

Instagram's Envy Effect

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Everyone's life looks better on social media. And that's the problem.

I keep having the same conversation over and over. It starts like this: "I gave up Facebook for Lent, and I realized I'm a lot happier without it." Or like this, "Pinterest makes me hate my house." Or like this: "I stopped following a friend on Instagram, and now that I don't see nonstop snapshots of her perfect life, I like her better."

Yikes. This is a thing. This is coming up in conversation after conversation. The danger of the internet is that it's very very easy to tell partial truths—to show the fabulous meal but not the mess to clean up afterward. To display the smiling couple-shot, but not the fight you had three days ago. To offer up the sparkly milestones but not the spiraling meltdowns.

I'm not anti-technology or anti-Internet, certainly, but I do think it's important for us to remind ourselves from time to time that watching other peoples' post-worthy moments on Facebook is always going to yield a prettier version of life than the one you're living right now. That's how it works.

My life looks better on the Internet than it does in real life. Everyone's life looks better on the internet than it does in real life. The Internet is partial truths—we get to decide what people see and what they don't. That's why it's safer short term. And that's why it's much, much more dangerous long term.

Because community—the rich kind, the transforming kind, the valuable and difficult kind—doesn't happen in partial truths and well-edited photo collections on Instagram. Community happens when we hear each other's actual voices, when we enter one another's actual homes, with actual messes, around actual tables telling stories that ramble on beyond 140 pithy characters.

But seeing the best possible, often-unrealistic, half-truth version of other peoples' lives isn't the only danger of the Internet. Our envy buttons also get pushed because we rarely check Facebook when we're having our own peak experiences. We check it when we're bored and when we're lonely, and it intensifies that boredom and loneliness.

When you're laughing at a meal with friends, are you scrolling through Pinterest? When you're in labor with your much-prayed-for-deeply-loved child, are you checking to see what's happening on Instagram? Of course not. We check in with our phones when it seems like nothing fun is happening in our own lives—when we're getting our oil changed or waiting for the coffee to brew.

It makes sense, then, that anyone else's fun or beauty or sparkle gets under our skin. It magnifies our own dissatisfaction with that moment. When you're waiting for your coffee to brew, the majority of your friends probably aren't doing anything any more special.

But it only takes one friend at the Eiffel Tower to make you feel like a loser.

I'm a writer. I use Twitter and Facebook and Instagram and Pinterest and my blog as part of my professional life—as a way to connect with readers and be part of a conversation that we're creating together, a conversation about creativity and faith and writing and parenting and community and life around the table. It's a lovely conversation, and part of my work involves reading many blogs and commenting on lots of photos and scrolling through status after status.

Some days it feels rich and multi-faceted. I learn and I'm inspired. I find recipes I want to try and stories I want to live. I feel connected and thankful to be part of such an intelligent and creative internet community.

And then on some days, I feel like I have nothing to offer, like I must be the only one who isn't a graphic designer and hasn't yet managed to display her entire darling life online with lots of chevron and mint accents. I feel so certain that my life is a lot less darling than other peoples' lives.

But that's the Internet. The nature of it. I so easily fall prey to the seduction of other people's partial truths and heavily filtered photos, making everything look amazing. And their amazing looking lives make me feel not amazing at all.

Let's choose community. Let's stop comparing. Let's start connecting.

Some days when I sit down at my laptop, instead of choosing to be an observer via Facebook, I choose to be a friend via email. Instead of scrolling through someone else's carefully curated images, I use those few seconds to send a text to a person I really know and really love and really want to be connected to.

It's not about technology or not. I'm not suggesting you get all old-school-pen-and-paper about it (unless that's your thing.) It's about connecting instead of comparing. Instead of using the computer to watch someone else's perfectly crafted life, enter into someone's less-than-perfect life. You can use Facebook if you want, but you might find email, Skype and phone calls work better.

The distinction I'm making is public vs. private, not in person vs. long distance. I have very close, very honest friendships that depend on phone calls and Skype dates and long wandering emails, and I'm thankful that technology allows for those connections. But I don't think you can build transforming friendships that take place only in a public sphere like Facebook or Instagram. For many of us, walking away from the Internet isn't an option. But using it to connect instead of compare is an option, and a life-changing one. Using technology to build community instead of building carefully-curated images of ourselves is an option, and a worthwhile one.

And on the days when you peer into the screen of your laptop and all you see are other people's peak experiences that highlight your lack in that moment, remember that life isn't about the story you tell about yourself on the Internet. It's about a million more beautiful and complex things than that, like love and faith and really listening. It's about using what you've been given to craft a life of gratitude and passion and grace.

Remember that the very best things in life can't be captured in status updates.