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Measure of Happiness

In 2017, the word "instagrammable" was chosen as the word of the year. With close to a billion Instagram users, it's not hard to understand why. It seems like everyone is using Instagram. Young girls show off popular sweets at a cafe and students stand shoulder-to-shoulder at beach barbecues. The photos are different, but they all have one thing in common: they are "Instagrammable." What does that mean? Instagrammable means a photo that not only looks nice, but makes people wish the life shown in the photo was their own.

To make a photo Instagrammable, users often try to make themselves look more impressive than they are in real life. One friend always makes me wait in front of a delicious dinner while she tries to take the perfect picture for Instagram. Another constantly uploads modified pictures, air-brushed and cropped to make her look younger and more beautiful. These photos are designed to get as much approval and admiration as possible. And this approval is measured in "likes." The more "likes" you get, the better people think your life is, and the more satisfied you are with yourself.

But here's the problem: Instagram has taught us how to "look" happy, but we've forgotten how to "be" happy. I have a silly confession: When the hands of a clock point to numbers that match the date of my mother's birthday, it makes me smile. Every time. It's a wonderful feeling, but not a very Instagrammable one. Does that mean I'm less happy than someone who got a hundred likes for their photo of a cheesecake? Asked another way, is the person with the most likes on Instagram really the happiest person in the world? No. Happiness cannot be quantified, and being true to who we are will surely bring us more happiness than a fake photo on Instagram.

But is it really so surprising that Instagram users care so much about "likes"? After all, young people are encouraged to chase after "likes" every day at school. We call them "grades." And just as Instagram can cause users to forget the true meaning of happiness, the focus on test scores and grades can make students forget the true joy of learning. Many students never read for pleasure, or take a semester to study abroad, because they're too focused on getting good grades. Even kindergarteners who can't yet read go to cram school to prepare for elementary school entrance exams! Is it any wonder that students grow up thinking the number of "likes" one gets on Instagram is the best way to measure happiness?

When my grandmother took me to the musical "The Phantom of the Opera" for the first time, words could not describe how touched I was by the beautiful music and the Phantom's sad love story. It became a passion. I memorized the lyrics to all the songs in English, I read the original novel that the musical was based on. I researched the history of the Paris Opera House and the lives of French people at the end of the 19th Century.

I knew I would never be tested on any of it. But I didn't care. All of these things were fascinating to me and I still carry what I learned deep in my heart. This is the difference between studying and learning. Between looking happy and being happy.

So here is my challenge to you: the next time you get a bad score on a test, take a blurry picture of it and post it to Instagram. You might not get a lot of likes, but it will be a reminder to you, and maybe to others, of what's truly important. Oh, look at the time. It's only two hours until my mother's birthday.