

Observation

Missing the Forest for the Trees By Musafir



There seems to be an insatiable urge in our contemporary society to bask in five minutes of fame. This social disease compels us to record everything that's going on around us. One can go to the Grand Canyon and find more people taking pictures than observing the grandeur of the gorge. You can join the crowd and visit the Eiffel Tower, and you will see hundreds furiously photographing the tower from every angle rather than taking a good look at it. At the zoos we seem more interested to record the animals than notice their beauty or behavior.

It gets worse during marriage receptions at least the one that I attended recently. The wedding ceremony concluded with the groom kissing the bride, nervously and awkwardly, but at the multiple photographers' insistence they had to reenact the scene a few times more. Toasts had to be repeated, as were some witty remarks by the groom's cousin, all at the behest of the avid photographers. I thought I detected a slight look of relief on the couple's face as their car finally took them away from the guests – and the photographers.

No doubt the popularity of social media has heightened the trend. No private or social event goes unrecorded and then promptly reported in Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr or SnapChat. Every birthday cake, wedding dress and reunion buffet is duly splashed in serial photographs of dubious focus and dismal composition. Probably bakers are baking cakes, designers are sketching dresses and hosts are planning parties with the resulting photos firmly in mind.

Why does one take photos? You take a photo to aid your recall. You take a photo of your child so that you can look at it years later and remember how she looked as a baby. You take photos of your sunset gondola ride, for you love to think of your glorious summer

in Venice even while you are freezing in Duluth, Minnesota. The album brings back charming memories.

The other reason one takes photos is to share experiences. We send photos of a wedding or birthday to your cousin who couldn't attend either. You make sure that Grandma gets to see snapshots of the reunion her gout did not let her attend. Were you to get to the peak of Everest, you may share with the world the unique view you beheld. But those have a purpose. The purpose should not be instant fame by displaying them on social media.

Is this what is spurring the tendency to shoot and publish virtually everything? It seems so. Aside from the scourge of selfies, which are nearly always an eyesore, many pictures are of I-and-the-Whitehouse variety that leave us in little doubt which of the two objects is truly important. Perhaps we all crave a measure of immortality, and leaving a visual imprint on Facebook pages is some people's way to grope for it.

A few years ago, I visited Louver in France. Looked like most of the visitors wanted to see Mona Lisa. I stood mesmerized for a long time, watching and wondering: What is she thinking? When I came out of trance, I took a shot of the painting, and meditated on it on my way back home. Seeing and snapping photos were discrete actions, distinct in time and purpose. Shooting did not take away from a 'mindful' immersion in the painting itself.

But there is a price for this. Looking back, it makes me conscious of what we lose when we start snapping photos the moment we see something interesting: we really don't see what is important. We care more about how the photograph will make us more important in eyes of our friends and acquaintances.