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## The Social Media Mirage (and What We're Missing)

**By Laurie Uttich**

UCF Forum columnist

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A large man in a black bear suit walks onscreen in a YouTube video. He stops in the middle of some guys tossing around two basketballs, makes some awkward 80s dance moves, and then moonwalks off the screen so well even Michael Jackson might have been impressed. More than 100 of my students watch the video in class. Not one of them see him.

I missed him, too.

You could blame technology and assume we were texting or tweeting or making cat memes on Tumblr. But in actuality we were all intently watching the one-minute video, an observation test produced by a company hoping to promote increased awareness of cyclists.

At the beginning of the video we're instructed to count the number of passes one of the teams makes. We're pretty successful with that—(spoiler alert: It's 13)—but then, the announcer asks if we've noticed the "moonwalking bear." We haven't, but next time, we look for him and it's painful how obvious he is. As the video states at the end, "It's easy to miss something you're not looking for."

I think about this moonwalking bear when a student sends me an email with shouty caps and four exclamation points over a mistake I made on a grade. I think about the bear when a man flips me off while passing me, because I stopped in the middle of a suburban side street to avoid hitting a sandhill crane. And I try to think of him when one of my sons is distant with me or picks on his brother.

I've come to think of this moonwalking bear as the suffering in others that I can't see. When you teach creative nonfiction, you learn quickly so many are carrying around pain. As Plato once wrote: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

I wonder sometimes if the ways we now connect make it difficult for us to remember Plato's point. For me, Facebook is the ultimate "moonwalking bear," but instead of being unnoticed, it's taking center stage and my own posts present a one-sided, breathtakingly positive image of my life.

I'm not *pretending* to be happy. This year, I celebrated my 25th wedding anniversary in Europe, my kid's football team had a big win, and my oldest son volunteered in Haiti and came back forever changed. I wrote poems and essays about things that mattered to me and some were published. I read work that moved me and watched videos that inspired me and shared the successes of students I adore. I posted about all of these events and if you looked at my wall, you'd find that 98 percent of my posts were overwhelmingly positive.

But, of course, life is more complex than that. And while I believe that happiness is an active choice—and I fight for it every day—there were tough times this year. We lost a loved one and my son had a difficult surgery that took months of rehab. I posted briefly about both...and I worried each time about bleeding all over the screen.

I'm still trying to figure out what role I want social media to play in my life and I wonder if my 98 percent of positive posts also add to our collective perception that other people's lives are "perfect"... and I'm concerned that this perception adds pain to those who are suffering. I worry, too, that perhaps the onslaught of "positivity posts" chips away at our urge to make real connections with others, to probe beneath the profiles we've created for ourselves and actively listen to those in pain.

I think about Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" a great deal. I worry that this is the reality he warned us of: a culture where we are all so distracted by things we can enjoy—or buy—that we are missing what makes us human. And I worry that I'm often contributing to that culture.

Of course, there are plenty of us who do share painful stories on social media, and Facebook itself offers a constant stream of negative updates. While I may try to keep my own social media primarily "positive," I first learned of the ISIS beheadings on Facebook and I'm hit almost daily with news of Ebola updates and refugees in Syria.

After a steady onslaught of social media, is it any wonder we sometimes feel numb to the suffering—or joy—of others?

Last June, [the New York Times reported Facebook conducted a sketchy study](#) in which researchers secretly manipulated the newsfeeds of 689,003 users by altering their number of positive and negative posts. The researchers found what you might expect: Those who received the continually positive posts (think: cat diaries and dogs reunited with veterans) wrote their own positive posts. Those stuck with a constant stream of negativity were more negative in their own posts.

We all know emotions can be contagious, but maybe we haven't yet considered how impacted those emotions are by social media. And perhaps we aren't yet concerned enough about how apathetic a steady diet of negative—or positive—news can make us over time. Maybe we forget that social media platforms are just that—*platforms*, our own personal mirages that feed our delusions about ourselves and others.

Because maybe, as the [video with the moonwalking bear](#) concludes, “It’s easy to miss something you’re not looking for.”

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