The Moon Walking Bear

There is a video I used to show to trainee diving instructors. A group of people pass basketballs back and forth, and the viewer is asked to count the number of passes made by one team. It seems straightforward. A simple task. Focus, observe, tally. Partway through, a person in a “moon walking bear” suit walks through the middle of the scene, pauses, beats their chest, and walks off.

A surprising number of viewers never see it.

This is not a trick of speed or camouflage. The “moon walking bear” is visible, central, unmistakable, if you are looking for it. The lesson is not about eyesight. It is about attention. When the mind is locked onto a task, the world outside that task can effectively disappear. The first time people realise they missed something so obvious, the reaction is often laughter, followed by disbelief. “How could I not see that?” But the realisation carries a quiet unease. If we can miss a moon walking bear in a small video frame, what do we miss in the larger frame of life?

Psychologists call this inattentional blindness. We see far less than we think we do, not because our eyes fail, but because our attention filters ruthlessly. The brain prioritises what seems relevant to the current goal and suppresses what appears unrelated. This is efficient. Without it, the flood of sensory information would overwhelm us. But efficiency comes with a cost. What we do not expect, we often do not perceive.

In diving instruction, this lesson is not academic. A diver focused on gauges or a particular fish can miss a change in current, a drop in a buddy's air supply, or a subtle sign of distress. Peripheral awareness is not optional; it is a safety skill. You must learn to widen your attention beyond the "main task," to scan, to check, to notice anomalies. Life on land is not so different.

We become absorbed in roles, projects, deadlines, narratives. We focus on what we believe is "the main game", career advancement, financial targets, personal goals, immediate problems. Meanwhile, other things move quietly through the background: a friend's growing isolation, a shift in workplace culture, early signs of burnout, environmental changes, political drift, small injustices accumulating. These are the "moon walking bears" in our lives. We assume that because something is important, we would surely notice it. The video proves otherwise. Importance does not guarantee attention. Only directed awareness does.

There is also a humbling dimension to this. We often trust our perception as if it were a faithful record of reality. "I didn't see anything," we say, meaning nothing happened. But the absence of perception is not proof of absence. It may simply reflect the narrow beam of our focus. This has moral implications. When people say, "I had no idea," they may be telling the truth. The question then becomes: should they have known? At what point does inattention become negligence? We cannot notice everything, but we can cultivate habits that reduce blind spots: pausing, scanning, asking what we might be overlooking, inviting other perspectives.

The awareness test experiment also reveals something hopeful. Awareness can be trained. Once people know about inattentional blindness, they tend to look more widely, to question their certainty. In diving, this is taught deliberately: check instruments, check environment, check buddy, check self. A rhythm of attention that resists tunnel vision. Perhaps the same discipline applies more broadly. Check assumptions. Check who is missing from the conversation. Check whether the story we are telling explains all the evidence. Check our own emotional state, which can narrow focus as effectively as any task.

We do not fail to see because we are foolish. We fail to see because we are human. The lesson of the “moon walking bear” is not that perception is useless, but that it is limited. Certainty should be held lightly. Attention should be shared, not hoarded by a single goal. The world is larger than the task we are counting.

Some of the most important things in life will not announce themselves by stepping into the centre of our vision. They will pass, quietly, at the edge, visible only to those who remember to look.