The word *fiasco* is like Justice Potter Stewart’s definition of hard-core pornography: most people know it when they see it. Even so, they can’t quite put their finger on what differentiates it from a good old-fashioned cataclysm. The problem here is that English is dynamic, unlike French, which has an entire academy dedicated to ensuring people use the language correctly. To figure out how to distinguish *fiasco* from its many synonyms, it’s best to turn first to etymology.

The fun never stops when conjecturing how one obscure word in a foreign tongue joins our evolving lexicon. *Fiasco* has great roots — according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it was originally Italian for “flask.” The dictionary tells us that in the mid-19th century, people of the theater referred to a breakdown in a dramatic performance as a *fiasco*. What’s the relationship between messing up on stage and a flask? Several online references cite Italian
communicate to unknown cultures from a distant future that this stuff that will remain so for tens of thousands of years. How to huge quantities of radioactive waste in Yucca Mountain — nasty figure out how to prevent them. The US government plans to bury and the ensuing reconstruction mess.

With human error at the heart of every fiasco, humans should be able to stop them. The insurance industry makes a valiant effort to discourage fiascos by putting value on risk — making it too expensive to do something really stupid (e.g., if you build one foot above sea level on Nantucket, you will pay a king’s ransom to insure your property). But even the insurance industry can be thwarted by those who are determined to ignore the evidence. One of my favorite actuarial anecdotes involves Henry Ford II, Lee Iacocca, Richard Nixon, and those pesky hidden tape recorders. Writer Gareth G. Cook describes the secret Oval Office meeting in 1970 in which the heads of Chrysler and Ford told Nixon to call off a new federal passive-restraint requirement (Washington Monthly, March 1995): “Iacocca was determined to convince the president that the real national interest lay elsewhere. ‘You can see,’ declared Iacocca, ‘that safety has really killed all our business...what safety is doing to us is gonna make inflation.’ Nixon was also deeply suspicious of the consumer-safety ‘Naderites,’ as he called them. ‘They’re a group of people who aren’t one really damn bit interested in safety,’ sputtered Nixon. ‘What they’re interested in is destroying the system.’” The rule was suspended, and thousands of deaths ensued.

The passive-restraint example introduces an attendant fiasco phenomenon: the modern version of Cassandra, the mythological figure whose punishment for rebuffing Apollo’s advances was a powerful precognitive ability that none would heed. In this case, it was Ralph Nader, whose book Unsafe At Any Speed, published in 1965, warned Americans of auto safety issues that were consistently ignored by manufacturers for economic reasons. Cassandras, including renegade government officials and freak seismologists, have been popping up like bunnies at Easter lately — people like Mark Fischetti, the science writer who wrote “Drowning New Orleans” in Scientific American (October 2001), correctly predicting the Katrina debacle, and former FBI deputy director John O’Neill, whose warnings about al-Qaida only led to a forced retirement and a new job as security chief of the World Trade Center, just in time to die when the towers went down.

The truth is that warding off fiascos requires more than just financial penalties and predictive abilities. Getting people to act responsibly requires a serious investment of time and resources. And sometimes, faced with the worst-case scenario, we just can’t figure out how to prevent them. The US government plans to bury huge quantities of radioactive waste in Yucca Mountain — nasty stuff that will remain so for tens of thousands of years. How to communicate to unknown cultures from a distant future that this place is mighty dangerous? Enter the US Department of Energy’s Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management and the “Yucca Mountain Project,” whose charge is to create permanent warning markers on the mountain that will deter intentional or inadvertent human intrusion. But what do “universal warning graphics” look like? Architects, designers, and artists have found endless amusement working for that elusive, impecunious client that is future mankind. Their solutions involve sharp, thorn-like monuments, or variations of the triangular “radioactive” symbol originally designed for the spaucious fallout shelters of World War II. When I was a kid, I had no idea what this ubiquitous sign was supposed to communicate; I’m probably not alone. All these solutions leave me trembling for future mankind; the futility of it all makes me wonder if ignorance really is bliss.

One alternative to a constant state of anxiety is to embrace fiasco and all its chaotic possibilities. Enter the elegantly named chaos theory, which posits that all apparently random systems have an underlying order when studied from the correct perspective. This theory has serious implications in physics, weather, biology, and the inconstant rate of Google hits on Paris Hilton (the single most Googled news topic of 2006). One architect who uses fiasco via chaos theory is Frank Gehry. He folds, cuts, crinkles, throws, and rips his way through design. The resulting edifice is a celebration of an incalculable number of small, irreversible transformations. Greg Lynn and Mark Goulthorpe, both paperless architects, use digital error and random operations to explore what Lynn calls “spatial conceptions,” three-dimensional blobs generated by neither human nor computer, but a brave, new hybrid.

The entertainment industry also thrives on fiasco — Britney’s latest meltdown, including stunted visits to rehab and a shaved head, enthralls us, if only temporarily. Elvis Presley sabotaged his guitar strings before a show so that they would break “unexpectedly” in the middle of his set, causing the audience to gasp in astonishment. And how popular do you think NASCAR would be without the possibility of a fantastic crash? Doesn’t the thought of witnessing a big, fat flop fuel American Idol?

I’d like to give humans the benefit of doubt, but I have to admit, I am concerned about at least one thing, given the present discussion. The pre-9/11 denial of warnings and the subsequent effort to figure out what to do on the World Trade Center site has been a series of nasty fiascos. So remind me: why are we so eager to rebuild the Twin Towers, more aptly named “terrorist teasers”? Isn’t an ounce of prevention worth a pound of cure? Let’s get a little more proactive about fiasco prevention, and give our Cassandras a little more credit. Maybe then we’ll get to enjoy our fiascos in a movie theater with a bag of popcorn instead of in our front yard.

Rachel Levitt is a designer and writer. She is on the faculty in the English department at Northeastern University.