

# The Five Blind Men and the Elephant: A Comment

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Perhaps you are familiar with the Jain<sup>1</sup> story “The Five Blind Men and the Elephant,” which takes place in a small village in India. When I recently rediscovered this story, I found that through time my memory of it had changed; I had even forgotten parts of it. I was delighted to go back to the story itself and to research the philosophy behind it to find that my understanding reflected only a small part of the story and its message. Let me recount it again. In the village, where people had heard of elephants but no one had yet seen one, there was great excitement on the day the elephant came. People crowded to the center of the village in their curiosity to find out more about this strange animal. There were five blind men living in this village, and since it was such a big event, someone invited them to come and touch the elephant so they would also know what it was like. When they went to the center of the village, people moved aside and gave them access to the elephant.

Afterwards they sat down and discussed their experiences. One man touched the trunk and said that it was like a thick tree branch. Another who touched the tail said that it probably was like a snake or a rope. The third man who touched the leg suggested that the elephant must be shaped like a pillar or tree trunk, while the fourth man, who touched the ear, said that the elephant must be like a huge fan. Finally the fifth man who had touched the side said it was like a wall.

They sat for hours discussing their experience, trying to determine whose point of view was correct, but no one was quite willing to listen to the others.

Finally they went to a wise man and asked who was correct. He said, “Each one of you is correct; and each one of you is wrong, because each one of you had only touched a part of the elephant’s body. Thus you only have a partial view of the animal. If you put your partial views together, you will get an idea of what an elephant looks like.”<sup>2</sup>

An important part of this story is the wise man who said, “Each of you is correct and each of you is wrong.” How can they be correct? We know that an elephant isn’t a tree branch, a snake, a pillar, a fan or a wall—unless the wise man was also asking us to include everyone’s perception and dreaming in the idea of the elephant. To take it further, not just the blind men, but the whole village is needed in order to have the experience of the elephant. If we asked each person in the village what the elephant was, we would start to find a rich tapestry of impressions that enhance our first notions of the elephant and help us comprehend not only a consensus reality notion of the elephant but more, the indescribable aspects of the elephant experience. Why are these parts indescribable? Because if we pay attention, they are always tied to the ever expanding, constantly evolving experience of elephant that is inventing and reinventing itself in various levels of awareness. In some ways, we are all blind women and men trying to “see” the indescribable, ever unfolding world.

This issue of *The Journal of Process Oriented Psychology* invites you into “Process Work in Action.” Like the various villagers looking at the elephant, we will look at and experience process work. You will see how individual practitioners have used various aspects of process work, the skills, ways of implementing the skills, and the philosophy,

in their own unique way. The continuing development of process-oriented psychology happens not only in the research and comparison of the discipline but also in the doing and being of it; how it manifests itself in its various applications. It develops as we keep attending to our experience of it in its many manifestations. Hopefully you will also see beyond the consensus reality of process work itself into the realm where it is constantly unfolding, evolving and rising out of all of us.

In his article, "Difficult Contacts," Lane Arye will lead us through examples of how our perception of someone's being difficult for us might be our inability to understand "that there is an exquisitely beautiful wisdom to the [troublesome person's] process, and it is only our normal identities that keeps us from recognizing it for what it truly is." In an e-mail interview with Joy Gates called "Following the River's Way," Arny Mindell talks about the "'quantum field,' an uncanny potential from which all things arise." He talks about amplification, awareness and where we are heading in the new millennium, especially if we pay attention to our hopes and our biggest dreams related to it. Pierre Morin's article, "Symptoms, Dreaming and Society: Process-oriented Symptom Work as a New Approach to Illness and Disease," introduces some of us to a view of health that encompasses mental, social and spiritual well being. This view includes marginalized experiences such as social status, dreams and personal myth as part of the medical system. "Families Coming Apart: A Process Approach to Divorce and Other Transitions," by Gary Reiss addresses how following individuals' tendencies toward coming together or drifting apart while in a couple helps couples and families transcend conventional notions of relationship in order to achieve more fulfillment both as individuals and as couples.

Alexandra Vassiliou turns into a learner in her article "Don't Forget to Come by for Coffee: Conflict Resolution Training with a Group of Muslim Women in Athens, Greece." Here she is asked to work with conflict resolution in a population not oriented toward growth but rather the challenges of living as a minority in Greece. When push came to shove and there was an explosive development of mistrust, group process skills helped.

On a more personal note, in "The Music that Dreamt Me Today," Maurice Shaw follows his experience of how music that pops into his mind is an integral part of his process, not just random tunes that got stuck there. Silvia Camastral shows how a chronic illness is a mythical journey on which the symptom itself is a spirit guide in her article, "Living with a Skin Disease: a Shamanic Journey." Andrea Courvoisier talks about the deep process of her experience with her mother's extreme state and her related body symptoms in "Mother, What Killed You?: Transcending Tragedy through a Process-oriented View of 'Mental Illness' and Body Symptoms."

So join us in the center of the village, as it were, where we can all examine the elephant. By being both right and wrong, we can keep co-creating and inquiring about the world in which we live.

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Portland, Oregon, January 11, 2001

1. "Jainism is a religion and philosophy of India. Along with Hinduism and Buddhism, it is one of the three most ancient of India's religious traditions still in existence.... Although Jainism has a much smaller number of adherents than do Hinduism and Sikhism, its influence on India's culture has been considerable, including significant contributions in philosophy and logic, art and architecture, grammar, mathematics, astronomy and astrology, and literature." Encyclopedia Britannica: [www.britannica.com/bcom/eb/article/7/0,5716,108147+1+105858,00.html](http://www.britannica.com/bcom/eb/article/7/0,5716,108147+1+105858,00.html).
2. [www.ibiblio.org/jainism/database/YSTORY/blindmen.doc](http://www.ibiblio.org/jainism/database/YSTORY/blindmen.doc).