

Six Blind Men and an Elephant

A long time ago in the valley of a large river in India, there lived six men who liked to brag about their brains. Although these men were no longer young and had all been blind since birth, they were very competitive. Their “Olympics” was the telling of tall stories.

One day, like all other days, they began to argue. The object of the row was the elephant. Since each was blind, none had actually seen an elephant. So to satisfy their minds and settle the dispute, they decided to hire a guide to help them encounter one.

The next morning, they found a leader—who spoke only enough of their native dialect to understand what it was they wanted to meet—and they set out. They walked in single file along a jungle trail, each placing his hands on the back of the man in front. The guide served as the engine for a seven-car train.

Eventually, they arrived at a large clearing. As fortune would have it, a large bull elephant was standing by a tree, scratching his head and planning his day. Fortunately, he was tame.

The first blind man to approach the elephant came forward boldly and loudly. But sadly for him, he stumbled over a log and fell face-first into the broad side of the elephant.

“Oh my brothers,” he cried out, “it is as certain as I am smart that this elephant is like a great mud wall baked hard (and a little hairy) in the sun.”

The second blind man was more cautious as he approached the beast. He slid his feet forward, hands outstretched, to feel his way to the “wall.” But since he approached from the front, his hands encountered the tip of a long, sharp object that curved up above his head. It was the elephant’s strong tusk—enough ivory for ten grand pianos.

“Now, my dear brothers,” he exclaimed. “You have been told a lie. The elephant is not a wall. Its shape is exactly like a spear. Long and sharp.”

The others smiled in disbelief.

Now it was the turn of the third blind man, who came at the object of their curiosity from the rear. Carefully, he stepped forward, his hands waving in the air before him until he touched the elephant’s tail. Seizing it in both hands, he felt the strong bending twine and the coarse fibers on the tip.

“Why, dear brothers, do you not see!/? The elephant is very much like a rope.”

The fourth man stepped forward, shaking his head in confusion. He stepped past his companion—who was still rubbing the tusk of the elephant—and placed his searching

hands on a long, squirming object that began to circle about his waist. It was, of course, the elephant's long trunk.

“Ah, ha!” he shouted. “Just as I thought. This elephant resembles a serpent.”

The others snorted their contempt.

The fifth, a tall old fellow with a tall old turban and long white beard, was a bit more cautious. As he was stepping backward to avoid the possibility of a serpent, he chanced to touch the elephant's ear.

“Good gracious, brothers,” he cried out in relief, “even a blind man can see what shape the elephant resembles most. The elephant,” he said as an ear-breeze passed across his face, “is like a mighty fan.”

That brought snorting laughter from the remaining five.

At last, it was the turn of the sixth fellow. He, bowed down with age, came forward slowly, passing beneath the elephant's trunk and tusks, so that his head came in contact with the beast's stout leg. Feeling it wonderingly with both hands, he called to the others in his wheezy but confident voice.

“The elephant, my dear brothers, feels exactly like the trunk of a great palm tree.”

And, of course, no one believed him.

Their curiosity satisfied, they all linked hands and followed the guide back to the village. Once they were seated in their familiar places, the six blind men began disputing loud and long. Each was now entrenched in his own opinion, firmly based on his own experience. After all, each had felt the elephant for himself and knew that he was right.

And so it was indeed. For depending on how the elephant is seen, each blind man was partly right and completely wrong.