



**PAYING ATTENTION INTENTIONALLY**  
**Looking at What You Don't See**  
**H B Gelatt**

*"Out of necessity we learn to run on auto-pilot, paying attention mechanically and passively most of the time. This underscores the need to pay attention deliberately and voluntarily, thereby liberating our awareness from robotic activity."* Daniel Goleman

I believe that our paying attention deliberately and voluntarily will lead to a more open and inclusive worldview and contribute to creating a more positive future for everyone and the planet. This article is part of my Process of Illumination, which promotes an open-minded and inclusive worldview to save the world. The illumination strategy for this article is: Look at what you don't see.

Since a worldview is located in the mind of the beholder, I will focus on the beholder's mind. It is in your mind where belief, thought, perceptions, emotion, will, memory and imagination reside.

**The Mind of a Sleuth**

A story about Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson on a camping trip demonstrates the importance of deliberately paying attention. As they lay down for the night...

Holmes: "Watson, look up into the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson: "I see millions of stars."

Holmes: "And what does that tell you?"

Watson: "Astronomically it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and billions of planets. Theologically it tells me that God is great and we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you?"

Holmes: "It tells me that somebody stole our tent."

The story is funny because it seems absurd and yet we can all somehow identify with it. It is said, "If you want to hide the treasure, put it in plain sight. Then no one will see it." We don't pay attention to something obvious because we are so interested in something else, as was Watson. Dr. Watson failed to notice the missing tent, but he also failed to notice that he failed to notice.

You might want to try to pay attention like a sleuth. Here's why:

*"The eye sees in things what it looks for and it looks for what is already in the mind."*

Paris Scientific School of Police

This school apparently trains the eye of a detective to avoid that mental-visual trap of seeing only what it looks for, only what it pays attention to. If you learned to see like a detective, like Sherlock Holmes, you would pay attention to what you don't pay attention to. Holmes apparently can gaze at a crime scene and see it without prior theories of prejudice, and refrain from jumping ahead of his perceptions. He keeps his mind and his options open.

**Asking Questions**

A simple method of illuminating your way of seeing is to ask, "What am I not seeing because I'm not paying attention?" Of course it is easier to see what someone else is not seeing. When George W. Bush looked at Iraq and decided to bomb, I found it easy to ask, what did he not pay attention to? Did he see it without prior theories? Did he jump ahead of his perceptions? Did he keep his mind open?

I need to ask myself the same questions about the way I see the war in Iraq. Because I have such a strong belief that attacking another country should be a last resort, I may fail to pay attention to certain realities because of my prior theories. When you consider your way of seeing



the Iraqi war, what do you not pay attention to? What is missing from your view? You and I might expand our way of seeing by seeing the war from another's view.

We might ask ourselves these questions: What is George Bush or the Iraqi people paying attention to that is missing from my view? Can I "see" the way they are seeing things? Can I see what is missing from their view better than what is missing from my view? We don't have to adopt their view, but try to understand it. The way they see the problem may be the problem but the way we see the problem may be the problem. Seeing the problem with a more open and inclusive view is the goal.

Of course, asking what you are not seeing is not the only way to become aware. Using metaphor as method may be more helpful. Metaphor has a way of "causing" you to see things in a different way. Here are two metaphoric methods for paying attention.

***"See Yourself as Your Greatest Technology"*** Marilyn Ferguson

Many years ago NASA was asked why they put humans in the spacecraft instead of robots; here is their answer. "Humans are the lowest cost, light-weight, non-linear, all-purpose computer system that can be mass-produced by unskilled labor."

And somewhere else I read that there is no technological device, no matter how sophisticated, that can equal the power, flexibility, creativity and user friendliness of the human mind. We all possess the world's finest multi-sensory learning device right behind our eyes—the human mind. All we have to do is believe it and use it. To see yourself as your greatest technology is to see your mind as your greatest resource.

The quote by Marilyn Ferguson introduces a computer metaphor that is helpful here. The software of your computer sends a set of coded instructions to tell it what to look for and what to do. The software programs your computer. Your worldview is the software that programs your mind the same way your computer is programmed; it provides operating instructions.

In computer terminology, your mind's software sends a set of coded instructions to tell your eye what to look for<sup>2/4</sup>which tells you what to see and do. Someone else programs your computer software; but you program your mind's eye software. Your mind is the author of its own software.

*"Human self-deception is one of the most impressive software programs ever devised."*

David Nyberg

We know the computer software that controls the functioning of your computer needs to be kept up-to-date. So does the software (your beliefs and worldview) that controls the functioning of the way you see things. Most people make sure their computer software is up-to-date but fail to pay attention to their mind's eye software.

Pause for a moment and ponder these questions. How often do you update your beliefs and worldview? Can you identify one or two of the collection of beliefs about life and the universe that make up your worldview? What "software" do you use to "re-program" your mind?

**Computer Metaphor**

The computer software metaphor gives us a way of thinking and talking about our way of seeing. I realize there is no delete button for biased, exclusive, closed-minded dogmatic beliefs, and that I am not able to offer a software program that will provide a default position for an open, inclusive worldview. My point is that belief is the search engine of the mind. So identify and pay attention to the search engine your mind.

Seeing yourself as your greatest technology hopefully helps you pay attention intentionally by



peeking into what is going on inside your mind—your presuppositions or beliefs—that determine what you look for and see. It might help you become aware of your default positions—your “personal lens,” your “vantage point,” your “blind spots.”

Your “self-deception software” will be different than someone else’s. For example, a member of Greenpeace and an executive in the petrochemicals industry will see the global warming issue differently because of what is already inside their minds—how their mind is programmed. I am aware it will be difficult to help them see the issue with a more open and inclusive perspective because what is in their minds is so well established.

Can you think of some issue where you may have such a preconceived, difficult to change, default position that creates a blind spot? For example, is your mind already made up about the next presidential elections, global warming, immigration, etc.? Are you “programmed” to see the issue a certain way? Do you not pay attention to some factors? Do you “see” the issues without prior theories of prejudice? Are you interested in expanding your way of seeing?

The next metaphor is intended to help you pay attention to seeing the hidden wholeness that is “out there,” outside your mind. Together, the two metaphoric methods hopefully help you notice what you are not aware of “inside and outside.”

### **See the trees AND the forest**

“*You can’t see the forest for the trees*” is another good metaphor for paying attention. One reason you **don’t** see the forest is because you are looking at the trees. And you **can’t** see the forest because much of it is hidden. Actually you cannot even see the whole tree because much of each tree is hidden or because you are looking at a particular branch.

This metaphor helps you pay attention to the parts and the whole of what you are seeing and not seeing.

*“In all visible things there is a hidden wholeness.”* Thomas Merton

This means you don’t see and can’t see the whole. When you look at a tree you see the trunk, branches, and leaves. You don’t usually see the roots and therefore, don’t pay attention to them. Yet the roots of a tree are often as expansive as the parts we see. In a forest, in fact, the roots of all trees are interconnected and form a dense underground network of relationships in which there are no boundaries between individual trees.

Yet this is not all of the hidden wholeness. Other parts of this interconnected system, which you don’t always see or even imagine, are the birds, bees, animals, insects, flora, and other interrelated living things that affect the well being of the tree – and whose well-being is affected by the tree. And you are usually not aware of and therefore, don’t pay attention to, the past history of experiences (fires, storms, human interventions, disease, etc.) of this tree you are observing or imagining. These are all part of the hidden wholeness.

### **The Hidden Wholeness**

The context of the whole is too complex to observe—but you can imagine it. Imagination can become a useful skill in expanding your worldview. For example, when you think about the current issue of educational reform and how to improve the education of all students in America, try to imagine all the factors that might impede or support a student’s success. Imagine you are in a contest to list the most factors of anyone. List the factors that impede and the factors that support.

Can you “see” some of the factors that you don’t see because you are not paying attention to them? These are the “trees” you are not looking at. Can you imagine some of the factors that you can’t see because they are hidden? These are the “roots and underground networks of



relationships and past histories” of the participants that are part of the invisible wholeness.

**Reflective Illumination**

*Paying attention intentionally* promotes asking questions about your way of seeing. Are you on autopilot? What are you not paying attention to? What beliefs drive your search engine? Where are your blind spots? Are you visualizing the hidden wholeness? To help in illuminating and expanding your worldview, reflect on the questions and quotations throughout the essay and discuss them with others.

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