



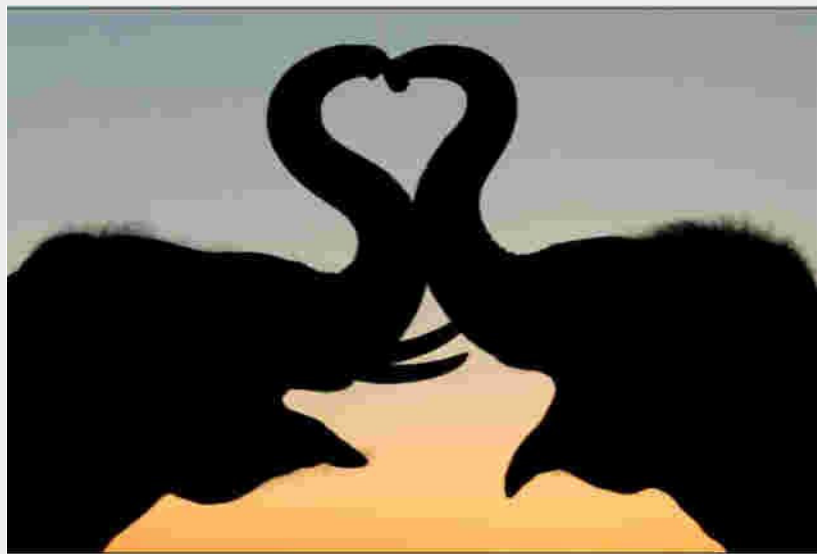
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The blind men and the elephant

1 Comment

By [David Johnson](#) January 5, 2012



When is an elephant not an elephant?

One of the challenges of community organizing in the **Transition** model is the sheer variety of people involved. Many are enthused and inspired by the hope that Transition offers in response to the challenges of economic contraction, peak oil, and climate change. People are roused, excited, wanting to break new ground and create an inspirational working model of what the world could be.

But what happens when your voice joins with the varied voices that make up your community?

Many people, many different ideas. Some more forthright than others. Some born leaders. Some not necessarily leaders but vocal just the same. Or the quieter one, the stubborn one, the one ready to do everything.

The challenge is bringing all these different voices to the same table.

The blind men and the elephant

There's a fable from the East about a group of blind men who are asked to pat an elephant to identify what it is. Each faith tradition has its own moral that it draws from the story, but the body of the narrative is the same. It goes something like this:

A group of blind men are taken to an elephant. They are told to reach and touch what is

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standing in front of them.

“What is it that is standing before you?”

The men, who’ve never encountered an elephant, are positioned so that each is standing in front of a different part of the beast.

Each man strokes what’s in front of him, and speaks to what it is he believes this hands are touching.

One claims the elephant is a pot (he has his hands brushing over the elephant’s head), another a plough (tusk), for another a pillar (leg), yet another a tree stump (foot) and another a fan (ear).

Truth is one, paths are many

For each telling of the story the outcome varies. But all versions of the story have a common element.

The Buddhist version has the men coming to blows over who’s right and who’s wrong, with a moral of how people cling to their ideas of right and wrong instead of opening their hearts to other ideas and possibilities.

The Jain tradition has the opposite result, with the men living in harmony through accepting the many valid beliefs that people can hold.

The Sufi tradition points out how one version of the truth can make us blind to other truths.

Other traditions offer similar interpretations of the story.

Holding opposites

How do we hold differing interpretations of the truth? Do we dismiss them, accepting the conflict that can arise from that? Or do we open ourselves to possibilities beyond our understanding and see where that openness takes us?

Of course none of the blind men were correct in their individual identities of the elephant, but even if their descriptions of what their hands were brushing over weren’t accurate, they were also not wrong. The elephant was each of these parts and more. Even when you are looking at the real thing it is very hard to say “what” the elephant is.

But what if it’s right in front of you? What if you can see it?

That spurs the question, What exactly are you pointing at? Or, What exactly are you seeing?

The elephant is many different things at many different times. Now covered in dust, now wet, now moving, now standing, now calling out, now quiet, now grabbing with its trunk, now eating. This thing called elephant is not a fixed entity, but rather a series of every changing activities, which when they come together we call – with complete validity – an elephant.

The blind men show how with limited information, even the elephant can be interpreted differently.

This isn’t meant to be indulgent wordplay or mind games. Rather it’s an illustration of how difficult it is to pin anything down with a single description.

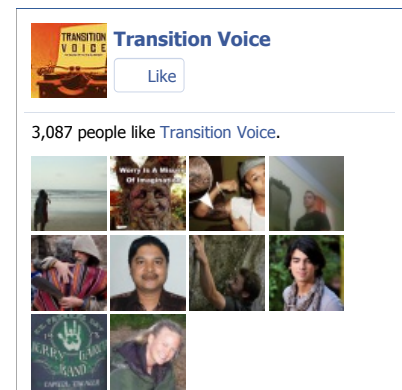
The simple complexity of Transition

Transition is no exception.

Those involved in **Transition initiatives** probably have an elevator speech ready to explain to others what it is that you’re involved in. One that I have used is, “Transition is a community led response to the challenges of climate change, energy contraction and economic instability.”

That trips off the tongue very easily but what do those words look like on the ground?

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In a community with many views and interpretations vying for expression, how does your local initiative translate its stated vision into action? How do we bring our own passion to play while allowing space for others with similar but conflicting passions to stand along side us and work?

It's out of these many voices that the collective genius of community arises. We must allow the diverse voices to be heard and find a way to bring them to the table. This isn't to suggest a chaotic meal, but rather a richer more bounteous spread, filled with a diverse mixture of ingredients. Not only do the diverse ingredients represent the multiplicity of communities, but also increase the resilience of that community.

In the Buddhist version of the parable the Buddha laments at the squabbling that takes place between the blind men as they try to defend their different interpretations on the nature of an elephant.

"O how they cling and wrangle," he says.

Contrast that with the Jain version where the king overseeing the episode congratulates and encourages the blind men for each seeing a part of the whole.

We all bring to the table of our Transition initiative different skills and visions. Within any Transition initiative, the part that each individual brings is but a small part of the community feasts being cooked up.

Like the blind men, we each only hold a part of the new story being written about our community. Embrace it all and savor the richness.

—David Johnson for **Transition Voice**



One in a series of monthly columns from **Transition US**, a non-profit organization providing support, encouragement, networking and training for Transition groups in the United States.

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About David Johnson

Originally from the UK, David now lives in Portland, OR where he helped to setup Transition PDX. David is an advisor and former board member of Transition US and a Transition Trainer. A follower of Tibetan Buddhism for a little over 20 years, David has a particular interest in the "Heart" aspect of the Transition movement and the dialogue between Faith communities and the Transition movement.



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January 5, 2012 at 6:43 pm

Nice piece to remind Transition people and others about the value of diversity of ideas. Sadly, not all Transition groups understand this vital issue.

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The poems of John Godfrey Saxe/The Blind Men and the Elephant



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THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT.

A HINDOO FABLE.

I.

IT was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

II.

The *First* approached the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
"God bless me!—but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!"

III.

The *Second*, feeling of the tusk,
Cried: "Ho!—what have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 't is mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!"

IV.

The *Third* approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a snake!"

V.

The *Fourth* reached out his eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he;
"'T is clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!"

VI.

The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Denv the fact who can.

[←The Youth and the Northwind](#)

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The Blind Men and the Elephant in Islamic thought.

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The legend of the Blind Men and the Elephant originated in the Pali Buddhist *Udana*, which was apparently compiled in the second century b.c.e. It spread to Islam [1] through the work of the orthodox Sufi theologian external link Muhammad al-Ghazzali (1058-1128 c.e.), in his *Theology Revived*. Ghazzali refers to the tale in a discussion on the problem of human action, a problem in which the inadequacy of natural reason becomes most evident. This is his version [2] of the fable:

A community of blind men once heard that an extraordinary beast called an elephant had been brought into the country. Since they did not know what it looked like and had never heard its name, they resolved to obtain a picture, and the knowledge they desired, by feeling the beast - the only possibility that was open to them! They went in search of the elephant, and when they had found it, they felt its body. One touched its leg, the other a tusk, the third an ear, and in the belief that they now knew the elephant, they returned home. But when they were questioned by the other blind men, their answers differed. The one who had felt the leg maintained that the elephant was nothing other than a pillar, extremely rough to the touch, and yet strangely soft. The one who had caught hold of the tusk denied this and described the elephant as, hard and smooth, with nothing soft or rough about it, more over the beast was by no means as stout as a pillar, but rather had the shape of a post ['amud]. The third, who had held the ear in his hands, spoke: "By my faith, it is both soft and rough." Thus he agreed with one of the others, but went on to say: Nevertheless, it is neither like a post nor a pillar, but like a broad, thick piece of leather." Each was right in a certain sense, since each of them communicated that part of the elephant he had comprehended, but none was able describe the elephant as it really was; for all three of them were unable to comprehend the entire form of the elephant.

The legend was also used by the Persian poet Sana'i (died probably 545 a.h./1150 c.e.), also as an illustration of the inadequacy of human reason. The great Sufi master Jalal ud-din-i Rumi (1207-1273 c.e.) is another who uses the story [5]; in his *Mathnawi*. He likens those who cannot agree about the eternally immutable God, those in whom the spiritual eye has not

yet awakened, to a group of people who seek an elephant in a dark room, and try to determine its appearance by touch alone. Naturally, each one comes to a different conclusion, according to the part of the animal's body that they feel.

The elephant was in a dark house; some Hindus had brought it for exhibition.

In order to see it, many people were going, every one, into that darkness.

As seeing it with the eye was impossible, [each one] was feeling it in the dark with the palm of his hand..

The hand of one fell on its trunk; he said: "This creature is like a water-pipe."

The hand of another touched its ear: to him it appeared to be like a fan.

Since another handled its leg, he said: "I found the elephant's shape to be like a pillar."

Another laid his hand on its back: he said, "Truly, this elephant was like a throne."

Similarly, whenever anyone heard [a description of the elephant]. he understood [it only in respect of] the part that he had touched.

On account of the [diverse] place [object] of view, their statements differed: one man titled it "dal [3]," another "alif."

If there had been a candle in each one's hand, the difference would have gone out of their words.

The Persian mystic and philosopher `Aziz ibn-Muhammad-I Nasafi (7th century a.h./13th century c.e.) was yet another profound thinker who made reference to this parable, this time in the context of criticism of exoteric theologians. According to Nasafi, these theologians have grasped only a part of the object of their study, but claim this part represents the whole. Since the whole consists of different parts, the result is bound to be false and one-sided; and hence each contradicts the others. The battle of theological opinions can only be arbitrated only by one who knows the relation between the parts, that is, the esoteric seer who has preserved or acquired an ability to see the whole. In this context, Nasafi tells the legend [4] of the blind men and the elephant. The blind men symbolize the theologians and exoteric thinkers, the elephant represents God or the truth:

Once there was a city, the inhabitants of which were all blind. They had heard of elephants and were curious to see [sic] one face to face. They were still full of this desire when one day a caravan arrived and camped outside the city. There was an elephant in the caravan. When the

inhabitants of the city heard there was an elephant in the caravan, the wisest and most intelligent men of the city decided to go out and see the elephant. A number of them left the city and went to the place where the elephant was. One stretched out his hands, grasped the elephant's ear, and perceived something resembling a shield. This man decided that the elephant looked like a shield. Another stretched out his hands, grasped the elephant's trunk, and perceived something resembling a club ['amud]. This man decided that the elephant looked like a club. A third stretched out his hands, grasped the elephant's leg, and perceived something like a pillar ['imad]. He decided that the elephant looked like a pillar. A fourth stretched his hands, grasped the elephant's back, and perceived something like a seat [takht]. He decided that the elephant looked like a seat. Delighted, they all returned to the city. After each one had gone back to his quarter, the people asked: "Did you see the elephant?" Each one answered yes. They asked: "What does he look like? What kind of shape has he?" Then one in his quarter replied: "The elephant looks like a shield. And the second man in the second quarter: "The elephant looks like a club." The third man in the third quarter: "The elephant looks like a pillar." And the fourth man in fourth quarter: "The elephant looks like a seat." And inhabitants of each quarter formed their opinion in accord; with what they had heard.

Now when the different conceptions came into contact with one another, it became evident that they were contradictory. Each blind man found fault with the next, and began to advance proofs in support of his own view and in confutation of the views of the others. They called these proofs rational and scriptural proofs. One said: "It is written in war the elephant is sent out ahead of the army. Consequently the elephant must be a kind of shield." The second said: "It is written that in war the elephant hurls himself at the hostile army and that the hostile army is thereby shattered. Consequently the elephant must be a kind of club." The third said: "It is written that the elephant carries a weight thousand men and more without effort. Consequently the elephant must be a kind of pillar." The fourth said: "It is written that so and so many people can sit in comfort on an elephant. Consequently the elephant must be a kind of seat."

Now you yourself consider whether such proofs they can ever penetrate to the object of demonstrations, the elephant, and whether with such proofs they can ever arrive at the correct conclusion. Every rational man knows that the more proofs of this sort they advance, the farther they will be from knowledge of the elephant they can never arrive at the object of their demonstrations, the elephant, and consequently that the conflict in

opinions will never be relieved, but will become more and more pronounced.

But know this: Suppose by the grace of God one of them is made seeing so that he perceives and knows the elephant as it really is, and says to them: "In what you have said of the elephant, you have indeed grasped some aspect of the elephant, but you do not know the rest. God has given me sight, I have seen and come to know the elephant as it really is." They will not even believe the seeing man, but will say: "You claim that God has given you sight, but that is only your imagination. Your brain is defective, and madness assails you. It is we who are the seeing." Only some few accept the word of the seer, for it is written in the Koran: "But few of my servants are the thankful" [Sura 34:13]. The others persist in their stupidity coupled with arrogance, refuse to be instructed, and call those among them who hear and accept the word of the seer, and who agree with the seer, unbelievers and heretics. But this only shows that "to hear about a thing is not the same as to see it for yourself."


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[1] T.W. Rhys Davids, "Does Al Ghazzali use an Indian Metaphor?," Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (London) 1911, pp. 200-201

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[2] al-Ghazzali, *Ihya' `ulum ad-din* (Cairo, 1933), vol.IV p.6, at the end of the section "Bayan wujub at-tawba"

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[3] *dal*, a crooked letter in the Arabic alphabet, and *alif*, a long, straight letter.

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[4] `Aziz-I Nasafi, *Kashf ul-haq`iq*, MS. Nuru Osmaniye (Istanbul) 4899; 230b 6 - 231a 17.

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[5] *The Mathnawi of Jalalu' d-din Rumi*, edited with critical notes, translation, and commentary by Reynold A. Nicholson, Vol. IV (Gibb Memorial New Series IV, London, 1930), Book 3, vv.1259-68.

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