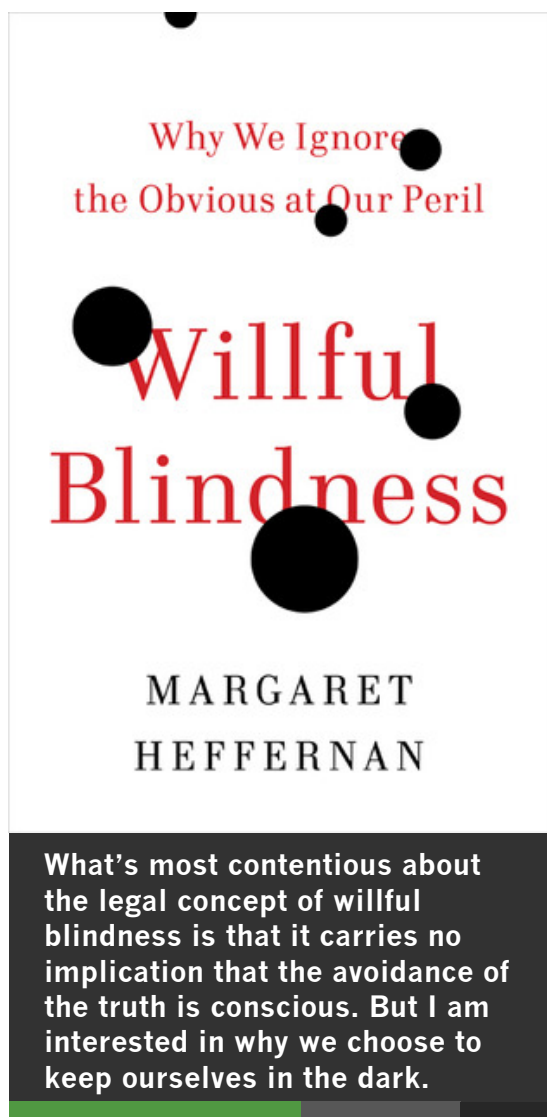


Why We Ignore the Obvious at our Peril

New York: Walker Publishing [2011]





Why is this book worth our time?

1. When we are blind to the dangers – physical dangers; life-threatening dangers; financial dangers – then the worst can indeed happen.
2. Since willful and unintentional blindness is so pervasive, we need to build strategies to combat such blindness – in our own lives; in our organizations; in our communities..
3. This a tour de force of cautionary and revealing stories – well worth our attention.

1. ...the only way to be hopeful was to deny the reality.” 46
2. Many, perhaps even most, of the greatest crimes have been committed not in the dark, hidden where no one could see them, but in full view of so many people who simply chose not to look and not to question. Whether in the Catholic Church, the SEC, Nazi Germany, Madoff’s funds, the embers of BP’s refinery, the military in Iraq, or the dog-eat-dog world of sub-prime mortgage lenders, the central challenge posed by each case was not harm that was invisible—**but harm that so many preferred to ignore.** 48
You are responsible if you could have known, and should have known, something that instead you strove not to see. 59
What they all have in common is the idea that there is an opportunity for knowledge, and a responsibility to be informed, but it is shirked. 78
3. What’s most contentious about the legal concept of willful blindness is that it carries no implication that the avoidance of the truth is conscious. 81
But I am interested in why we choose to keep ourselves in the dark. 83
What stops us from seeing that burying knowledge makes it more powerful, and makes us so much more vulnerable? Why, after any major failure or calamity, do voices always emerge saying they’d seen the danger, warned about the risk—but their warnings had gone unheeded? 84
4. Individuals, singly and in groups, are both equally susceptible to willful blindness; what makes organizations different is the sheer scale of damage they can cause. 90
5. **We mostly admit the information that makes us feel great about ourselves, while conveniently filtering whatever unsettles our fragile egos and most vital beliefs.** 95
Fear of conflict, fear of change keeps us that way. 98
And money has the power to blind us, even to our better selves. 99
6. During the London Blitz, morale was better sustained by dancing and partygoing than by acknowledging a terrifying future. 102
7. Embedded within our self-definition, we build relationships, institutions, cities, systems, and cultures that, in reaffirming our values, blind us to alternatives. This is where our willful blindness originates: in the innate human desire for familiarity, for likeness,

Here are some key quotes from the book.

(Note: The “#s” following each quote indicate the Kindle App for the iMac “location” of the quote in the book.)

that is fundamental to the ways our minds work. 144

Familiarity, it turns out, does not breed contempt. It breeds comfort. 213

Human beings want to feel good about themselves and to feel safe, and being surrounded by familiarity and similarity satisfies those needs very efficiently. 260

The problem with this is that everything outside that warm, safe circle is our blind spot. 262

8. Of course we consider the people who disagree with us to be the most biased of all. 274
...bias is pervasive among all of us, whether we think we're biased or not. 284
9. Stereotypes are energy-saving devices; they let us make shortcuts that feel just fine. That's why they're so persistent. 295
10. The Fox News fan does not buy the New York Times. 365
We select our media knowingly, rejecting the programs, newspapers, and TV stations that we don't agree with because we feel comfortable sticking to the same groove. 366
The search for what is familiar and comfortable underlies our media consumption habits. 367
This is natural but it isn't neutral. 369
11. ...when groups of like-minded people get together, they make each other's views more extreme. 370
12. ...when individuals read, they focus on the information that supports their current opinion, paying less attention to information that challenges their views. 383
Overall, people are about twice as likely to seek information that supports their own point of view as they are to consider an opposing idea. 384
13. **But while it's true that all of us now have access to more information than ever before in history, for the most part we don't use it. 391**
14. ...you gain access to shortcuts: information from people like you that you believe to be reliable. 397
Shortcuts do make us smarter and more efficient and they reward us in many ways—**until they lead us astray. 403**
Shortcuts can be very pragmatic, but when you take them, you miss a lot along the way: that's what shortcuts are for. 430
15. Madoff's was an affinity crime, preying on people like him who knew people like themselves, who didn't ask questions because their level of comfort with each other was so high that they felt they could take shortcuts. 419
16. What does your brain like? What gets the 'yes' vote? It likes the stuff it already recognizes. It likes what is familiar. 440
17. As we pursue like-minded people, in like-minded communities, doing similar jobs in homogeneous corporate cultures, the riverbed sinks deeper and deeper, its sides become steeper and steeper. It feels good; the flow is efficient and unimpeded. You just can't see anything. 456
This is how willful blindness begins, not in conscious, deliberate choices to be blind, but in a skein of decisions that slowly but surely restrict our view. 459
And what's most frightening about this process is that as we see less and less, we feel more comfort and greater certainty. We think we see more—even as the landscape shrinks. 461
18. Indeed, there seems to be some evidence not only that all love is based on illusion—but that love positively requires illusion in order to endure. 508
19. We use considerable ingenuity to sustain our illusions, blind ourselves to inconvenient or painful facts. We protect our life with our illusions. 532
20. **Carmela Soprano, who hovers between knowing and not knowing that her husband is a murderous, adulterous gangster. How can she acknowledge the truth? It would destroy everything she loves: her family, her home, her children, her sense of herself as a good person. 556**
She is blind to Tony's criminal activity because she has to be. 562
21. One of the many downsides of living in communities in which we are always surrounded by people like ourselves is that we experience very little conflict. That means we don't develop the tools we need to manage conflict and we lack confidence in our ability to do so. We persuade ourselves that the absence of conflict is the same as happiness,

but that trade-off leaves us strangely powerless. 620

22. “Not knowing, that’s fine. Ignorance is easy. Knowing can be hard but at least it is real, it is the truth. The worst is when you don’t want to know—because then it must be something very bad. Otherwise you wouldn’t have so much difficulty knowing.” 916
23. **When we work hard to defend our core beliefs, we risk becoming blind to the evidence that could tell us we’re wrong. 962**
24. What Alice Stewart had provoked in her scientific colleagues was cognitive dissonance: the mental turmoil that is evoked when the mind tries to hold two entirely incompatible views. 1082
Dissonance is eliminated when we blind ourselves to contradictory propositions. And we are prepared to pay a very high price to preserve our most cherished ideas. 1088
25. Marian Keech’s followers would reinterpret events to fit their expectations, because not to have done so threatened to destroy their sense of who they were in the world. 1163
26. The problem with models, in other words, is that they imply that whatever does not fit into them isn’t relevant—when it may be the most relevant information of all. 1207
27. “Greenspan’s willful blindness was incredible,” says Frank Partnoy, professor of law and finance at the University of San Diego. 1215
He believed in the core of his soul that markets would self-correct and that financial models could forecast risk effectively.” 1216
“There was just so much happening in markets that Greenspan didn’t understand—because it was inconsistent with his worldview,” 1222
“It really illustrates the dangers of having a particular fixed view of the world and not being open to evidence that your worldview is wrong until it is too late.” 1223
“I am opposed,” Rand told Mike Wallace in 1959, “to all forms of control. I am for an absolute laissez-faire free unregulated economy. I am for the separation of state and economics.” 1238
The man with a religious belief in the evils of regulating was now in charge of money supply. 1250
“If this was a religion, Alan Greenspan was the pope,” 1295
28. When investigators, lawyers, and executives arrived to investigate the cause of the tragedy, everybody talked about blind spots: problems, processes, and warnings that everybody could see but somehow managed not to see. 1426
29. Focused attention on one thing, to the exclusion of everything else—often referred to as cognitive fixation or cognitive tunnel vision—is a typical performance effect of fatigue.² 1437
Briggs and his operators could not see the problem. They were simply too tired. 1440
“After a certain number of hours, the eyes start to lose focus; after a certain number of weeks with only one day off, fatigue starts to accrue and accumulate exponentially. Bad things happen to one’s physical, emotional, and mental health. The team is rapidly beginning to introduce as many flaws as they are removing. The bug rate soared in crunch.” 1473
The higher-order brain activity that was most needed in those jobs was the first thing to go. 1503
“A tired worker tends to perform like an unskilled worker.” Or, you could say, a smart worker starts to work like a mindless one. 1512
“We now know,” says Czeisler, “that twenty-four hours without sleep or a week of sleeping four or five hours a night induces an impairment equivalent to a blood alcohol level of point one percent. 1523
We would never say ‘This person is a great worker! He’s drunk all the time!’ yet we continue to celebrate people who sacrifice sleep.” 1525
30. “We experience far less of our visual world than we think we do. We feel like we are going to take in what’s around us. But we don’t. We pay attention to what we are told to attend to, or what we’re looking for, or what we already know. Top-down factors play a big role. Fashion designers will notice clothes. Engineers will notice mechanics. But what we see is amazingly limited.” 1564
31. **“For the human brain,” says Simons, “attention is a zero-sum game: If we pay more attention to one place, object, or event, we necessarily pay less attention to others.” 1585**

Do people learn? People don't.

- 32. We just do not have enough mental capacity to do all the things that we think we can do. 1625**
One frustrated psychologist has argued that the case for multitasking is on a par with “urban legend”; that is, it’s a story we like the sound of but that is really nonsense. 1626
- 33. Because it takes less brain power to believe than to doubt, we are, when tired or distracted, gullible. Because we are all biased, and biases are quick and effortless, exhaustion makes us favor the information we know and are comfortable with. We’re too tired to do the heavier lifting of examining new or contradictory information, so we fall back on our biases, the opinions and the people we already trust. 1641**
34. If a city was a system that yielded more “inputs” than anyone could handle, inhabitants responded by taking in less. 1676
“Overload is made more manageable by limiting the ‘span of sympathy.’ 1681
35. (Countrywide) “Everybody turned a blind eye to fraud. 1694
“We knew it was fraud but what can you do? We packaged them up and sold them on.” 1697
- 36. Propagandists and brainwashers know what managers and corporate leaders choose to forget: the human mind, overloaded and starved of sleep, becomes morally blind. 1700**
37. Working hours seem such a small issue—but, by the same token, such a small thing to get right. 1724
...but what we can’t see is what we are losing: the capacity to reason, to judge, to make good and humane decisions, to see consequences and complexity. 1728
The allure of exhaustion is baffling. 1729
38. QUITE OFTEN WHEN people come in here, they don’t really lie—they just, what shall I say, underestimate the truth. Some deny it. They’re all embarrassed. No one ever quite tells the truth.” 1748
- 39. “Do people learn? People don’t. 1919**
40. At the BBC, I once had a boss whose response to adverse news was to throw telephones against the wall, a reasonable incentive to keep one’s mouth shut. 2017
41. But nothing was more shocking than Gayla’s discovery that so many of her friends and neighbors did not want to know anything she had uncovered. “People would cross the street when they saw me coming,” she recalled. 2156
...That this community would allow this group to let people die—it was just incredible to me.” 2168
42. We focus so intently on the order that we are blind to everything else. When we obey orders, our concern to be a good soldier means that we no longer see that we have a choice or that we are morally responsible for our actions. 2380
43. The problem, he says, is not that you are asked to do one big, bad deed; it is that there are so many tiny steps along the way that there is never a moment when it’s simple to say no. 2468
44. The Army is not just trying to teach soldiers how to use their weapons but how to use their minds, making difficult decisions under stressful conditions of great complexity. 2554
45. Obedience is another kind of shortcut, in which we trust someone else’s thinking above our own. 2587
46. The rewards of belonging—well, it was everything! The self-satisfaction of knowing what you had accomplished monetarily but also intellectually and that you had joined a club, a group of people seen as the best and the brightest—that was something money can’t buy. 2684
It wasn’t greed. I didn’t need anything. I had a car. A house. Once I had that, I had what I needed. It wasn’t about stuff. It was about my personal scoreboard with everyone else. 2699
I lost all morals, all ethics, in the interest of staying in the gang.” 2701
- 47. Ostracism makes individuals feel they lack purpose, have less control over their lives, are less good moral beings, and lack self-worth. Those high school cliques aren’t uniquely adolescent experiences: Human beings hate being left out. We conform because to do so seems to give our life meaning. 2774**

The carrot of belonging and the stick of exclusion are powerful enough to blind us to the consequences of our actions. 2778

48. So instead of the group benefiting from the collective wisdom of many, in fact what it got was reduced thoughtfulness from each one. 2829
49. Do you read the new Dan Brown novel because you want to—or because you worry about being left out of the discussion? 2840
50. Groups influence other groups, pushing each other into positions of greater extremism. 2891
51. **“There was endless willful blindness,” says Michael Sarnoff, chief credit officer at a large Midwest bank. “The entire food chain from borrower to lender to securitizer to auditor to rating agency to end investor. They all went along for years, they all got sucked in and conformed to perpetuate the madness.” 2968**
This was conformity on an epic scale, as institution after institution caved in to the same thinking: if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em; if we don’t do it, someone else will; toe the line or else; you have to keep dancing. 3000
“Insane consumers, greedy lenders, loan officers who’d do anything to get information through the system, poor underwriters who were no more than box checkers, a cheap labor force, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac and a president who pressured them to increase home ownership, biased rating agencies, securitizers, and all the stupid investors who bought CDOs and CDOs squared,” he says. “All equally blind. All greedy. There was just a horrible deterioration in the moral fabric of people. And a lot of wishful thinking. But the structure of the industry means no one feels responsible.” 3009
52. Diffusion of responsibility—the rule of nobody—is a common feature of many large organizations, where almost nothing is done alone. 3130
53. If everyone is doing crooked deals, and being rewarded for it, then what is normal? 3176
54. **The cases are legion, but teaching the stories of these industrial train crashes never seems to prevent them. 3191**
55. (re. bullying) -- “It is at school that children learn to be bystanders,” 3247
56. **The greatest evil, he argues, always requires large numbers of participants who contribute by their failure to intervene. 3283**
57. **“But you may inhabit an environment that valorizes blindness, so you don’t look. Who or what is it you are blind to? In the end, I think it’s you. You become blind ... to yourself ... to your better self.” 3310**
58. **Companies are now organized—often for good reasons—in ways that can facilitate departments becoming structurally blind to one another. 3572**
59. **Where you put information makes a difference in how visible it is. 3609**
60. **Once you outsource critical functions, you may be blind to how the work gets done. The cynical will conclude that that is precisely what outsourcing is for. 3672**
61. Why do we build institutions and corporations so large and so complex that we can’t see how they work? In part, it’s because we can. 3733
62. “Doctors who own stakes in testing labs order more tests; I’ve experienced that firsthand.” 3798
63. To paraphrase Edmund Burke, all that evil needs to flourish is for good people to see nothing—and get paid for it. 4001
64. ... after any industrial or organizational failure, individuals inevitably surface who saw the crisis coming, warned about it, and were mocked or ignored. 4117
65. Cassandras are often also whistleblowers, determined not just to see what others don’t see, but to act upon it, trying to alter fate. 4138

66. In the United States, in 2000, the Ethics Resource Center in Arlington, Virginia, found that a third of public and private employees had personally observed misconduct. 4153
...80 percent—of directors of internal auditing said they had observed wrongdoing by their organizations. 4154
67. In many instances like this, what enables Cassandras to see what others don't is a tremendous eye for detail. 4190
- 68. Who had incentives to see? No one. 4290**
69. Buried deep at the bottom of our riverbeds, we are blind to connections and dependencies. 4293
70. People don't want to look at a really bad thing. 4465
71. Cassandras may see the truth, but they inspire fury because those truths were so energetically and necessarily hidden, and because their revelations demand change. We side with the truth teller but, in the comfort of the theater, we don't have to bear the cost. 4492
72. In one study of whistleblowers, 30 percent of them had been removed from their offices by men with guns—that is how dangerous they were deemed to be. 4495
73. You want to build organizations where everyone sees provocation as one of their essential roles." 4617
Writing about groupthink, Irving Janis recommended institutionalizing dissent. 4619
- 74. "Once you are in a leadership position, no one will ever give you the inner circle you need." 4656**
- 75. Outsiders—whether you call them Cassandras, devil's advocates, dissidents, mentors, troublemakers, fools, or coaches—are essential to any leader's ability to see. 4695**
76. They've been brought up in an educational system of multiple-choice tests, on which the point is not to think but to know—to limit knowledge, not to explore it. They've been taught, in effect, an intellectual form of obedience. 4723
- 77. When business school leaders start wondering whether they should teach critical thinking, you have to wonder what they've been teaching heretofore—uncritical thinking? 4726**
- 78. Crimes like the poisoning of Libby, Montana, aren't perpetrated by a few bad people but by large numbers of individuals who don't blow the whistle, don't stand up and say no. 4775**
A simple question—Do we mean this? Did I understand correctly?—can turn the tide. 4777
79. There is a special narcissism in the belief that we, and our times, are special, that we are so smart that we have nothing to learn from the past—even about who we are. This extreme bias for the present leaves us blind to the patterns developing all around us. 4875
80. Unanimous decisions are incomplete decisions, made when there was too much power in the room, too much obedience, and too much conformity. If only one solution is visible, look again. 4927
- 81. If we lack the legislative or regulatory muscle to control such businesses, we place ourselves in the position of being willfully blind to their actions. Inevitably we make ourselves bystanders—because there's nothing we can do about them. 5029**
82. The most important thing to remember about Cassandras and whistleblowers is that they are ordinary people. 5059
- 83. When we are willfully blind, it is in the presence of information that we could know, and should know, but don't know because it makes us feel better not to know. 5061**
84. We make ourselves powerless when we choose not to know. But we give ourselves hope when we insist on looking. 5079
...seeing starts with simple questions: What could I know, should I know, that I don't know? Just what am I missing here? 5081

Willful Blindness

Why We Ignore the Obvious at our Peril

by Margaret Heffernan

New York: Walker Publishing [2011]

Willful blindness is about the blindness all around us – in our own lives, in our organizations and communities and institutions.

We are blind. I am blind; you are blind. And we are blind to the things we are blind to.

And, we ignore the obvious (our own blindness) at our peril.

- **The question –**
 - Since there is so much blindness (and, there is), why is there so much blindness to what is wrong; dangerous?
- **The point:**
 - We are in fact blind – willfully blind.
 - Tough there are many causes of such blindness, the result of each is...danger; and worse.
- **Think about this**
 - **Not “naysayers” – but “fault spotters”**
- **Some stories:**
 - Bernie Madoff (all were *blindsided*)
 - Carmela Soprano
 - Catholic Priests and sexual abuse
 - Gayla Benefield, Libby, Wyoming (W. R. Grace)
 - Alice Stewart – X-rays and Leukemia
 - Marion Keech – (the world will be flooded...)
 - Alan Greenspan
 - BP – Texas City (and, the Gulf Oil Spill)
 - How many passes? (Gorilla in your midst) – focus on “this,” you miss all of the “thats”
 - Michael Brown, Katrina
 - Countywide Mortgage
 - Abu Ghraib -- simply, truly exhausted... (worked 40 days straight; 12 hour days – then, 1 day off – then, 2 weeks straight, 12 hour days)
 - Simply too tired to have adequate cognitive ability available...
 - Tanning Beds
 - Merck – Vioxx – people dying!
 - The O-Rings and the Challenger explosion
 - WWII – Nazi Germany and the Holocaust
- **The Problems – Why are people so blind?**
 - 1st – remember, there are some “bad (evil) people”
 - Tunnel Vision – people literally do not see what they do not want to see (the photographs & eye movement experiments)
 - Conformity (the “in group”)
 - Hierarchy – organizational structure - division of labor
 - Too much “distance”
 - • Embarrassment
 - • Exhaustion (Texas City)
 - Money as motivation
 - Outsourcing
 - It’s simply too hard to see – it takes too much energy to consider other viewpoints – (diversity is exhausting)...

- **The Metaphor of the River Bed...**

The book:*Introduction**Chapter 1 – Affinity and Beyond**Chapter 2 – Love is Blind**Chapter 3 – Dangerous Convictions**Chapter 4 – The Limits of Your Mind**Chapter 5 – The Ostrich Instruction**Chapter 6 – Just Following Orders**Chapter 7 – The Cult of Cultures**Chapter 8 – Bystanders**Chapter 9 – Out of Sight, Out of Mind**Chapter 10 – Do-Moralizing Work**Chapter 11 -- Cassandra**Chapter 12 – See Better***Some Takeaways**

1. You can't multitask. So, don't try to.
2. Acknowledge that you have blind spots. Because, you do. (And, so do I).
3. Seriously, do not reject "regulations" so quickly.
4. We like *Easy and Convenient* – being willfully blind is easier, more convenient... less exhausting. Thus, we don't put in the effort to combat our own blindness.
5. Love people, use things.
6. Ask intentional "stasis" questions – Where should we be "stopping to think?"
7. Make folks "change sides" in discussions (make them take the "devil's advocate" position).
8. Welcome/embrace the "*Cassandras*" – the seekers of the blind spots...

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