**On Being Nothing**

*By* [*BRIAN JAY STANLEY*](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/author/brian-jay-stanley/)

*Every man looketh that his companion should value him at the same rate he sets upon himself.*

–Thomas Hobbes

As a carryover from childhood camps, I still instinctively check my mailbox with excitement. At camp, when I felt homesick, the arrival of mail from family was a reminder that I was not forgotten, that somewhere in the great world, though not here, my existence was written boldly in another’s ledger. Now, despite my Pavlovian reflex, browsing my mail is not merely unexciting but depressing.

Why should we care what thoughts are in the minds of others? Is this not like a Canadian fretting about the weather in Mexico?

What am I in this world but a pawn of others’ projects? The utility companies require the payments they are owed. The stores have new products they invite me to come and buy. A speaker has planned a lecture and seeks an audience. I owe taxes to the government for making money, for spending that money, for owning a home, for owning a car to leave that home. I am not a name but an account number, a social security number, a customer ID, a “current resident” of this address. Every day, I am sought out by people who do not know me but who want something from me. I matter to the world merely as the owner of a bank account from which others wish to withdraw.  
  
Most annoying are subscription solicitations I receive from literary magazines that got my name and address from rejecting work I submitted. They do not want my writing, but might I send them my money — so I can read the writers they chose over me? They thwart my project and subsume me into theirs. Not that I can blame any of these solicitors. A store needs customers, a speaker needs listeners, a publisher needs subscribers. I use others as surely as others use me. They are not my enemies but individuals trying to live and succeed, just as I am. Nevertheless, all those individuals added together make up the world, and the world is cruel.

At every stage of life, we desire to be noticed and affirmed by others. Infants are born craving affection as much as milk. Children playing do not require the active involvement of nearby adults, but if you try to leave they demand that you *watch* them play. Adolescents, in their perpetual anxiety to be popular, do not so much look at others through their own eyes as look constantly at themselves through others’ eyes. Those who are dying worry about being remembered after death, though when dead, how can they care if they’re forgotten? As adults, our successes give us little pleasure unless sweetened by others’ admiration. If we dress up, there must be others to see us or our work seems wasted — no one wears a tuxedo at home. A marvelous gardener once told me (speaking for human nature) that he takes more delight in a single garden visitor’s compliment than in all the shrubs and flowers he has ever planted. What is this craving for another’s eye to rest upon us?

Upon reflection, a desire for recognition seems irrational. Since we live in our own minds, why should we care what thoughts are in the minds of others? Is this not like a Canadian fretting about the weather in Mexico? How to explain this need for notice is debatable. Are we so doubtful of our worth that others must attest to it? Conversely, are we so certain of our worth that others must bow down to it?

Growing up in a small town, I had an audience. I knew everyone at church, at school, on opposing sports teams. Everyone else knew everyone, too. Thus we were all one another’s audience. This did not always make life pleasant; one had an audience for one’s failures as well as one’s successes. But it made life meaningful. Everything counted because someone was watching. In high school, the bliss of getting a pretty girlfriend consisted less in having the girl herself than in walking the halls with her on your arm, for others to see. The chief motivation to score goals in sports was not to beat the other team but to impress the fans. To score a goal or get a girl on a desert island would have been a paltry pleasure. Small town life resembled the medieval universe in which saints and angels looked down on the adventures of humankind. Your actions might lead to heaven or hell, but because all eyes were on you, even damnation possessed a certain coziness.

A decisive break in my life occurred when I left town after high school. My well-nurtured ego thought of the outside world as the waiting arena of my actions, where all humanity was expectantly assembled for me, yet when I arrived I found that no one knew my name nor wished to learn it; I was a king without any subjects. Arriving at college was like stepping out of the medieval world into the modern. The campus was a chaos of otherness with nothing at the center, least of all me. Unknown students from unknown places lived unknown lives, unconnected to mine. What did my actions matter anymore, since no one was keeping track of me but me? I studied anomie in my sociology classes and experienced it alone in my dorm room. Though I made friends, I no longer had an audience.

I remember lying awake in my dorm bed the first night I arrived on campus. The thought gripped me that no one on campus or in the city knew I had come or required that I be there in order to function. The local restaurants had been in business for 20 years without my patronage. The dorm where I slept had been housing students since before I was born. If I died tonight, I thought, the city would not miss me or pause from its busy routines except for someone to call my family to fetch my body. I felt frightened to be so unnecessary. The one comfort I clung to was that the college had admitted me and, more importantly, had offered me a scholarship, implying it wanted me. For what is the proof of being wanted except being paid?

I began noticing every small sign of my insignificance to others, and minor episodes made deep impressions. One day during my sophomore year, I was issued a $100 citation for parking seven feet from a fire hydrant, when the law required 15 feet. I thought the ticket was unreasonable, for although common sense told me not to block a fire hydrant, how was I to know the precise distance required, when no one had posted a sign? I appealed the ticket using this argument but was informed in a formal letter that the law does not bend for the ignorant, and I had to pay. Reading the brief, austere sentences from an authoritative stranger gave me a view of myself through the law’s eyes, as a nameless citizen. I had duties more than rights; the law’s only concern was that the human herd keep inside the fences. Excuses were irrelevant.

Some days I feel so insubstantial that I am startled by signs of my visible presence in the world. On a recent afternoon walk, when my thoughts on these matters had gone somewhat too far, a dog rooting in the grass turned its head and barked at me. I turned my head toward the sound in surprise: I had made the rooting dog look up — therefore I did exist. True, the dog hated me, but in its bark I heard a vicious compliment, for it is better to be hated than ignored, hate being a form of acknowledgement, albeit negative.

Society is adroit at disillusioning newcomers, and many self-assured children grow up to be bitter adults. But bitterness, instead of a form of *dis*illusionment, is really the refusal to give up your childhood illusions of importance. Ignored instead of welcomed by the world, you fault the world as blind and evil in order not to fault yourself as naïve. Bitterness is a child’s coddling narcissism within the context of an adult’s harsh life. Instead, I know that the world only tramples me as a street crowd does an earthworm — not out of malice or stupidity, but because no one sees it. Thus my pain is not to feel wrongly slighted, but to feel rightly slighted.

There must be a Copernican revolution of the self. Instead of pointlessly cursing the sun to go around me, my chance of contentment is learning to orbit, being the world’s audience instead of demanding the world be mine. If the world is a stage, then everyone’s an extra, acting minor roles in simultaneous scenes in which no one has the lead. With so much happening, society is poorly made to satisfy pride, but well made to satisfy interest, if we will only let go of our vanity and join the swirl of activity.