

You may remember James Thurber's classic story, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." Walter Mitty is an ordinary middle-aged man who escapes his humdrum life by fantasizing extravagantly.

"We're going through!" The Commander's voice was like thin ice breaking. He wore his full-dress uniform, with the heavily braided white cap pulled down rakishly over one cold gray eye. "We can't make it, sir. It's spoiling for a hurricane, if you ask me." "I'm not asking you, Lieutenant Berg," said the Commander. "Throw on the power lights! Rev her up to 8,500! We're going through!" The pounding of the cylinders increased: ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-*pocketa-pocketa*. The Commander stared at the ice forming on the pilot window. He walked over and twisted a row of complicated dials. "Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!" he shouted. "Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!" repeated Lieutenant Berg. "Full strength in No. 3 turret!" shouted the Commander. "Full strength in No. 3 turret!" The crew, bending to their various tasks in the huge, hurtling eight-engined Navy hydroplane, looked at each other and grinned. "The Old Man'll get us through," they said to one another. "The Old Man ain't afraid of Hell!" . . .

"Not so fast! You're driving too fast!" said Mrs. Mitty. "What are you driving so fast for?"

"Hmm?" said Walter Mitty. He looked at his wife, in the seat beside him, with shocked astonishment. She seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd. "You were up to fifty-five," she said. "You know I don't like to go more than forty. You were up to fifty-five." Walter Mitty drove on toward Waterbury in silence, the roaring of the SN202 through the worst storm in twenty years of Navy flying fading in the remote, intimate airways of his mind. "You're tensed up again," said Mrs. Mitty. "It's one of your days. I wish you'd let Dr. Renshaw look you over."

Walter slips into these fantasies easily and seamlessly, triggered simply by driving past a hospital or hearing a newsboy call out a headline. But whenever he is brought back to reality, it's with an abrupt thud, and an instant deflating of the story he'd been immersed in.

Thurber intended Mitty as kind of a sympathetic alter ego for himself and his (male) readers—a romantic soul trapped in a prosaic existence with an unsympathetic, practical wife. I tend to see him from his wife's point of view, as a self-indulgent escapist who'd rather be the hero of his own stories than a real life

partner who takes responsibility for remembering things like speed limits and overshoes. But either way, Walter Mitty is like all of us in the sense that he lives in the stories he tells about himself.

At one point in the story, he's brought to attention by a parking lot attendant.

"Wrong lane, Mac," said the parking-lot attendant, looking at Mitty closely. "Gee. Yeh," muttered Mitty. He began cautiously to back out of the lane marked "Exit Only." "Leave her sit there," said the attendant. "I'll put her away." Mitty got out of the car. "Hey, better leave the key." "Oh," said Mitty, handing the man the ignition key. The attendant vaulted into the car, backed it up with insolent skill, and put it where it belonged.

They're so damn cocky, thought Walter Mitty, walking along Main Street; they think they know everything. Once he had tried to take his chains off, outside New Milford, and he had got them wound around the axles. A man had had to come out in a wrecking car and unwind them, a young, grinning garageman. Since then Mrs. Mitty always made him drive to a garage to have the chains taken off. The next time, he thought, I'll wear my right arm in a sling; they won't grin at me then. I'll have my right arm in a sling and they'll see I couldn't possibly take the chains off myself. He kicked at the slush on the sidewalk. "Overshoes," he said to himself, and he began looking for a shoe store.

Mitty, you begin to see, is constantly fighting off humiliation. He was humiliated when he got the chains on his tires wound around the axles, because men are supposed to be handy with mechanical things. He drowns out the humiliation by telling himself grandiose stories in which he is the hero—the daredevil Commander, the world-famous surgeon, the fearless witness at a murder trial. It makes for a funny short story, but if Walter Mitty were my friend, I'd really be pushing for him to get past his fear and avoidance of humiliation. Shame controls Mitty to such an extent that he can only get through the day by avoiding being in the present moment. He can't stand himself; he feels like such a failure.

A psychiatrist named Curt Thompson has written a lot about shame, and in a commentary on Romans, Thompson says, "To have one's mind set on something is

essentially about paying attention. What do I pay attention to? Paul says that **what we pay attention to doubles back and governs us**. Hence our attention is deeply associated with either death or life. So much of the biblical narrative is the story of God working hard to get our attention.” (p. 48) *The Soul of Shame*

**What we pay attention to doubles back and governs us.** This is key to what Paul is saying in our reading from Romans 6 today. He has just said that where sin increased, grace abounded more and more, and now he’s answering the question, Well, then, shouldn’t we sin more so that grace can abound more? No, says Paul, because in our baptisms, we died to our old selves and therefore to sin. We’re transformed—not that we can’t still screw up, but we’re now living in an ecosystem that is not structured by sin. We now pay attention to the power and grace of God as we’ve witnessed it in Jesus. Therefore that power and grace governs us, rather than what used to govern us, which is classically known as sin, which in Walter Mitty’s case manifests as shame.

Paul raises the question, What are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves? What stories are we the actors in? And do our stories incorporate the reality of God’s grace and power, or are they replacements for it, ways to protect what we think is deficient in us, as if God’s grace and power weren’t quite enough for our particular issues? If Walter Mitty is the exemplar of someone whose stories don’t incorporate the grace of God—who therefore is not living fully—Anne Lamott would have to be our exemplar of someone whose stories about herself do. And what is it about Anne Lamott’s stories that incorporate the grace of God? Her ready acceptance of her shortcomings, which God’s grace then meets and makes sufficient.

You can see it just in the titles of her books: *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. She admits that very basic, un-heroic yelps are her main prayers. *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. This is a person who has to recalibrate her plans quite a bit. Plan A often doesn't pan out. *Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace*. Anne Lamott makes herself vulnerable, shares her humiliations openly, and as a result she lives richly in the ecosystem of grace.

Curt Thompson re-tells the story of the resurrected Jesus meeting the disciple Peter at the Sea of Galilee. Peter is ashamed to have denied Jesus three times when he was afraid-- under the dominion of sin, as Paul would say.

I think Jesus knows this. There's this sense in which Jesus says, "Look, if you're going to be a leader in my group, I'm going to need everybody in the group – you included – to know what everybody knows. I know that you're feeling ashamed. I know that you're grieved. We know that you denied me three times. I want everybody to hear that we're good. Now I want you to stop paying attention to that [shame] and pay attention to me. I want you to pay attention to the work that I have for you to do. If I have to say this three or 33 more times in order to get you to be persuaded that this is what you're called to do, then that's how long it's going to take."

<https://www.cccu.org/magazine/shining-light-shame/>

The effect of sin's dominion is to let shame immobilize us. When Paul says that we are dead to sin and alive to grace, he means that we can tell the stories about ourselves that include the bad parts, and, like Anne Lamott, we will live in the ecosystem of grace. But he also means that we will be liberated to answer God's calls to us—we will not be like Peter, unable to go forward because of our deep sense of unfitness. We can live more fully and richly, *and* we can mobilize to **be** the change God wants in the world, because we are, as Jesus says to Peter, good with each other.

God of grace, you have brought us from slavery to freedom, from despair to hope, from death to life. May our words and music, our thoughts and our

prayers and our very lives bring honor and glory to you. This we pray in the name of Jesus, whose death and resurrection have brought us new life.  
Amen. by Rev. Dr. Barb Hedges-Goettl