

What Goes Unnoticed

Written by Vivian Bikulege



Everyone chases after happiness,

not noticing that happiness is right at their heels.

- Bertolt Brecht

A few nights ago, *Mark Twain*, a film directed by Ken Burns, was rebroadcast on PBS. I could not keep my eyes open long enough to watch Part 1 in its entirety, but through the early haze of impending sleep, I learned one important fact about Samuel Clemens. He was “an enormous noticer.”

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I fell asleep thinking about the idea that all writers are noticers. Conversely, all noticers are not writers. Not everyone chooses words as a means to communicate what they see or hear. Noticers can be painters, photographers, teachers, clergy, doctors, moms and dads. Security guards and TSA agents get paid to notice. Going unnoticed can be a lonely and solitary existence.

The act of noticing should not be confused with being a “neb nose,” Pittsburgh slang for a person who is always minding other people’s business. Healthy noticing is neither intrusive nor hurtful. A person who is aware and present to the moment is usually a noticer.

I like to notice. Something I am keen on doing is to notice, read, and then use the name on a person’s nametag in grocery stores or retail outlets. I try to use a person’s name politely and not take advantage of the fact that I know someone’s name without giving them mine. Speaking to another person by name and introducing myself puts us on common ground. Addressing someone by name can be the beginning of a relationship, not always desired, but the possibility of a new friendship is always positive.

Another adventure in noticing is in the simple act of walking. I see and hear more when I walk or ride a bike. On the mornings when I am at home, I take the dogs for their first walk between 8 and 9 a.m. I have one of two choices for our unleashed expedition – either the sandy trail to the community dock, or a wooded path (actually private property) at the back of my subdivision on the banks of the Coosaw River. Most recently, I begin my dog walk with Blackberry in hand, reading emails, texting, or talking, oblivious to my surroundings until I come to the end of the path. When I put the device in my pocket, I hear the *purdy* chirps of cardinals, chick-a-dee-dee-dees, or the rapid-fire tapping of pileated woodpeckers. Further away is the din of traffic layered with the sound of rifle shots echoing from Parris Island and filtered by the rustle of palms pushed by marsh breezes. When I put my cell phone away, I notice.

It is what I do not notice, the things I take for granted, that oftentimes impact me the most when I finally pause to consider them. My mother’s eyes, the color of my beagle’s coat, my husband’s hands, the kindness in a coworker’s voice on the other end of a telephone call. My good friend Dan, who sustained a brain injury from a car accident sang the first stanza of The Steve Miller Band’s *Take the Money and Run* to me during a recent visit. In those few seconds, I was delighted by the memory and music created by the right side of his brain. I noticed his joy and mine as he laughed over the exploits of Billy Joe and Bobbie Sue, two young lovers who decide to cut loose.

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I take notice of the dust and clutter of my house. I notice the shift in my mood when I consider the devastation in Japan, and the man-made crises of assault and war. I absorb and notice the mournful weight of the strains of Ralph Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* on my heart when I hear those notes and remember them lingering in the air of our family room as my father passed away.

We live our lives in what we notice. The leftover hoots of an owl at dawn. The wonder of a baby grabbing after bubbles magically lifted by warm air. The sound of an elderly woman's voice cracking open the notes of *Amazing Grace*. The slow taste of tea and honey sliding past the tongue and soothing the throat as it moves to warm the belly. The damp and musty evaporation of tidal creek waters sifting past cord grass and into the nose.

I know that my senses are diminishing. The acuity of sight and sound, taste and touch are not as sharp and tangy as they were twenty years ago, but I am not disheartened. Wisdom, or some degree of understanding, has awakened an appreciation in me to the attention I must give to the art of noticing. I have to write things down to remember, or just remember to savor the things I do not take time to record. I may not be "an enormous noticer" like the great Mr. Mark Twain, but I appreciate his example in taking note of life's everyday offerings of humor, controversy, and the foibles of mankind.