IN PLAIN SIGHT

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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The current issue of *Quanta* magazine contains an interview with Donald Hoffman, a professor of cognitive science at the University of California, Irvine. Hoffman has spent the past three decades studying human perception and evolutionary game theory. He has come to the conclusion that what we call reality is mostly a magnificent illusion.

Hoffman says, "Evolution has shaped us with perceptions that allow us to survive. But part of that involves hiding from us the stuff we don't need to know. And that's pretty much all of reality, whatever reality might be." In other words, everything we see is one big illusion.

Even so, Hoffman goes on to say, it's a useful illusion. "We've been shaped to have perceptions that keep us alive," he says, "so we have to take them seriously. If I see something that I think of as a snake, I don't pick it up. If I see a train, I don't step in front of it. I've evolved these symbols to keep me alive, so I have to take them seriously. But it's a logical flaw to think that if we have to take it seriously, we also have to take it literally." According to Hoffman, my snakes and trains are my mental representations, and your snakes and trains are your mental representations. And that's all we can know about them.

For my part, I think Hoffman is wrong when he claims that we have no way of knowing whether objective reality exists. Even so, I think his distinction between what we see with our eyes and what's actually there turns out to be an important one. And it becomes especially important when we ask for what we're accountable.

The movie *Room* illustrates the distinction between what's seen and what's there in a compelling, even if devastating, way. It's based on a novel by Emma Donoghue, who also wrote the Oscar-nominated screenplay. Brie Larson won a Best Actress Oscar for her role in the film, which also collected two additional Oscar nominations, including Best Picture. For those of you who haven't yet seen it, I'll be spare with the details.

One of the most poignant scenes in the movie comes early. It depicts a young mother ironically named Joy, played by Larson — she's known in the movie simply as Ma — sitting on a flea-market sofa with her five-year-old son Jack. They are watching a talk show on a small antiquated black-and-white television. To pass the time, Ma threads broken egg shells onto a string, adding length to a creature that's already many feet long. Jack sits holding the rest of the snake, which Ma and Jack refer to as Eggsnake.

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On the television, the talk show host interviews a one-armed war veteran. At one point, we overhear the host say to the vet, "And that's the most poignant aspect — and I can speak for all our viewers. We are all so, so deeply moved by what you endured." In Jack and Ma's case, no one is moved by what they are enduring, because no one sees the truth.

Later in the movie, as Jack tries to explain to a police officer where his room is located, the officer patiently pieces together clues that Jack offers up. She learns that Jack and his mother don't know how to open the door to the room and that it has no windows, but it has a skylight. She also learns how many turns the truck made — and in which direction — as it took Jack from the room to the intersection where the officers found him.

Suddenly, the officer closes her eyes as if mapping the route in her mind, and then she speaks into her walkie-talkie, "Control, listen carefully. South on Maple, three stop signs from the junction with Beach, look for a garden shed with a skylight."

When the officers arrive at the specified location, they discover a garden shed that isn't only a garden shed. What passersby had seen for the past seven years as they looked at the shed turned out to be dramatically — even tragically — different from what was really there. But no one could have seen the difference simply by looking. And no one can be held accountable for not knowing what can't be seen.

The moral calculus changes, however, when we fail to acknowledge difficult realities that, in fact, we can perceive — or could perceive. The movie that won this year's Best Picture Oscar tells the story of the investigative unit of Boston Globe journalists who unraveled the web of deceit surrounding 87 pedophile priests in the archdiocese of Boston. The unit is known as Spotlight, which gives the movie its title.

Late in the movie, one of the Spotlight journalists, a man named Robby, enters the Oak Room in the Fairmont Hotel in downtown Boston to have a drink with a lawyer named Peter, a longtime and close friend. The terror attacks of 9/11 have just happened, and the city, like the nation, is in shock.

Robby and his Spotlight colleagues have already documented both the extent of the abuse and the extent of the cover-up, and they know it leads all the way up to the very top of the archdiocese to Cardinal Law. They have also discovered that Peter has been part of the cover-up, secretly negotiating with dozens of families over the years to ensure silence on the part of victims in exchange for trivial payouts.

As the two friends talk over drinks, Peter tries to convince Robby to bury the story once again, as the newspaper had done many years before when allegations of systematic abuse initially surfaced. Peter applauds Robby's work as a journalist, saying, "It's cause you care about this place. It's why you do what you do, it's who you are."

Then comes the subtle request: "But people need the church more than ever right now. You can feel it. And the Cardinal may not be perfect, but we can't throw out all the good he's doing over a few bad apples."

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Robby lets Peter's words sink in, and then he turns and looks at his friend. "This is how it happens, isn't it, Pete?"

"What's that?" Peter asks.

"A guy leans on a guy and suddenly the whole town just looks the other way."

Earlier in the movie, an attorney who has been working on behalf of the victims talks with one of the other Spotlight journalists, who expresses disbelief that the abuse and cover-up could be so extensive. The attorney responds, "Mark my words: if it takes a village to raise a child, it also takes a village to abuse one."

When we see a painful truth, it's often easier to look the other way — even if we know for a fact that what we see is not an illusion. As was true with the pedophile priests, however, the truth frequently lies beneath the surface. And perceiving it requires us to look carefully and deeply.

Let me further illustrate this point. Ten days ago, my wife Holly and I participated in an interfaith Seder against sex trafficking. The event linked in a compelling way the release of the Hebrews from slavery in ancient Egypt to the release of women from sex slavery today. In the words of the Seder, until everyone today has been released from bondage, no one today is truly free.

As part of the Seder, we took turns reading the testimony of women who had once been held captive by the sex slave trade but had somehow gained their freedom. Their captivity had typically been based more on emotional imprisonment than on physical detention, but their bondage was no less real.

One of the survivors, a woman named Sarah, described her feeling of being trapped. She said, "I thought [my captivity] was obvious, but the people around me did not notice or chose not to care. I was kicked out of Hebrew school for hanging out with older men. My pediatrician commented on my injuries, but never identified me as a trafficking victim. I went to a free clinic almost weekly to make sure I did not have any STD's, but no one there realized I was forced into prostitution, even though the staff noticed my injuries and I was honest about the number of men who had sex with me. I was beaten in several stores, but instead of reaching out to help me, both my pimp and I were told to leave. I was in and out of the hospital for injuries my pimps inflicted on me, several times. I was well known in the local precinct, as I was often robbed or assaulted. I also tried to go to the police for help, but I was turned away, because instead of seeing a crime victim, they only saw a prostitute."

Near the end of the movie *Spotlight*, the editor of the *Boston Globe*, a man named Marty, is talking with three of the Spotlight journalists. The group includes Robby, whose lawyer friend had lobbied for a cover-up. In the course of the conversation, Robby realizes — to his horror — that he himself was the metro editor who, nearly 20 years earlier, had buried the story about the pedophile priests. "That was me," Robby says. "I'd just taken over. I don't remember it at all."

They sit in silence for a while, absorbing what Robby has just said. Then Marty responds, "Sometimes it's easy to forget that we spend most of our time stumbling

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around in the dark. Suddenly a light gets turned on, and there is a fair share of blame to go around."

No one can be held accountable for not knowing what can't be seen. But we can be held accountable if we fail to look carefully and deeply.

Fortunately, the perceptual challenges we most often face in our daily lives concern realities that are far more common than sex trafficking or sexual abuse. But we also find commonplace realities easy not to notice. In the late novelist David Foster Wallace's book titled *This Is Water*, he imagines going to the grocery store at the end of an exhausting day in the middle of an exasperating week. Imagine being hungry, tired, and desperate to get home, he says. The store is crowded, the light is harsh, the lines are long, and everyone is annoying.

My tendency, Wallace says, is to look at the situation only from my own perspective — what I see, what I think, and what I feel. But there's another option. He says, "I can choose to force myself to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket's checkout line is probably just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that some of these people actually have much harder, more tedious or painful lives than I do." Maybe the man yelling into his cell phone has a son in prison. Maybe the woman blocking the aisle to the ice cream freezer has just been laid off. Maybe the impossibly slow checkout clerk has just been dumped by her boyfriend. And so on.

In situations like these, Wallace suggests, we may not be able to see what's actually there by using our vision alone. We may also need to use our understanding, even our empathy.

After all, the snake may not be on your path to bite you, but because its habitat has been cleared for a building site. The train may not pose a threat to your personal safety, but it may be carrying someone whose heart has just been broken. Some of your coworkers or neighbors may be able to come and go with apparent freedom, but they may feel trapped. And so on.

Yes, you can usually believe what you see with your eyes, but don't always believe that your vision alone captures the truth you ought to perceive. Sometimes you have to look courageously and empathetically to see the truth.

So open the door if there's a door to open. Turn on the light if the light needs to be turned on. Tell the truth about what you perceive. And then do what you can to help others bear their burdens and find their freedom.

In so doing, you will strengthen the commitments upon which your moral integrity depends. And you will express the moral courage upon which your own freedom depends.

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