



IF the elephant stands for wisdom, what does it mean to blindly touch part of it?

what does it mean to assume one visceral experience is the totality?

AND... what conditions limit the possibilities of growing into wisdom? For these blind men, the certainty of their limited direct experience

blinds them again, to context and curiosity.

What IF one of the blind men had asked, upon being allowed to touch the trunk,

"is this the whole elephant? Is there more?"

OR WHAT IF

before the argument began or even in the heat of it,

one man thought to say, "I did not hold the whole thing in my hands at once,

so I'm not so sure." Are you sure?

5/31/12 ~ 30m

## **The Blind Men and the Elephant : : May Reflection (paper 8)**

From a spiritual care perspective, the most compelling messages in this story are perhaps the classic ones. In a sense, this parable is a cautionary tale. It points to the dangers of assuming that personal, visceral experiences can be blithely generalized to define an objective truth. Interpreting a personal, limited perspective to be the reality of an object or idea (in this case an elephant, or wisdom) invites conflicts such as the one depicted among the blind men. Humility and open curiosity suggest themselves to me as antidotes. If the elephant is pañña, prajna, who is the King? Sampajañña? Sati? A facilitator? There are levels of analysis available here.

Looking at all of the characters, I wonder: what is the responsibility of the man “showing” the elephant? If he were a teacher teaching how to touch wisdom, would limiting their perspective in this way be ethical, even if it made such wisdom easier to touch? How might this man have felt about seeing the blind people come to blows? Amused? Upset? Guilty over his role? Struck with the symbolism? It seems implicit in this story that he was instructed by the King to limit their experience to part of the animal.

Where the blind man in fact prevented from walking around? Given the sensitivity of the few blind people I've directly encountered, it surprises me that they would not have explored the object before them more thoroughly with their hands. I'm remembering a recent magazine article about a blind man who learned to echo-locate by clicking his tongue. He could mountain bike<sup>1</sup>! Those blind from birth learn to compensate in many creative ways...

The Buddha refers to the wanderers of other sects as "blind, unseeing," just as he refers to Brahmins in the Tevijja Sutta. In this story, I imagine the introduction of the King as main character lends itself to an interpretation of "not holding to fixed views" more in the realm of leadership and relational practice. I could easily imagine how such a display could introduce some much needed perspective to an uncooperative court. From a chaplaincy perspective, this could have many applications. In the context of San Francisco General, one important way to hold this story is as an encouragement to respect the wisdom of many different faith traditions, and to keep in mind that any particular patient's – or Chaplains--- spiritual experience may be visceral, true, and limited. In a spiritual care context this could be generalized to any experience of "knowing" what is supposed to happen or be communicated in a spiritual care setting. Respect for multiple experiences of truth directly reminds me not just to hold spiritual and cultural humility, but also to inhabit, whenever possible, a compassionate and open regard for patients themselves, their families and their caregivers, regardless of the particularities of their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mensjournal.com/magazine/the-blind-man-who-taught-himself-to-see-20120504>