

THE BLIND EYE IN MY HAND

BY KATHLEEN DEAN MOORE

Sun on the granite shore of Lake Huron. The musky, green scent of a freshwater cove. Mosquitoes. Uncle Stan and I, casting spinners for small-mouth bass. Rooster-tail spinners with pink feathers and treble hooks.

I'm not much for fishing, and I wasn't catching anything, but fishing is what one does in my husband's family, so this is what I was doing. Of course, I wasn't catching anything. Finally, I felt a tug.

"A hit. I had a hit."

"Set the hook!"

I yanked the rod. "Aah. It got off."

"Might have been weeds. But reel in and cast again."

When I reeled in, there were no weeds on my hook. What there was, was an eyeball.

"Oh my god. I caught an eyeball. I must have yanked that thing right out of a fish's face. Oh my god."

Cupped in my hand, the eyeball was staring straight at me, suitably surprised. About the size of a martini olive, the eye had a glistening iris and empty, black pupil. I was horrified. I dropped the fishing rod on the rocks and never picked up a rod again in my life. The eyeball? What do you do with an eyeball in your hand? I threw it back. I suppose I meant to give it back to the fish, but in retrospect, I'm sure something hungry rose to inhale it as it slowly sank. And I knew that somewhere down in the slanting green light of the cove, there was a wary, one-eyed small-mouth bass. Half the world was lost to it — the algae-covered rocks and silver minnows, each in its swirl of light.

Now, when someone says, "he turned a blind eye," I can picture what that means — in a murky, silted way. The idea makes me queasy. And when I read the news, I can't help but think of my small-mouth bass and wonder if humans are like that fish, all of us possessed of one seeing eye and one blind eye. When we want to see something, we can turn a seeing eye. When we don't, we can choose to turn an unseeing eye. It's even possible that this ability to choose *not to see* is finally what distinguishes us from the rest of creation and accounts for our particular peril.

When I taught sophistries in my basic logic class, Invincible Ignorance was the name we gave to the refusal to see, that deliberate turning away. *Sophistries* — the rhetorical tricks that sidestep the reasoning process to escape drawing an unwelcome conclusion. *Invincible Ignorance* — in the category of sophistries, a deliberate refusal to consider facts or other evidence that might change your mind.

There are advantages to Invincible Ignorance, to the extent that it allows people to escape responsibility for the consequences of their acts. In law and morality, if people transgress unknowingly, they are generally not considered blameworthy. The *act* may be terrible, but the unknowing *actor* is not. So ignorance of fact is generally regarded as an excuse. A driver: "Oh no! I didn't see her in the

crosswalk." A fossil-fuel executive: "We see no solid evidence that fossil fuels cause global warming."

Knowingly doing something wrong, on the other hand, is culpable. This is expressed clearly in the law: "A high degree of culpability is present when a person engages in [unlawful] conduct, *knowing he is doing so.*" Even clearer is the moral connection between knowledge and culpability, as it is expressed in the conscience of the street: "You say you don't know, and I hope you don't know, because if you knew and kept doing what you are doing, I would have to call you evil." This is Greta Thunberg, speaking to oil company executives about the consequences of mining and marketing fossil fuels.

So, it makes sense that people who want to think of themselves as good people — even as they continue doing dreadful (but profitable) things — would develop Invincible Ignorance into a fine art. Not surprisingly, as the horrific consequences of human decisions pour over the world, an entire hierarchy of types of Invincible Ignorance are at work. Let's give them names and list them, in increasing order of iniquity.

The Ordinary Invisibility of the Familiar. It is said that a fish is the last one to ask, if you want to know about water. Born to it, swimming in it, dying in it, water is an invisible matrix to a fish. Just so, privileged people can seldom see their privilege. Bosses may not see their power. Human exceptionalists do not see the air they breathe, the water that flows in their veins, the ecosystems that nourish them. Concurrently, the rich can organize their lives so as not to see the

The human choice not to see something might distinguish us from every other species — and it could lie at the heart of our present-day peril.

suffering of the poor. So-called “developed” countries can refuse to acknowledge the suffering of those who bear the unjust burden of our profligate use of fossil fuels.

These — shall we euphemistically call them “oversights”? — have moral consequence. What is *compassion*, if not the ability to see the pain of others and to respond to it as if it were your own? What is cruelty, if not turning an unseeing eye to the needs of others? What is criminal negligence, if not acting in *dis-regard* of the near certainty of harm? At what point does carefully cultivated ignorance become not an excuse for inaction but a *wrong in itself*? To create the conditions for compassion requires making visible the invisible. In an unjust society, this requires moral education at a dramatic scale: street demonstrations, strikes, churches, literature, film, human-rights legislation, direct action — all the various ways people are invited or forced to encounter a reality beyond themselves.

Ideologically Invincible Ignorance. Benjamin Franklin, having declared himself a vegetarian, was tempted by the smell of fish sizzling onboard his ship. Ah, he thought, if fish eat one another, then mayn't I eat a fish? “What a remarkable thing it is to be a human being,” he marveled, “because you can always find a *reason* to do what you have a *will* to do.” Just so, it seems to be a human trait to cherry-pick facts, seeing only evidence that confirms what a person already believes and rejecting evidence for what they have already decided is false. “Confirmation bias” is the word that cognitive psychologists use. “Ideologically Invincible Ignorance” suits our times, as people stubbornly seek out only those voices that build their confidence in their own ideas, and viciously, sometimes physically, attack those who might urge a different vision. The attacks extend to the four great institutions designed particularly to find the truth — a free press, an independent judiciary, universities, and science. For Ideological Ignorance to prevail, these must be co-opted or enfeebled.

The dangerous, heart-breaking moral consequence is, of course, damage to the truth itself and the values it serves. Truth is far more useful than oblivion, when it comes to mapping a safe and just course; on a perilous journey, we should treasure and protect it.

Let us call the third variety of ignorance *Imposed Ignorance* — that created *in* others, *by* others, for their own profit and impunity. Here are corporations and politicians yanking a bunch of hooks through the lake with the deliberate goal of blinding the unwary fish. Although there are abundant examples, from cigarettes to vaccines, the most egregious and consequential examples come from the actions of Big Oil. Here is Exxon, whose executives knew by 1977 that burning fossil fuels caused global warming. Instead of warning the public, they helped create a coalition of fossil fuel industries to suppress that knowledge, writing that “victory will be assured when the average person is uncertain about the climate science.”

In the three years following the Paris Agreement, the five biggest Big Oil corporations spent more than a billion dollars to sow ignorance and uncertainty. It was money effectively spent. Although 97% of scientists conclude that global warming is real and caused by humans, 18% of Americans now believe it is not happening or is not caused by human actions; 13% say they do not know. It is a theft, a violation of their humanity, a threat to their very futures, to take away people's seeing eyes, their ability to draw reliable conclusions based on trustworthy information.

We humans have the gift of foresight; we can see the world that is shimmering in our hands. Yes, here are the victims of ignorance campaigns, finning through time with an empty eye socket, ferociously defending their right not to see. But here also are the children who have a clear view of their prospects — the lonely seers. Here are the prophets in front-line communities around the world, seeking justice for the future. Here also is sunlight shafting through the murky present, throwing a wavering light on the course forward, if we would choose to turn our heads and see.



KATHLEEN DEAN MOORE'S books of essays include *Riverwalking*, *Holdfast*, *The Pine Island Paradox*, and *Wild Comfort*.