

To Be Seen Transcription

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Hello there and welcome to Splinters, my podcast about woodworking and stuff. Thanks for listening. And thank you to Highland Woodworking Woodworking for their willingness to help share my thoughts with you. I appreciate the partnership. Highland Woodworking is where you can find their excellent online store for all things woodworking. Huge selection of tools. Check them out.

My thoughts today turn to this. To be seen. This is the title, To Be Seen. Why do artists perform in front of a crowd? Why did that mannequin, how do I describe him? This was in Paris at some small square and he was completely painted in silver, so he looked like a statue and then he would move, you know, small muscle. Why do people do that? Why do people show their creations at a show and tell, or a craft fair, art gallery? Why do I display my furniture or write stories or talk in front of a group of people?

And the answer is quite simple, I think. We want to be seen, to be acknowledged. We want to leave a mark. We need to leave a mark. Some expression of ourself, a painting on the cave wall, a handprint.

Fame is not the same as that. Fame is not the same game. That fame stuff is for the supremely egodriven, or for money, or for the empty promises of forever. Name leaves in a hurry on the next scooter, looking for the latest, greatest sensation. Fame fizzles out fast now in our world. Our world of the fatuous, the furious. Fifty years ago, I looked it up, Time Magazine's 'Person of the Year' was King Faisal, and the year before him, John Sirica. Remember them? I rest my case.

No matter. We still want to be seen or read or heard. And so we create things to leave an account of ourselves, a record, a footprint behind. The wonderful book by Robert McFarland, 'The Old Ways', talks about pathways, and he discusses paths around the world. And there's one, I think, on the coast of England, I could be wrong, with footprints that are thousands of years old and left in the mud and get there they remain. And it's that permanence in a world of impermanence that people strive for, that sense of leaving a mark behind.

We want to be seen. And so we create things. From our first cry as a baby to the time we give it our last shout or murmur, we want someone to acknowledge us. Yes, I see you.

This is a powerful phrase, to be seen for what we are attempting to do. To know that our voices do not fall like leaves into the quiet of a dark and forgotten forest, that someone will acknowledge us. I had a student last week. I had a class just outside of Rochester, New York at the Wendell Castle Workshop. It was great fun. And we had a student who was a literature professor. And we had this interesting conversation about Herman Melville.

What a failure. What an absolute failure in his lifetime to get people to read his stuff. At first, he had some success with a few of his travel books, but not his most famous, 'Moby Dick', which is so well known now, it just never took off. He ended up making a living as a customs house officer, man. He tried and succeeded, but after his passing, to be seen.

So much for fame. But if we accept our one hit wonder status as the state of things, what's our one hit to be? This is the decision of a lifetime. What will I do with my time so that I create something that I think has value, so that someone will think of me with gratitude or admiration or pride that I created something that they could see and enjoy and learn from? I can't say what it is for you. Having that one hit, whatever

it is, your life, I don't know. Maybe it's just that I hope that one of the three drunks who show up at my funeral, one of them will at least know how to pronounce my name right. There's a lasting mark. It can't be that we're working just for the money. That may come from creative work if you do something very, very well, or if you're smart about marketing, or finally, if you live long enough, it takes many people a whole lifetime to be discovered overnight. My friend Arvie Smith, who's I think he's in his late 70s now, just got a Guggenheim Fellowship. Man has been painting for years. Finally just got noticed. Good on him. It's great. It's great to see.

But you wait a whole lifetime to be discovered overnight. My friend Angie and I, another painter, talked about getting discovered like that. Years of work, and maybe one of us will get noticed. You keep banging away at it. Persistence is the genius, perhaps. Keep on knocking. Keep on knocking at that door. But many people work for nothing so they can strum their music or dance to it or read their poetry out loud to six over-caffeinated listeners in a coffee house. Think those folks you see playing music in the subways do it because they can't figure out where else to go or what else to do. They want to be heard.

Here is my skill they cry out. Here is my passion they offer. Here is my life open like a book before you. Do you see me? We want the world to know that we're here. To know that the creation of our head, our hearts, our hands will be seen. For the artists and craftspeople that I know, we also do it because we want to be known for our good work, our worthy efforts, our skills, our gathered talents such as they are. But the vast majority of us will not be well known or written up in history books or have even a 15 second obit piece on CNN about her life.

That's all right. If the whole world doesn't know about me, that's okay. If a few of my friends and my sister and a few colleagues whose opinion matters to me know that I was here, that's fine. It is an effort, I believe, to create objects of quality in a throwaway world. This is a statement of purpose to be creative in a time such as ours is a commitment to the idea of value. Value in the work in a culture surrounded with the notion that cheap is better. We'll just throw it away anyway. It is an unceasing desire to do my best work, to do good work, and leave behind a mark that shows that you were here and cared.

I don't know that many of us have this sense of doing our best work. It gets back to this concept that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi talks about with flow. And that is one of the attributes of flow. This is a concept he created that artists have known about for years, where you get in this zone and you don't care if the work sells and you don't care how people respond to it. All you care about is you're loving what you're doing at the moment. And sort of the thing that is happening at that moment is you keep trying to get better at it.

'Oh, it's a different stroke. Erase that. Do a better job. Do this better. Try this again.' And that level of commitment to the work itself is so appealing to a creative person, to a rock climber, a chef, a painter. These are creative moments where you're stuck with the problem and you're trying to figure it out. It is just that sense, though, of trying to do your best work and getting better at it each and every time that is so appealing. And this concept of flow that Csikszentmihalyi talks about is a big part of it. It is work done for its own self, just for the sake of doing it, because it feels good to keep getting better at it.

And that's an important part of it. You do want, I find, that a little bit of acknowledgment for your efforts helps. And that's this topic I've latched on to today To Be Seen in a world of a billion voices, billions of voices. What are we at now? Seven billion? Eight, who knows? So let a few people know that you're out here trying. Anyway, make a mark. Make a mark on the world. Do good work. It's worth the effort.

I want to thank again all of you for listening. I appreciate that. If you want to support me, I'm on Kofi.com. I started something new. I'm on Substack now with some of my writings. If you'd like to check

those out, Gary Rogowski at Substack. I think that's the address. And thanks again to Highland Woodworking for our partnership. I appreciate their support. Check them out at Highlandwoodworking.com.

And thank you to those who have visited our website, Northwestwoodworking.com. There is information there on the Online Mastery Program. I'm hoping to start in late October with a full group. And if I can get that full group, I can offer scholarships, and that's something I've always been striving for. There is also information on the Setting Up Shop Program. That is going to start just in November, right after the election. Yeah, forget about everything. Move forward with your life. We'll still be here. That class, this video class, 12 weeks, talks about the concept of flow, but also you know real practical things. You know How about where our tools go? Machines, if you have them, where they go, what should be next to each other, real practical stuff. And we do little projects, so it's a lot of fun.

Thank you, everyone, for listening. Be good out there. Do your best. Keep practicing. Adios.