

Is the Invisible Life Worth Living?

According to a well-known saying, “It’s not *what* you know, it’s *who* you know.”

Today, the second clause may as well read “It’s *who* knows *you*.”

We live in a culture that largely attaches meaning to visibility. The importance of the contemporary person is typically determined by digital footprint and esteem in the eyes of fellow men and women. In recent years, blogs and social media have dramatically expanded the number of people who can achieve a longed-for exposure and affirmation.

Over thirty years ago, Christopher Lasch described this shift to a celebrity-seeking society in *The Culture of Narcissism*:

“Today men seek the kind of approval that applauds not their actions but their personal attributes. They wish to be not so much esteemed as admired. They crave not fame but the glamour and excitement of celebrity. They want to be envied rather than respected... What a man does matters less than the fact that he has ‘made it.’”

However, I’m increasingly encountering a desire in people to step back behind the curtain of greater anonymity. It’s a sentiment that has been experienced by various people on the spectrum of visibility – from the Hollywood celebrity or media personality to the mommy blogger and the person with a few hundred Facebook friends. As they discover, achieving and maintaining greater visibility takes time away from other pursuits and relationships. Many of those who garner more attention eventually come to feel that much of the activities that accompany it are ephemeral. In addition, greater notoriety can bring greater suffering: the more you put yourself out there, the likelier you are to engender hurt feelings or get attacked.

At the same time, those who experience this sentiment often have a hard time justifying a retreat. Our visibility culture still tugs at them. It pesters them with thoughts such as: "You're being selfish and antisocial by not regularly updating your status on social media"; "it's a waste of money to not use your degree properly"; "people won't respect you as much if you stay home with your kids"; "being relatively unknown means you're a failure."

My question is: how should people today reconcile these competing desires? If a man lives in the forest and not many people know him, is his life still worthwhile? If so, why?