

WILLFUL BLINDNESS

Why We Ignore the Obvious at Our Peril

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INTRODUCTION

*Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.*
—T.S.Eliot, Four Quartets

WHEN THE PSYCHOLOGIST Philip Zimbardo was five years old, double pneumonia and whooping cough landed him in New York's Willard Parker Hospital.

"Kids," he said, "were dying all over. And every morning, you'd wake up and ask, 'Where did Charlie go?' And the nurses would all say, 'He went home.' And we'd say, 'Oh that's great, he went home!' But we all knew the kids who 'went home' were dead. But here's the thing: the only way to be hopeful was to deny the reality."

Zimbardo and his fellow patients were willfully blind: denying truths that were too painful, too frightening to confront. It's something we all do, even when we have grown up. The problem arises when we use the same mechanism to deny uncomfortable truths when they cry out for acknowledgement, debate, action, and change. 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 subprime mortgage lenders, the central challenge posed by each case was not harm that was invisible—but harm that so many preferred to ignore.

I first encountered the idea of willful blindness when I read the transcript of the trial of Jeffrey Skilling and Kenneth Lay, CEO and Chairman of Enron. In his summary, Judge Simeon Lake gave this instruction to the jury:

You may find that a defendant had knowledge of a fact if you find that the defendant deliberately closed his eyes to what would otherwise have been obvious to him. Knowledge can be inferred if the defendant *deliberately blinded himself to the existence of a fact.*¹

Judge Lake was applying the legal concept of willful blindness: You are responsible if you could have known, and should have known, something that instead you strove not to see. In this case, Skilling and Lay could have known, and had the opportunity to know, just how rotten their company was. Their claim not to know was no excuse under the law. Since they could have known, they were responsible.

Once the idea of willful blindness lodged in my mind, I started to see it everywhere. I'd seen it in marriages: Why had she never asked about all those business trips? I'd seen it in hospitals: Why had he skipped his checkup? Why had she started smoking? Boardrooms seemed to be full of it: Why did no one ever question that doomed deal?

When I mentioned willful blindness to friends and colleagues from any walk of life, their eyes lit up: they knew exactly what I was talking about. Politicians recalled legislation they had passed, knowing it would never work. Doctors described treatments their patients demanded and got, however unnecessary. Lawyers recounted their struggles to forget information their clients should not have shared with them, and product designers vented their rage about obvious trends that their companies had missed. When I mentioned willful blindness to accountants and auditors, they would talk in confidential tones about assimilating to their clients' sometimes elastic ethics, while chief executives described to me how hard it was, even in a small business, to know what was really going on. Almost everyone mentioned the Iraq War and global warming: big public blunders caused or exacerbated by a reluctance to confront uncomfortable facts.

Willful blindness had started life as a legal concept in the nineteenth century. A judge in *Regina v. Sleep* ruled that an accused could not be convicted for possession of government property unless the jury found

that he either knew the goods came from government stores or had “willfully shut his eyes to the fact.” Thereafter, English judicial authorities referred to the state of mind that accompanied one who “willfully shut his eyes” as “connivance” or “constructive knowledge.”² Over time, lots of other phrases came into play—“deliberate or willful ignorance,” “conscious avoidance,” and “deliberate indifference.” 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. Nowadays, the law is most often applied in cases of money laundering and drug trafficking: If you’ve been paid a large amount of money to carry a suitcase, then you are being willfully blind if you don’t check what is inside.

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. The law doesn’t care *why* you remain ignorant, only that you do. But I am interested in why we choose to keep ourselves in the dark. What are the forces at work that make us deny the big threats that stare us in the face? 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? And why, as individuals, companies, and countries, do we so regularly look in the mirror and howl, *How could we have been so blind?*

As I investigated the causes and patterns of willful blindness, from our daily lives to the boardrooms of global corporations, I could have confined myself to corporations alone; there’s no shortage of material. But it struck me that one source of our blindness at work is the artificial divide between personal and working lives. Every workforce is a conglomeration of individuals whose behaviors and habits started well before they were hired. 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.

Whether individual or collective, willful blindness doesn’t have a single driver, but many. It is a human phenomenon to which we all succumb in matters little and large. We can’t notice and know everything: the cognitive limits of our brain simply won’t let us. That means we have to filter or edit what we take in. So what we choose to let through and to leave out is crucial. We mostly admit the information that makes us feel great about ourselves, while conveniently filtering whatever unsettles

our fragile egos and most vital beliefs. It's a truism that love is blind; what's less obvious is just how much evidence it can ignore. Ideology powerfully masks what, to the uncaptivated mind, is obvious, dangerous, or absurd and there's much about how, and even where, we live that leaves us in the dark. Fear of conflict, fear of change keeps us that way. An unconscious (and much denied) impulse to obey and conform shields us from confrontation and crowds provide friendly alibis for our inertia. And money has the power to blind us, even to our better selves.

Of course, willful blindness isn't always disastrous. It oils the wheels of social intercourse when we don't see the spot on a silk tie, the girlfriend's acne, or a neighbor's squalor. Ignoring political differences may contribute to office calm. In times of national emergency, blindness can be positively helpful. During the London Blitz, morale was better sustained by dancing and partygoing than by acknowledging a terrifying future. And just like the children in Willard Parker Hospital, we are able to maintain optimism and momentum because we don't daily confront our own mortality.

Perhaps it is the sheer utility of willful blindness that sucks us into the habit in the first place. It seems innocuous and feels efficient. But the mechanisms that make us blind to the world also put us in peril. The children who grow up among abusive parents come to maturity feeling crazy, confused, and anxious because their reality has been consistently denied. Ideologues, refusing to see data and events that challenge their theories, doom themselves to irrelevance. Fraudsters only succeed when they depend on our desire to blind ourselves to the questions that would expose their schemes. Companies full of compliant employees take on levels of risk beyond their ability to recover. And all the time that these perils go unacknowledged, they grow more powerful and more dangerous.

That willful blindness is so pervasive does not mean that it is inevitable. Some of the most inspiring people in this book are those who have had the courage to look—a fierce determination to see. That is what makes them remarkable. They aren't especially knowledgeable, powerful, or talented. They're not heroes; they're human. But their courage in daring to see reveals a central truth about willful blindness: We may think being blind makes us safer, when in fact it leaves us crippled, vulnerable, and powerless. But when we confront facts and fears, we achieve real power and unleash our capacity for change.

1

AFFINITY AND BEYOND

*In life one and one don't make two;
One and one make one.
And I'm looking for that free ride to me:
I'm looking for you.
—"Bargain," The Who*

MEET REBECCA. The first thing you will notice is that she is very tall—just under six feet. Mid-thirties. Healthy, wholesome—and even today, when she's had to bring her two children in to work with her, she has plenty of energy.

Meet Robert.

He's tall too—just over six feet. Mid-thirties. Handsome, clean-cut, and, despite some looming deadlines, unfailingly polite.

Meeting Rebecca and Robert together, you will notice what all their friends comment on: they look very alike. Not the same, of course; they're not twins. They're husband and wife. And their looks are not deceptive.

"Amazing similarities," Robert concedes. "Similarities in background that I didn't notice, but I like more and more. Not rich, not poor. Went to the same university, both Christian. But then there are more nuanced things, like the way we both think about family and friends and believing in hard work. And of course we work in the same industry and," he looks over at Rebecca and beams, "wear the unofficial uniform: neat jeans, crisp shirt." They both laugh.

Rebecca and Robert enjoy the fact that they are similar, because it makes them feel comfortable, safe, located within each other.

“It isn’t that we like all the same things,” says Rebecca when she’s on her own. “I love going for walks—and Robert’s had to learn to like them! But the skeleton of our lives, that’s what we have in common. Very settled home lives, parents still together, parents who were always very encouraging. We didn’t think consciously about these things when we started going out, but you look back and see these things, these patterns.”

Rebecca and Robert enjoy the fact that they’re so similar. They have very little sense that it limits them, narrows their perspective on life or blinds them to a wide array of opinions, experiences, and different ways of thinking and being. But the fundamental human preference that they exemplify—for the familiar over the alien, the known over the unknown, and the comfortable over the dissonant—has insidious but important consequences. 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, that is fundamental to the ways our minds work.

Because for all that their similarities are so pronounced, in fact Rebecca and Robert are typical. Most people marry other people very like themselves: similar height, weight, age, background, IQ, nationality, ethnicity. We may think that opposites attract, but they don’t get married. Sociologists and psychologists, who have studied this phenomenon for decades, call it “positive assortative mating”¹—which really just means that we marry people like ourselves. When it comes to love, we don’t scan a very broad horizon.

Gian Gonzaga used to work as a senior research scientist before leaving to join eHarmony, the online dating site. The “science of compatibility” that the site promotes argues that “compatibility is not enough! 29 Dimensions™ predict great relationships.”

This is not romance, it’s business. So eHarmony stands or falls on its success in finding people who really will like each other. In 2007, eHarmony claimed credit for 44,000 weddings, which amounted to 2 percent of all the marriages in America that year.² Today, they claim to average 236 marriages a day. What were all those people looking for?

“We know that people select for appearances, which is why you upload your picture. But our questionnaire goes a lot deeper and that’s really based on what we know works. So we ask lots of questions about personality—how neat you are, how punctual—and about values: Do you value religion, altruism, volunteering? Values are the things you hold on to even in tough times and they are the things you most want validated by others. Of course interests count, too, but they change. You can learn to love walking, but values are really sticky.”

Gonzaga and his wife, Heather Setrakian, don’t just practice what they preach—they *are* what they preach. They met while working as academic researchers in UCLA’s marriage lab; they’re both in their thirties, dark-haired and, according to their friends, brilliant, witty, and wise. The eHarmony system could have matched them, Gonzaga says, except that when his wife filled out her questionnaire she said she wanted someone two years younger.

That questionnaire certainly tests for patience and endurance. It takes at least a half hour to complete—longer if you’re seriously committed to finding a mate. The questions are all designed to identify your key values and attitudes—those twenty-nine dimensions—and to match them up with someone else whose dimensions are as close to yours as possible. It may be software but it is, quite literally, matchmaking. It is not looking for opposites or quirky combinations.

“People may have an interest in people who are different from themselves,” said Gonzaga. “But they don’t marry them. They’re looking for confirmation, for comfort.”

Gonzaga bases his claims on data from twenty-five million questionnaires. What these tell him is that, whether we’re using the wiring in our brains or the software underneath eHarmony’s site, we go through life looking for people who make us comfortable because they’re so much like us. We may be intrigued by difference—but ultimately, we reject it.

“For a while, I went out with women who looked different,” Robert told me. “And women who really were different—sometimes very different indeed. But the turbulence of those relationships really drew me back to the center. You’d think it would widen the circle but it really didn’t. I tried but I found I really didn’t love Albanian women! Clearly some Albanian women are wonderful—I have nothing against the Albanians! But I think I learned that you’re given a center of gravity that

is immutable. You've been given a set of rules that you return to almost without thinking."

It isn't that Robert wasn't curious about other kinds of people and other cultures; he was. He wanted, more than many people, to explore beyond his own immediate knowledge and experience. But he rejected a difference that just felt too great. That puzzled him enough to make him think about it, but not enough to change his mind.

"I wonder if I might feel I am looking at myself when I look at Rebecca," Robert said. "Have I chosen myself?"

Robert and Rebecca are well educated and skeptical. They aren't inclined to take anything at face value. What makes them unusual is that they were prepared to analyze and talk about the powerful influence that their similarity has had on their relationship. They both acknowledge that it is a source of delight and comfort, but they worry that sticking to their own kind narrows their experience of life. By choosing to live and work among people like themselves, are they restricting what they see?

These findings—that we mostly marry and live with people very like ourselves—always annoy people. Confronted by the data, the most common response is a challenge: I'm not like that, my husband's not like that. Why are we so affronted? Because we all want to feel that we have made our own choices, that they weren't predictable, that we aren't so vain as to choose ourselves, and that we are freer spirits, with a broader, more eclectic range of taste than the data imply. We don't like to feel that we're blind to the allure of those who are not like us; we don't like to see how trapped we are inside our own identity.

But our minds operate somewhat like eHarmony's software: We go through life searching for good matches and, when we find one, it feels good. And that habit of mind pertains equally to things that really matter (like choosing a wife) and to things that don't matter at all. So when subjects in an experiment were led to believe that they shared a birthday with Rasputin, they were far more lenient in judging the antics of the mad monk than were those who had nothing in common with him. Just the thought that they shared a birthday made people like him more.

Even when it's something as trivial as our own initials, we stick to what we know best. A meta-analysis of the most severe hurricanes between 1998 and 2005 showed that people were more likely to donate to relief funds if the hurricane's name shared their first initial—so Kate

and Katherine were more likely to donate to Hurricane Katrina relief than Zoe was.³ I've always been baffled by monogrammed towels and shirts (do we really not know who owns the towels in our own homes?) but clearly these familiar letters mean a lot to us.

In other experiments, asked to choose a preferred letter from several pairs of letters, subjects tended, quite reliably, to opt for letters from their own names. What's so interesting about these findings is that the letters themselves are pretty meaningless—nothing will happen as a result of the choices made. Yet still the participants gravitate toward letters they see, and sign, every day. Even when it comes to the alphabet, we don't stray that far from home.

When you take this out of the lab and into the real world, the same pattern emerges. Carol, it seems, is more likely to drink Coke while Pete will choose Pepsi.⁴ Leo likes Listerine but Tom likes Tom's of Maine—even if he's from Ohio. And while those choices may seem unimportant, it appears that life choices too may be influenced by those initials we love so much. Dentists are over-represented by people whose names begin with "D" and there are more people named George than you should expect to find living in Georgia.

Familiarity, it turns out, does not breed contempt. It breeds comfort. In a series of experiments at the University of Michigan in the 1980s,⁵ one group of sixty-four students was shown photographs of a male college student once a week for four weeks; the other group of sixty-four saw different faces each week. After the four weeks were up, the two groups were asked to assess how much they thought they would like the people whose faces they'd seen if they were to meet them in the future. They were also asked how far they believed those people to be similar to themselves.

The students who had seen the same face for four weeks believed more strongly that these were people they would like in real life. They also believed (on no evidence except the photograph) that those faces belonged to people who were similar to themselves. In other words, the familiar faces—with no supporting evidence—felt nicer. Women responded to the experiment in exactly the same way as men. A similar experiment, using irregular octagons, generated the same pattern of responses. The familiar makes us feel secure and comfortable.

This even pertains when we go looking for emotional experiences, as when we listen to music. It can be hard fully to enjoy a new piece the first time you listen to it; only after repeated hearings does it become

a favorite. Part of that may be because if you're trying out, say, Mahler's Eighth Symphony for the first time, there is a lot to take in: two orchestras, two choirs, and eight soloists over eighty minutes won't create an instant impression. And listening to music is a hugely complex cognitive exercise.⁶ Even the White Stripes' "Seven Nation Army" can take some getting used to. But once we've heard it a few times, we're used to it and like it. And then we don't want something different. We want more of the same.

"We score hundreds of attributes of every song," says Tim Westergren, the founder of Pandora Internet Radio. "And then we find the matches between those songs—and then that's what we recommend to you. Because we know that if you liked one piece of music, you are very, very likely to like another one that shares the same characteristics."

Westergren's business does for music what eHarmony does for dating. Each song is scored manually by musicians for some four hundred attributes; there are thirty for the voice alone, capturing everything from timbre to layers of the voice to vibrato. Then that "score" is matched to other songs that have scores that are as closely similar as possible. Pandora software is doing to music what we do when we meet people: looking for matches. And, when it finds them, people feel very happy.

"God, I love Pandora!" said Joe Clayton, a music fan in Boston. "I love it. I'm always finding new bands, new stuff that I just couldn't find otherwise—certainly not in any music store. And it's kinda creepy—but in a good way—because they almost never give me something I don't like. Almost never."

More than fifty million people use Pandora, and many are avid evangelists. But what Pandora can't do is come up with that serendipitous suggestion that introduces you to something completely different from anything you've ever heard before. I like Bruce Springsteen, Frank Zappa, and the White Stripes—but I also adore Handel. And given my first three preferences, Pandora wouldn't ever offer me Handel.

Westergren acknowledges that limitation. "We're never going to take you from rock and roll to baroque music. Pandora is about broadening your selection—but narrowing your taste. If you like jazz, you like more jazz. If you like hip-hop, you like more hip-hop. But Pandora is never going to take you from Springsteen to Handel."

All personalization software, whether eHarmony, Pandora, Ama-

zon's book recommendations, or MyShape.com's clothing suggestions, does the same thing: makes our lives easier by reducing overwhelming choice. And software is doing it the same way that our brain does, by searching for matches. It's as though, online and off-line, our life is one gigantic game of Snap! This is immensely efficient: It means that the brain can take shortcuts because it is working with what it already knows, not having to start from scratch. When we find what we like, part of our pleasure is the joy of recognition.

But the flip side of that satisfaction is that we are rejecting a lot along the way. As Westergren says, we are narrowing our taste, reducing the music or books or clothes or people that might widen our horizons. Our brains aren't designed to draw us into experiences that are wild and different; there would be no advantage in doing something so risky. And so, by focusing in one direction and excluding others, we become blind to the experiences that don't match.

This is not to say that strange, serendipitous things never flow into our lives. Of course they do. You meet someone at work who introduces you to Handel and you develop a love of baroque music. Or—more likely—your son introduces you to Rammstein. But these encounters are random and risky. Remember Robert's problem with Albanian women.

There's a circle here: We like ourselves, not least because we are known and familiar to ourselves. So we like people similar to us—or that we just imagine might have some attributes in common with us. They feel familiar too, and safe. And those feelings of familiarity and security make us like ourselves more because we aren't anxious. We belong. Our self-esteem rises. We feel happy. Human beings want to feel good about themselves and to feel safe, and being surrounded by familiarity and similarity satisfies those needs very efficiently.

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

Because not only are we rejecting music that doesn't match; we use these same processes to make important decisions in our everyday lives. When I had my first opportunity, as a producer at the BBC, to choose my own team, I hoped to hire people who would challenge me and each other and who would invest the entire project with intellectual richness and vigor. With all that firmly in mind, I selected liberal arts graduates who were all female, spoke several languages, and had

birthdays within the same week in June. In other words, they were all like me.

Did I consciously intend to do that? Of course not. Like hiring managers the world over, I intended to hire only the best and the brightest and that's what I thought I was looking for. But did I also want people I'd feel comfortable working with, enjoy spending late hours with, people who shared the values of the project? Well, yes.

I was biased, in favor of those just like me. Everyone is biased. But just as we are affronted when told that we're likely to marry and associate with those very similar to ourselves, so most people vehemently reject the idea that they are biased: others may be, but not us. "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" is how the Bible puts it.⁷ Of course we consider the people who disagree with us to be the most biased of all.⁸

It's recently become easier to identify and measure biases with a suite of tests called the Implicit Association Test, or IAT for short. Designed by three psychologists, the computer-based tests examine thoughts and feelings that exist outside of our conscious awareness or control.⁹ These may pertain to gender, age, race, or religion. In the test, participants are given two sets of images and two lists of words—one positive, one negative. Images and words appear randomly on the screen and you have to associate them with positives or negatives. You may link "male" with "intelligent" or "old" with "stupid." When making a link that isn't comfortable for us, we take longer. And that delay, say the researchers, is telling: it takes more time to overcome bias. The longer we take to accept a match, the greater our bias.

Since 1998, more than 4.5 million people have taken these tests and the researchers have found that bias is pervasive among all of us, whether we think we're biased or not. White physicians are friendlier toward anonymous white patients than black ones. Seventy percent of citizens in thirty-four countries associate science more with men than with women. More than 80 percent of us have a bias against the elderly. Ordinary people (including the researchers who direct the project) harbor negative associations in relation to various social groups even though they say they don't and often wish, quite earnestly, not to.

We see this play out in daily life everywhere. Go into any major corporation and look around. Despite decades of diversity campaigns

and millions of dollars invested in programs to make recruitment and retention less biased and more equitable, the homogeneity of most companies is overwhelming. Look at the lists of where the graduates of Harvard Business School or Wharton go and you will see the same phenomenon: armies marching into banks, financial institutions, consulting firms, year after year.

This is one reason why, despite a great deal of good will and commitment and even, in some countries, equality legislation, it has proved so hard to shift women into top roles, shovel venture capital into ethnic businesses, or train a lot of male midwives. It isn't the only reason, of course, but the fact that we like people like ourselves, are unconsciously biased in their favor, makes a big impact. Stereotypes are energy-saving devices; they let us make shortcuts that feel just fine.¹⁰ That's why they're so persistent.

The famous development of blind auditions for new symphony members provided graphic illustration of this point. Harvard economist Claudia Goldin and Princeton's Cecilia Rouse found that when musicians were allowed to audition behind screens, where their gender could not influence the evaluation of their music, women's chances of making it through the first round increased by 50 percent—and in the final rounds by 300 percent. Blind auditions have now become standard in the United States, with the result that the number of female players in major orchestras has increased from 5 percent to 36 percent.

In Europe, that practice is not ubiquitous—and many musicians argue that this perpetuates both gender and ethnic discrimination. Some of this bias isn't even implicit: The Vienna Philharmonic did not accept women until twelve years ago and even now only 2 percent of its 137 musicians are women. Moreover, despite the recent rise to prominence of many brilliant Asian musicians, the Philharmonic has never hired a visible “non-Aryan” because it feels that such individuals would “destroy the ensemble's image of Austrian authenticity.”¹¹ Even white male musicians say that white male musicians prefer white male musicians.¹² Music may be a universal language but not, apparently, universally.¹³

The many voices arguing in favor of diversity in recent years have not been motivated only, or even primarily, by notions of social justice. The argument for diversity is that if you bring together lots

of different kinds of people, with a wide range of education and experience, they can identify more solutions, see more alternatives to problems, than any single person or homogenous group ever could. Groups have the potential, in other words, to be smarter than individuals; that's the case put forward so compellingly by James Surowiecki in his book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*. But the problem is that, as our biases keep informing who we hire and promote, we weed out that diversity and are left with skyscrapers full of people pretty much the same.

Just as we choose to work with people very like ourselves, we choose to live among them also. The psychologist David Myers says that the way we move around and build neighborhoods mirrors the way we choose our spouses.

"Mobility enables the sociological equivalent of 'assortative mating,'" he says. Now that we enjoy so much freedom to move around, choosing the jobs that we like, we can also choose the communities that we like. And by and large we choose "those places and people that are comfortably akin to ourselves."¹⁴

Across the United States, the journalist Bill Bishop studied this pattern and found that over the last thirty years, most Americans had been engaged in moving toward more homogenous ways of living, "clustering in communities of like-mindedness." He calls this "the big sort" and what strikes him is how well defended these communities can be. When a lone Republican neighbor, living in a staunchly Democratic part of Austin, Texas, dared to articulate his political opinion in a local LISTSERV, the response he got was unambiguous: "I'm really not interested [in] being surprised by right-wing e-mail in my in box, no matter what its guise. It makes me feel bad, and I don't like it."¹⁵

As we have either more freedom or less security in our work, we move more. In 2008, 34 million people—11.9 percent of the population—moved, and that was the lowest rate of migration since 1959.¹⁶ And when people move, they mostly choose to live among people who like the same coffee shops, bookstores, festivals, and politics. When Bill Bishop went on to map this trend across the United States, his data revealed that the preference people have for living with others like themselves made a clear impact on the political map of the country. Whereas in 1976, only 26 percent of people lived in landslide counties, by 2000 45.3 percent did. That didn't make for a lot of argument outside the polling stations.

“The neighborhood where we live,” Rebecca says, “is lovely. The neighbors are lovely. The family on the other side of us, Paul and Juliet—they *are* us! Mid-thirties, two boys. Slightly younger but exactly parallel. Juliet doesn’t work, but I’m only part-time. The street is full of people like us. Each house is a carbon copy of the same kinds of people.”

When Rebecca and Robert were house-hunting, she recalls that they were driven by price, proximity to work, and choice of schools. All her neighbors were using the same parameters, so perhaps it isn’t so surprising that they’d all end up together.

“I guess you could say that,” Rebecca concedes. “But there were other places that would have fit the bill. But when we came here, it was more than just functionality. We liked it here—we still like it here. It feels right for us.”

Bishop argues that we have come to demand living arrangements that won’t challenge us. We seek confirmation and validation from those around us, even if it is just a matter of our pastimes. Wesleyan College in Connecticut caters to this desire, by offering twenty-eight different dorms organized around themes, including one for “eclectic” students. (Apparently even dislike of themes is a theme.) Colgate College in New York has a dorm for the lovers of foreign films. Affinity is a big draw.

These dorms are merely mirroring what is happening in the communities from which these students come; real estate developers bank on it. They design neighborhoods like Covenant Hills in Orange County for Christians so it boasts a Christian school. The more exotically named Terramor, on the other hand, aims to be one of the largest environmentally friendly developments in America, marketed to “cultural creatives” who want to send their children to its Montessori school.¹⁷ As nice as they may be, what the dorms and developments also do is narrow the field of vision, providing environments in which the inhabitants can reside safe from challenge.

However, living in communities that look different may not deliver real social diversity. Year ago, my family and I lived in the North End of Boston, the colorful Italian district of the city. After living in Europe, we’d chosen it because we were used to, and enjoyed, hearing Italian spoken on the streets and liked the aroma of garlic in the evenings. But we didn’t have any Italian friends. We had an Italian longshoreman as a neighbor but we knew Louis only well enough to say “ciao.”

Who were the people we spent time with? People like us: educated white professionals with young kids.

Living in London wasn't so different. Yes, we lived in Stockwell, which real estate agents would call "a mixed area"—meaning an ethnically diverse and sometimes volatile combination of elegant early Victorian terraces and 1960s public housing. But you didn't see much traffic between those two architectures, not a lot of cups of sugar being borrowed. Teachers, professors, business people, and TV producers lived in elegant stucco homes; single, often teenage parents lived across from them. At least we could see each other but that was about as far as it ever went.

By following our instincts to cluster together in like-minded communities, we reduce our exposure to different people, values, and experiences. But we also slowly but surely focus on what we know, losing sight of everything else. We may have more choices than ever before but our tastes are more narrow than ever, too.

Media companies understand this perfectly. They know that when we buy a newspaper or a magazine, we aren't looking for a fight. The Fox News fan does not buy the *New York Times*. My Italian neighbor might read the *Boston Herald* but I would never see the *Boston Globe* on his doorstep. 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. The search for what is familiar and comfortable underlies our media consumption habits in just the same way as it makes us yearn for Mom's mac'n'cheese.

This is natural but it isn't neutral. In what he calls the "group polarization effect," legal scholar Cass Sunstein found that when groups of like-minded people get together, they make each other's views more extreme.¹⁸ (It is worth noting that Sunstein, a professor at Harvard, is married to Samantha Power, also a professor at Harvard, and they both are currently on leave serving the Obama Administration. Even people who write about this behavior can't escape it.) Just as Pandora narrows your taste, like-minded people have the same impact on your opinions.

In 2005, Sunstein got together with some of his colleagues to conduct an experiment. They brought together two groups of like-minded people: liberals from Boulder, Colorado, and conservatives from Col-

orado Springs. In their respective groups, each was asked to deliberate on three topics: civil unions, affirmative action, and climate change. But before the discussions began, individual participants recorded their private opinions on each topic. Then the groups were mixed up and encouraged to discuss their views.

The group deliberations were consistently respectful, engaged, and substantive, but when they were finished, almost every member ended up with more extreme positions than they had held at the start. Conservatives from Colorado Springs who had been neutral on a climate-change treaty now opposed it. Boulder liberals who had felt somewhat positive about civil unions became firmly convinced of their merit. What small diversity each group might have had at the outset was, says Sunstein, “squelched,” while the rift between them had grown larger.

Even when presented with a wide range of data and arguments, Sunstein’s work with groups demonstrated that when individuals read, they focus on the information that supports their current opinion, paying less attention to information that challenges their views. 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.¹⁹ Rather than broadening their attitudes, the very process of discussion renders them blind to alternatives. We stop looking at places or jobs or information or people that will prove too uncomfortable, too tumultuous for our closely held beliefs. We may think we want to be challenged, but we really don’t. Our intellectual homes are just as self-selected and exclusive as our physical homes.

In theory, the Internet was going to change all of this. Access to the world’s store of knowledge was supposed to liberate us from the confines of the people we knew and the institutions to which we belonged. After all, online you can meet anyone from anywhere. 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. Just like newspapers, we read the blogs that we agree with—but there we encounter a virtually infinite echo chamber, as 85 percent of blogs link to other blogs with the same political inclination.²⁰

In fact, the great strength of the Internet lies in this ability to develop and connect affinity groups. It goes beyond connecting Tea Party members with other Tea Party members, and jihadists with

jihadists. Wherever you live, whatever your age, whether you love orchids, aikido, or ideology, you can find and connect to like-minded enthusiasts. Why do you want to do that? Because in doing so, you gain access to shortcuts: information from people like you that you believe to be reliable. If you don't know how to lift and split your orchids, the community of orchid aficionados will save you a lot of money and grief. Offline or online, what's the advantage of clustering in strongly defined communities of like-minded people? You believe the advice or recommendations your neighbors give you. If they like a school or a restaurant or a movie, well then you will probably like it too; you don't have to try them all or read all the reviews. We cling together because it feels comfortable and safe but also because it's highly efficient. We don't have to learn everything ourselves, the hard, slow way.

Shortcuts do make us smarter and more efficient and they reward us in many ways—until they lead us astray. Which is what happened when Bernie Madoff tapped into a community of investors, all very much alike and eager to pass on what they knew.

"I inherited my account from my Dad," said Irvin Stalbe.

We spoke in Stalbe's modest apartment in Pampano Beach, Florida. He retired there when he was fifty-five, but had continued to work part-time in a bank, just for the companionship. The money he made from his Madoff account was for extras—vacations, a little gambling—and to pay for his grandchildren's education.

"I didn't know much about it. I got it when my parents died. They weren't wealthy, they just put a little aside every year. I'd tried investing for myself but I wasn't that good at it, and I just thought: it's steady and it works."

"When I brought the paperwork to my accountant and he saw the income, he said he'd like to add money to it. So we worked out a way we'd issue 1099s to anyone who put money in. In the end, I had forty friends and family in the account."

Did the accountant, did anyone, do any research before they joined, I wondered.

"No, not really. We were in it for twenty-five years, my parents twenty years before me! Over the years, we brought in friends, grandkids, all under my name. For many years, it was wonderful. Of course what I realize now is I should have remembered the golden rule: Never

put all your money in one place. But at the time, I mean, everyone was in it. We didn't have to worry."

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. Sitting with Stalbe and his family in their Florida sitting room, I sensed that these aren't greedy people. They just wanted the safety of a reliable return and they believed they'd found that in an investment vehicle that they all validated for one another. It is something we all do every day, only few of us pay such a high price for it.

"I'm okay," Stalbe says. "I still have some income and I work at my son's take-out restaurant, cleaning tables, working behind the counter. I like to talk to people. But my sister, she's devastated, she has nothing. My sister-in-law, the same thing: 90 percent of her money was in there. Because of me."

What distresses Stalbe most isn't his own loss, but the fact that he drew so many others in. He's angry with himself because his confidence is what gave them confidence. Everyone felt so comfortable with each other, they all had so much in common, that no one ever asked any questions. It's that affinity that allowed Madoff's fraud to reach such astronomic proportions.

Shortcuts can be very pragmatic, but when you take them, you miss a lot along the way: that's what shortcuts are for. Living, working, and making decisions with people like ourselves brings us comfort and efficiencies, but it also makes us far narrower in how we think and what we see. The more tightly we focus, the more we leave out.

These blind spots have a physical reality in the brain. Robert Burton is former chief of neurology at Mount Zion-UCSF Hospital. He has a restless mind and is always looking for ways to understand and to challenge the certainty that our biases give us. He's very aware that, in its endless search for matches, our brain rejects information that might broaden our outlook, widen our gaze, or make us just a little less certain.

"Neural networks," said Burton, "don't give you a direct route from, say, a flash of light straight to your consciousness. There are all kinds of committees that vote along the way, whether that flash of light is going to go straight to your consciousness or not. And if there are

enough ‘yes’ votes, then yes you can see it. If there aren’t, you could miss it.

“But here’s the thing: What does your brain like? What gets the ‘yes’ vote? It likes the stuff it already recognizes. It likes what is familiar. So you will see the familiar stuff right away. The other stuff may take longer, or it may never impinge on your consciousness. You just won’t see it.”

We were talking on a beautiful morning in Sausalito, overlooking the harbor. It was early, there weren’t many people about, but there were a few. Even before his first coffee, Burton eagerly scanned the horizon.

“I’m aware of people moving around, the town starting to wake up,” Burton continued. “But it’s a kind of fuzzy background, it doesn’t get much attention from me. But if someone I knew walked across the street, I’d see that at once. Zip—straight in to my consciousness, ‘yes’ votes all the way. A perfect match.”

Burton is very wary of our love for matches and craving for certainty. It goes right against the spirit of enquiry that, as a scientist, he loves. But mostly he’s suspicious of it because he thinks it stops us seeing so much. He likens the development of the neural networks in our brain to the creation of a riverbed.

“Imagine the gradual formation of a riverbed. The initial flow of water might be completely random—there are no preferred routes in the beginning. But once a creek is formed, water is more likely to follow this newly created path of least resistance. As the water continues, the creek deepens and a river develops.”

It’s a beautiful metaphor, and a useful one too. The longer we live, and the more we accumulate similar experiences, friends, and ideas, the faster and more easily the water flows. There’s less and less resistance. That absence of resistance produces a sense of ease, of comfort, of certainty. Yet, at the same time, the sides of the riverbed grow higher. 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.

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. We don’t sense our perspective closing in and most

would prefer that it stay broad and rich. But our blindness grows out of the small, daily decisions that we make, which embed us more snugly inside our affirming thoughts and values. 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.