

# You don't have to prove yourself to God: Lessons from 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty'



A week or so before Christmas, I gathered with a small group of friends for a movie night to watch "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." If you haven't seen the 2013 film, I suggest you make a point to watch it. (And if you don't want spoilers, I suggest watching the movie before reading this column.)

I don't remember when I first saw the movie – probably some time in high school – but it's one of those stories that lingers in your mind and makes you consider life and how we spend it.

Based on a short story by James Thurber, the story follows – you guessed it – Walter Mitty, a negative assets manager for Life magazine who struggles to live in reality, preferring to zone out and daydream about what he would do or say if things were different. While this quirk of his sets him up for ridicule, especially at work, this habit of constantly comparing his life to what it could be leaves him unsatisfied while perpetuating a lack of confidence in himself.

When a specific film negative goes missing – the one chosen to be the final cover of Life before the magazine transitions exclusively to the digital landscape – Walter (Ben Stiller) goes on a journey to find the photographer, a man he's never met in person but who for years has trusted him to get his most important photos in print and to the world. This journey forces Walter outside of his comfortable – though, to himself,

unimpressive – life and into a realm of adventure, one that includes jumping from helicopters into frigid water off the coast of Greenland, skateboarding in Iceland toward an erupting volcano, and hiking the Afghan Himalayas, where he finally finds Sean O’Connell, the photojournalist.

To Walter’s surprise, Sean explains that he had the photo negative the entire time, hidden in a wallet Sean had gifted him at the beginning of the film – which Walter, in his anger surrounding the wild goose chase he had been on, had tossed into his mom’s garbage can. As they often are, the mom is the hero of the story, as she had salvaged the wallet and the picture before it was lost to the world. Without looking at the film negative – which Sean believed held the “quintessence of Life [magazine]” – Walter delivers it to the managers at Life. To his surprise, when he glimpses the final cover of Life a few days later, he sees an image of himself, sitting at a favorite spot outside the Life offices looking over prints.

As I was watching the movie, I couldn’t help but look at it from a spiritual perspective. For just as Sean saw Walter’s life – despite the ordinariness of it – as worthy of recognition and as beautiful in its simplicity, so, too, does God look at our lives.

For it can be tempting to look at our lives and call them mundane. We can slip into daydreams of how we wish life would happen, but even if what we are wishing for is good, it can take us away from encountering the people and opportunities that are right in front of us, and it can keep us from seeing the graces that are already present in our lives.

As we enter into this new year, we can learn an important lesson from this fictional character: that we don’t need to prove ourselves to God, that he already sees us as good simply for being his creation. He loves us, despite our flaws, and desires us to do his will in the everyday, mundane tasks – whether that is work or family life.

As someone also prone to daydreaming and getting caught in future plans, this is a reminder to myself to not wish any time away. [Especially as I make plans for the next stage of my life](#), it can be easy to want to skip to the next best thing, but I know each moment is an opportunity to encounter God in the present, and we can't get these moments back.

I think we can all agree that 2020 and 2021 didn't go as anyone planned, but that doesn't mean we can't take a step back and recognize that every moment is a gift. This upcoming year can be good, if only we would have the eyes to see it.

*Ava Lalor is assistant editor for Our Sunday Visitor and editor for Radiant magazine.*