

The contemplative mask

By [Patrick Prag](#)

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I feel dread when my phone rings these days. This presents a bit of a problem, because I make my living by taking peoples' calls. The same goes for e-mail. I've got more than a week's worth piling up unanswered.

Part of this I can explain: When I made a promise as an oblate on the altar at the Benedictine community of Saint Walburga, I was serious about cultivating a contemplative life of prayer and at least the semblance of a quiet interior. Ordering your day by the Divine Office is supposed to keep distraction at bay.

The other part, however, is where the problem lies: my posture as a contemplative has become, at times, a way to cultivate an interior craziness that is about as soothing and comforting as a Fox News broadcast. Instead of cultivating interior peace, I end up using the Daily Office and my intentions for contemplative prayer as a shield. And my contemplative orders act as a mask for the inner craziness.

I work as a therapist. This caregiving profession, if done well, requires an intense amount of connection. Theoretically, my contemplative life should serve that connection. A true contemplative brings inner peace outward. That's the goal.

Here is the reality: When I am not calm and still inside, when my internal and spiritual life is a shit storm, I hide it. I am afraid that my care seekers will see the true me, and not come back. I fear their rejection. I am afraid that I will be found out to be incompetent, that they will see that I am just as unraveled as they are. So this primal fear drives me to pretend to be something that I am not: to hide behind a facade of spirituality. In my case, as a contemplative.

Then it gets worse. I role play how busy, busy, busy my "important" life is; I excuse myself from making simple time to be with friends and family and, most of all, God. And this self I want to hide even more. So I cover this man deeper in the cloak of contemplative spirituality. And as Merton said, this type of hiding in our shadow self—this type of walking deadness—is "altogether too much privacy" from God.

Our mission is to be known before God face to face, and to have others watch us live that out in community. For those of us who want to bring something of the reality of Christ to the world, these words from Merton are essential to try to embody:

I must look for my identity, somehow, not only in God but in other men. I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of mankind as if I were a different kind of being.

So I am going to the garden to dig for a few hours with my wife. And then I am going back to the monastery to try again.