. Whence came this dream of perfection? Our tradition seems to trace it to the kiss God gave Adam in Eden. Touched by God, we have ever since aspired to be more than chemistry and biology will allow. But we seem to have mistaken the full intent of that divine kiss. What we have savored most is the flavor of God's omnipotence, so that ever since Eden we have become addicted to power, builders of one Tower of Babel after another - and on a lesser level, dreamers like Walter Mitty or like James and John in today's Gospel - imagining ourselves as superior in one way or another.

When all the while, the intent of God's kiss in Eden was to share with us a taste of his mercy; make us creatively merciful towards ourselves and others and all things great and small. To make us persons, not potentates. And think about it. Do we impose perfectionism on our kids? I mean, I like mine just as they are! They were beautiful to me from the moment I first saw them helpless in a bassinet. Their quirks endear them to me. Their mistakes make me love them all the more. Then why can't we be as merciful to the face we see in the mirror? Why can't we value our own selves as God made us? I mean, if it weren't for our flaws we'd all be like manikins in a store window.

Walter Mitty, leaning against a drug store wall, has a final fantasy. He imagines himself a patriot about to be executed. He refuses a blindfold, takes one long drag on a cigarette and snaps it away. "Then with a faint . . . smile playing about his lips, he faced the firing squad; erect . . . proud, disdainful - Walter Mitty - the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last." In concluding his story in this way, Thurber seems (figuratively) to suggest just how we might get rid of this perfectionist in our bonnet who would forever distract us from leading down to earth, productive, sociable lives: ready, aim, fire!

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