The Dangers of Willful Blindness: TED Talk

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In the northwest corner of the United States, right up near the Canadian border, there's a little town called Libby, Montana, and it's surrounded by pine trees and lakes and just amazing wildlife and these enormous trees that scream up into the sky. And in there is a little town called Libby, which I visited, which feels kind of lonely, a little isolated.

0:47And in Libby, Montana, there's a rather unusual woman named Gayla Benefield. She always felt a little bit of an outsider, although she's been there almost all her life, a woman of Russian extraction. She told me when she went to school, she was the only girl who ever chose to do mechanical drawing.

1:07Later in life, she got a job going house to house reading utility meters -- gas meters, electricity meters.And she was doing the work in the middle of the day, and one thing particularly caught her notice, which was, in the middle of the day she met a lot of men who were at home, middle aged, late middle aged, and a lot of them seemed to be on oxygen tanks. It struck her as strange. Then, a few years later, her father died at the age of 59, five days before he was due to receive his pension. He'd been a miner. She thought he must just have been worn out by the work.

1:52But then a few years later, her mother died, and that seemed stranger still, because her mother came from a long line of people who just seemed to live forever. In fact, Gayla's uncle is still alive to this day,and learning how to waltz. It didn't make sense that Gayla's mother should die so young. It was an anomaly, and she kept puzzling over anomalies. And as she did, other ones came to mind. She remembered, for example, when her mother had broken a leg and went into the hospital, and she had a lot of x-rays, and two of them were leg x-rays, which made sense, but six of them were chest x-rays, which didn't.

2:38She puzzled and puzzled over every piece of her life and her parents' life, trying to understand what she was seeing.

2:47She thought about her town. The town had a vermiculite mine in it. Vermiculite was used for soil conditioners, to make plants grow faster and better. Vermiculite was used to insulate lofts, huge

amounts of it put under the roof to keep houses warm during the long Montana winters. Vermiculite was in the playground. It was in the football ground. It was in the skating rink. What she didn't learn until she started working this problem is vermiculite is a very toxic form of asbestos.

3:25When she figured out the puzzle, she started telling everyone she could what had happened, what had been done to her parents and to the people that she saw on oxygen tanks at home in the afternoons. But she was really amazed. She thought, when everybody knows, they'll want to do something, but actually nobody wanted to know. In fact, she became so annoying as she kept insisting on telling this story to her neighbors, to her friends, to other people in the community, that eventually a bunch of them got togetherand they made a bumper sticker, which they proudly displayed on their cars, which said, "Yes, I'm from Libby, Montana, and no, I don't have asbestosis."

4:07But Gayla didn't stop. She kept doing research. The advent of the Internet definitely helped her. She talked to anybody she could. She argued and argued, and finally she struck lucky when a researcher came through town studying the history of mines in the area, and she told him her story, and at first, of course, like everyone, he didn't believe her, but he went back to Seattle and he did his own research and he realized that she was right.

4:36So now she had an ally. Nevertheless, people still didn't want to know. They said things like, "Well, if it were really dangerous, someone would have told us." "If that's really why everyone was dying, the doctors would have told us." Some of the guys used to very heavy jobs said, "I don't want to be a victim.I can't possibly be a victim, and anyway, every industry has its accidents."

5:11But still Gayla went on, and finally she succeeded in getting a federal agency to come to town and to screen the inhabitants of the town -- 15,000 people -- and what they discovered was that the town had a mortality rate 80 times higher than anywhere in the United States. That was in 2002, and even at that moment, no one raised their hand to say, "Gayla, look in the playground where your grandchildren are playing. It's lined with vermiculite."

5:53This wasn't ignorance. It was willful blindness. Willful blindness is a legal concept which means, if there's information that you could know and you should know but you somehow manage not to know, the law deems that you're willfully blind. You have chosen not to know. There's a lot of willful blindness around these days. You can see willful blindness in banks, when thousands of people sold mortgages to peoplewho couldn't afford them. You could see them in banks when interest rates were

manipulated and everyone around knew what was going on, but everyone studiously ignored it. You can see willful blindness in the Catholic Church, where decades of child abuse went ignored. You could see willful blindness in the run-up to the Iraq War. Willful blindness exists on epic scales like those, and it also exists on very small scales, in people's families, in people's homes and communities, and particularly in organizations and institutions. Companies that have been studied for willful blindness can be asked questions like, "Are there issues at work that people are afraid to raise?" And when academics have done studies like this of corporations in the United States, what they find is 85 percent of people say yes.Eighty-five percent of people know there's a problem, but they won't say anything. And when I duplicated the research in Europe, asking all the same questions, I found exactly the same number. Eighty-five percent. That's a lot of silence. It's a lot of blindness. And what's really interesting is that when I go to companies in Switzerland, they tell me, "This is a uniquely Swiss problem." And when I go to Germany, they say, "Oh yes, this is the German disease." And when I go to companies in England, they say, "Oh, yeah, the British are really bad at this." And the truth is, this is a human problem. We're all, under certain circumstances, willfully blind.

8:18What the research shows is that some people are blind out of fear. They're afraid of retaliation. And some people are blind because they think, well, seeing anything is just futile. Nothing's ever going to change. If we make a protest, if we protest against the Iraq War, nothing changes, so why bother? Better not to see this stuff at all.

8:41And the recurrent theme that I encounter all the time is people say, "Well, you know, the people who do see, they're whistleblowers, and we all know what happens to them." So there's this profound mythology around whistleblowers which says, first of all, they're all crazy. But what I've found going around the world and talking to whistleblowers is, actually, they're very loyal and quite often very conservative people. They're hugely dedicated to the institutions that they work for, and the reason that they speak up,the reason they insist on seeing, is because they care so much about the institution and want to keep it healthy.

9:28And the other thing that people often say about whistleblowers is, "Well, there's no point, because you see what happens to them. They are crushed. Nobody would want to go through something like that."And yet, when I talk to whistleblowers, the recurrent tone that I hear is pride.

9:49I think of Joe Darby. We all remember the photographs of Abu Ghraib, which so shocked the world and showed the kind of war that was being fought in Iraq. But I wonder who remembers Joe Darby, the very obedient, good soldier who found those photographs and handed them in. And he said, "You know, I'm not the kind of guy to rat people out, but some things just cross the line. Ignorance is bliss, they say, but you can't put up with things like this."

10:26I talked to Steve Bolsin, a British doctor, who fought for five years to draw attention to a dangerous surgeon who was killing babies. And I asked him why he did it, and he said, "Well, it was really my daughter who prompted me to do it. She came up to me one night, and she just said, 'Dad, you can't let the kids die.'"

10:51Or I think of Cynthia Thomas, a really loyal army daughter and army wife, who, as she saw her friends and relations coming back from the Iraq War, was so shocked by their mental condition and the refusal of the military to recognize and acknowledge post-traumatic stress syndrome that she set up a cafe in the middle of a military town to give them legal, psychological and medical assistance. And she said to me, she said, "You know, Margaret, I always used to say I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grow up.But I've found myself in this cause, and I'll never be the same."

11:43We all enjoy so many freedoms today, hard-won freedoms: the freedom to write and publish without fear of censorship, a freedom that wasn't here the last time I came to Hungary; a freedom to vote, which women in particular had to fight so hard for; the freedom for people of different ethnicities and culturesand sexual orientation to live the way that they want. But freedom doesn't exist if you don't use it, and what whistleblowers do, and what people like Gayla Benefield do is they use the freedom that they have.And what they're very prepared to do is recognize that yes, this is going to be an argument, and yes I'm going to have a lot of rows with my neighbors and my colleagues and my friends, but I'm going to become very good at this conflict. I'm going to take on the naysayers, because they'll make my argument better and stronger. I can collaborate with my opponents to become better at what I do. These are people of immense persistence, incredible patience, and an absolute determination not to be blind and not to be silent.

13:06When I went to Libby, Montana, I visited the asbestosis clinic that Gayla Benefield brought into being, a place where at first some of the people who wanted help and needed medical attention went in the back door because they didn't want to acknowledge that she'd been right. I sat in a diner,

and I watched as trucks drove up and down the highway, carting away the earth out of gardens and replacing it with fresh, uncontaminated soil.

13:49I took my 12-year-old daughter with me, because I really wanted her to meet Gayla.

13:54And she said, "Why? What's the big deal?"

13:57I said, "She's not a movie star, and she's not a celebrity, and she's not an expert, and Gayla's the first person who'd say she's not a saint. The really important thing about Gayla is she is ordinary. She's like you, and she's like me. She had freedom, and she was ready to use it."

14:26Thank you very much.

14:28(Applause)

Reference

Heffernan, M. (2013, March). *The dangers of wilful blindness (transcript of the TED talk)*. Retrieved fromhttp://www.ted.com/talks/margaret_heffernan_the_dangers_of_willful_blindness?language=en