

University of Wollongong

Research Online

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts -
Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

1-1-2013

Book review: Wilful Blindness by Margaret Heffernan

Brian Martin

University of Wollongong, bmartin@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Law Commons](#)

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Book review: Wilful Blindness by Margaret Heffernan

Abstract

Whistleblowers see a problem and speak out about it. But what about the people who know there's a problem but say nothing? What about those who can't even see there's a problem?

If you're wondering about these questions, get a copy of Margaret Heffernan's book *Willful Blindness*. She surveys the evidence about how and why people turn away from unwelcome information, often to their own detriment.

Keywords

blindness, margaret, heffernan, book, wilful, review

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Martin, B. (2013). Book review: Wilful Blindness by Margaret Heffernan. *The Whistle*, (76 October), 14-15.

Willful blindness

by Margaret Heffernan

A book review published in [*The Whistle*](#) (Newsletter of Whistleblowers Australia), [No. 76, October 2013](#), pp. 14-15

Reviewer: Brian Martin

Whistleblowers see a problem and speak out about it. But what about the people who know there's a problem but say nothing? What about those who can't even see there's a problem?

If you're wondering about these questions, get a copy of Margaret Heffernan's book *Willful Blindness*. She surveys the evidence about how and why people turn away from unwelcome information, often to their own detriment.

She starts with a very personal issue: being oblivious to the shortcomings of those closest to us. She married a man who, due to a heart condition, had a short life expectancy. But she ignored this - because she was in love. She provides heart-wrenching stories of other relationships that continue despite abuse and betrayal.

Many people who use sun beds to acquire a tan become angry when confronted with evidence about their harmful effects on health. Many who are deeply in financial debt are completely oblivious to their plight. Heffernan:

We know - intellectually - that confronting an issue is the only way to resolve it. But any resolution will disrupt the status quo. Given the choice between conflict and change on the one hand, and inertia on the other, the ostrich position can seem very attractive. (p. 96)

Not wanting to know about problems, or doing nothing about them, occurs in all sorts of situations. Major engineering disasters, such as the collapse of levees that devastated New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, can be traced to bureaucratic systems in which warnings were repeatedly ignored. In German-occupied Europe in the early 1940s, there were many

who knew about Nazi atrocities, but turned away.

There's quite a lot of research that helps explain this very human failing. One factor is conformity. Solomon Asch did pioneering experiments in the 1950s in which subjects assessed which of three lines was the same length as a reference line. When others in the room - confederates of the experimenter - chose the wrong line, even though it was obviously wrong, many subjects conformed and denied the evidence of their own eyes. Going against the group can indeed be uncomfortable.

Then there were Stanley Milgrim's experiments on obedience to authority, in which subjects willingly gave electric shocks to another person (an actor who wasn't actually shocked) up to highly dangerous levels, with no more than an experimenter with a white coat to urge them on.

In a corporation or government department, these two influences come together. When the boss expresses a view, most subordinates will acquiesce, and when most others acquiesce, many of them literally cannot see any problem: they deny the evidence of their senses. This helps explain the giant corporate disasters such as Enron.

Reflective military officers know from experience that blind obedience can be damaging, and even contribute to war crimes. However, many business executives do not understand this.

... business colleagues seemed to envy what they imagined to be the military model of obedience - just do as you're told - and were unaware that the model is dangerous and out of date. That the military itself doesn't regard blind obedience as an admirable goal should give any executive pause. Some of the gravest mistakes in both the business and the political world have been caused by eager executives, keen to please, hungry for reward, and convinced that blind obedience was their path to success. Who is more willfully blind: the executives who believe this, or their leaders who allow them to? (pp. 123-124)

Then there is the problem of taking responsibility. If

experimental subjects are put in a room doing some mundane task, and smoke gradually starts filling the room, nearly everyone will raise the alarm - if they are doing the task on their own. If there are several subjects in the room at the same time, they are likely to continue with the task until they can hardly see. Each individual thinks, "the others aren't doing anything, so I shouldn't worry." One implication is that in the case of an emergency, it's better to ask an individual to help than to ask an entire group. Heffernan comments: "The experiment indicated that the larger the number of people who witness an emergency, the fewer who will intervene. Collectively, we become blind to events that, alone, we see readily." (p. 148)

In some cases of apparent neglect, when people turn away, they literally do not register what is happening. Studies show no brain activity to correspond with sensory inputs. When people say they didn't see or hear something, they can be quite sincere: it didn't register in their conscious mind.

Willful Blindness is an engaging treatment of these issues. Heffernan interviewed psychologists, business people and many others to provide personal commentary about the issues. She tells numerous stories about the disastrous effects of remaining unaware of serious problems.

You only have to mention the words *willful blindness* to hear the same story about a different industry: how beverage companies ignored the advent of vitamin drinks; packaged goods businesses don't think it matters whether products are environmentally sound; pharmaceutical companies don't pay attention to off-label prescribing; and gun manufacturers still pretend a secondary market (selling to kids and criminals) has nothing to do with them. The knowledge is there, spoken or unspoken, but the executives do nothing. (p. 155)

What to do? Heffernan gives pride of place to whistleblowers and dissidents, giving many stories of heroic intervention. She also offers suggestions for better practice, for example advising bosses not to let subordinates know their views before discussion proceeds. She tells about a time when she was the boss

and couldn't attend a meeting: that was the time when her team came up with the best ideas, because they could acknowledge problems and change their minds without loss of face. She says "In fact, of course, being a truly good team player involves having the confidence to dissent - but this is rarely what's involved in this trite accolade" (p. 138).

The implication is that whistleblowing is valuable, but is only part of the solution. As well, society needs systems that overcome the human tendency to ignore looming problems due to conformity and obedience. Last, and not least, money is part of the problem.

All the other organizational forces of willful blindness - obedience, conformity, bystander effects, distance, and division of labor - combine to obscure the moral, human face of work. Money keeps us very busy, often too busy, to see clearly and work thoughtfully. It keeps us silent, too, fearful lest debate or criticism jeopardize salaries. Money reinforces and often appears to reward those core, self-identifying beliefs that blind us to alternatives and to argument. You could say that if we are just obeying orders, fitting in, diffusing responsibility for people who are a long way away and, anyway, may not be our concern at all - then money is the final incentive to keep looking away. The fact that money tends to be addictive - the more we have, the more we feel we need - merely ensures that the cycle is rewarded and perpetuated. To paraphrase Edmund Burke, all that evil needs to flourish is for good people to see nothing - and get paid for it. (p. 194)

Margaret Heffernan, *Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril* (New York: Walker & Company, 2011)

Thanks to Anu Bissoonauth-Bedford and Ian Miles for helpful comments on a draft of this review.

Go to

[Brian Martin's publications on dissent and whistleblowing](#)

[Brian Martin's book reviews](#)

[Brian Martin's publications](#)

[Brian Martin's website](#)
