



“On Vision”

Rev. Mary Gear

Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

May 7, 2023

Story for All

“The Wise Ones and the Elephant,” adapted from an East Indian Folk Tale.

Long ago six wise elders lived in a village in India. Each of the elders was born without being able to see with their eyes to see, so they counted on their other senses to experience the world. They used their hearing, touch, smell and taste. They listened carefully to the stories told by travelers who came to their village to learn what they could about life elsewhere. And they used their creativity to imagine the wonders of the world.

The wise elders were curious about many of the stories they heard, but they were most curious about elephants.

They were told that elephants could trample forests, carry huge burdens, and frighten young and old with their loud trumpet calls.

But they also knew that the Rajah's child rode an elephant when they traveled in their father's kingdom. Would the Rajah let his precious child get near such a dangerous creature?

It so happened one morning that an elephant was coming down the road where they stood. When they were told that the great beast was before them, they asked the driver to let the elephant stop so that they might see it.

Of course, the wise elders could not see the elephant with their eyes; but they thought that by using their other senses they could learn just what kind of animal she was.

The first one happened to put his hand on the elephant's side. "Well, well!" they said, "Now I know all about this beast. It is exactly like a wall."

The second felt one of the elephant's tusks. "Oh, my friend," they said, "you are mistaken. This elephant is not at all like a wall. She is round and smooth and sharp. She is more like a spear than anything else."

The third wise elder happened to take hold of the elephant's trunk. "Both of you are mistaken," they said. "Anybody who knows anything can see that this elephant is like a snake."

The fourth wise elder reached out their arms and grasped one of the elephant's legs. "My friends, what are you seeing?!" they said. "It is very plain to me that she is round and tall like a tree."

The fifth wise elder was very tall, and they were able to take hold of the elephant's ear. "Anyone could see that this beast is not like any of the things that you name," they said. "She is exactly like a huge fan."

The sixth wise elder needed some help to find the elephant and it took some time, but at last they seized the animal's tail. "Oh, friends!" they cried. "You surely have lost your senses. This elephant is not like a wall, or a spear, or a snake, or a tree; neither is she like a fan. But anyone can see that she is exactly like a rope."

After a while the elephant moved on, and the six wise elders sat by the roadside all day, talking about the elephant.

"An elephant is like a wall. Surely, we can finally agree on that," said the first elder.

"A wall?" said the second elder, "'It's a spear, I tell you."

"An elephant is a giant snake," insisted the third.

"I'm certain it's a large tree," said the fourth.

"There's no doubt it's a fan," said the fifth wise elder.

"Don't you see?" pleaded the sixth. "It's definitely a rope."

Their argument continued and their shouts grew louder and louder.

"Wall!" "Spear!" "Snake!" "Tree!" "Fan!" "Rope!"

Each wise elder believed that they knew just how the animal looked, and they could not believe that their friends did not agree with them!

Finally, a young person with keen eyesight came by and heard their argument. "How can each of you be so certain you are right?" asked the youth.

"The elephant is a very large animal," said the youth kindly. "Each of you touched only one part. Perhaps if you put the parts together, you will see the truth."

The six wise elders rested quietly in the shade, thinking about the young person's advice.

"They are right," said the first elder. "To learn the truth and see clearly, we must put all the parts together."

Then, the first elder put his hand on the shoulder of the youth who would guide them home. The second elder put a hand on their friend's shoulder, and so on until all six wise elders were ready to travel together in search of the truth.

This ends our story.

Another Story

This is a story of a smuggler. There are different versions of this Middle Eastern folktale; this version is just one way to tell it.

At the border crossing in a country far away from here, and many years ago, a border guard noticed a traveler approaching. The traveler was leading a donkey whose back was stacked with heavy bales of straw.

The guard's job, among other things, was to make sure that travelers didn't smuggle goods into the country. Watching the traveler approach, the guard's intuition was to be suspicious.

The guard stopped the traveler, asking to look inside of the straw bales on the donkey's back. The guard couldn't find anything valuable in the straw. "But I'm certain you're smuggling something," the official said, as the traveler crossed the border with a smile.

Now each week, for years, the traveler came to the border with a donkey bearing bales of straw. Although the guard searched and searched the straw bundles on the donkey's back, then the hems of the traveler's robes, then inside of their food and water bundles, the guard never could find anything valuable hidden in them.

Many years later, after the official had retired, they happened to spot the traveler in a marketplace and said, "Please tell me, I beg you. Tell me, what were you smuggling?"

"Whatever do you mean?" the traveler replied.

"I'm no longer a guard, and even if I could get you into trouble, I'd never do so. But for years, I knew you were smuggling something, and I only want my curiosity satisfied so that I can die in peace, and not wonder any further."

The traveler leaned in. "You're right, then. Every time I crossed the border into your country, I was smuggling...."

"What?" cried the retired guard.

"Donkeys."

This ends our story.

Part I Seeing Clearly

Have you ever had the experience of not seeing something that was right there in front of you? Maybe not a donkey, but an item (like your keys or glasses), or a person, or an opportunity? I know that I have. When someone points it out to me and my vision clears, my perspective shifts, it's so obvious! Of course, it was there all along.

Our spiritual theme for this month of May is "vision." There are many ways to approach this theme and I'm going to talk about a couple of them today. One way to understand "vision" is that it's what we see, how we use our senses to experience what is around us, and how we make meaning from what we experience.

How we think about our perceptions and how we understand our meaning-making has changed over the course of human history. Here in the US, the dominant story is the influence of European history, which includes the

ideas of the Age of Enlightenment, which was roughly from the mid-to-late 1600's to the start of the 1800's. The Age of Enlightenment came after the Scientific Revolution, influenced by philosophers and scientists like René Descartes, Francis Bacon, John Locke, and Isaac Newton. The Scientific Revolution brought together men who shared findings, theories and ideas in coffeehouses, salons, scientific academies and scientific journals. This created the means to challenge the absolute authority of the monarchy and the Catholic Church in the Age of Enlightenment. It was out of the Enlightenment that ideas of democracy and liberal religion grew.

One of the ideas of the Enlightenment was that humans could pursue knowledge or truth by using the evidence that we gather with our senses and by using our reason. You can notice this Enlightenment idea in the Unitarian Universalist 4th and 5th principles: We affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

You can also hear Enlightenment ideas in the first source that UU's draw on for our principles and values. That source names the direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder as a source of our knowing. I asked Troy to include the hymn "Wake Now My Sense" in part because it is a great example of the theology that we can "know" the world and something greater however you name it, we can know it with our own senses. It's a challenge to the idea that it takes a priest to know God. Each of us can know God/The Divine/The Oneness of All if our senses are keen and awakened.

So, we usually think that we can know the world through our senses, and we trust that what we "see" is the truth. And, we regularly have experiences that remind us that our vision can be clouded with our lenses and biases, so we can't see that the donkey is what's being smuggled.

During the last century, philosophers and scientists began questioning and challenging the ideas of the Enlightenment. Postmodernism asserts that "truth" or knowledge is conditional and dependent on cultural and societal factors. There is no one truth. Postmodernism asserts that identity is not fixed and that many binaries are false. And Post-modernism calls out the role of ideology, like ideas from the Enlightenment, in maintaining economic and political power for a few at the expense of the many.

Post-modernism was and is informed by many voices, unlike the predominantly white, wealthy, male voices of the Enlightenment. While we can be grateful to those men that they challenged the dominant institutions of their time, we can also acknowledge that their perspective is just one part of the whole. Many other truths and voices were missing, and some have been working to add those voices in; not to replace the voices of white men, but to add to them.

It's not by accident that the civil rights movements for racial justice, women's rights, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, all came out of Postmodern ideology. Challenging the gender binary by using pronouns is implementing a post-modern idea. One way to understand our current political and cultural divide in the US right now is that it's a battle between the ideas of the Enlightenment and Postmodernism.

So, if we can't always trust our senses and our reason, what are we to do?

Let's look at an example; let's take the image of a glass of water.

If you are willing to raise your hand, online and onsite, how many of you see this glass as half full? How many of you see this glass as half empty? This exercise has been used as a way for us to identify our outlook on life: seeing the glass as half-full indicates a more optimistic outlook; seeing the glass as half empty indicates a more pessimistic outlook on life.

I would be in the "glass half empty" camp. Whether by temperament or life experience or both, I tend to be very good at seeing what isn't working. When it comes time to ask, "What could possibly go wrong?" chances are I have a list. Now, this perspective serves me well in some situations. I am pretty good at preparing for tough situations, you may have heard about my always having a Plan B or asking for one, and I can be pretty helpful in a crisis. After all, I expect things to go bad, even if I may not know exactly how they will.

The shadow side of this perspective is that I can get very focused on the weaknesses and threats and lose sight of the strengths and opportunities that are right in front of me. I just don't see them. I sometimes miss beauty and joy. I might miss a subtle or even not so subtle invitation to connect in the now, with the person right in front of me. My co-workers here will tell you that I can get so focused on the task at hand (often in response to a risk or threat) that I forget to pay attention to the relationships.

What helps me is first to know this about myself. I know my bias toward seeing threats and weaknesses, and that lets me be intentional about finding ways to broaden my perspective, to broaden my vision. Spiritual practice does that for me-walking in nature, journaling, meditation. And it lets me be receptive and grateful when someone points out that I have skipped the meeting check-in to get to the task.

I also intentionally ask others to share their truth, their perspective. I count on others to help broaden my perspective because I know that I only have one piece of the truth. Others have different senses, different lived experiences, and so they make different meaning. Just like the wise ones exploring the elephant; we each know a part, but to see the whole, we need each other.

In order for our vision to be as clear as possible, we need all of us and we need each other. Our vision is most clear together.

Reading

This reading is by Dr. Sharon D. Welch from her book *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work*.

The wellspring of decency is loving this life in which people die, people suffer, there are limits, and we make mistakes. The wellspring, then, of moral action is not utopia, not a counterfactual vision, not a declaration that the world could and should be otherwise. Rather, it is a deep affirmation of the joy, richness, and blessing that the world is. The ground of challenging exploitation, injustice, and oppression is not a vision of how the world could be or will be in the future reign of God, or after the revolution. The ground of challenging injustice is gratitude, the heartfelt desire to honor the wonder of that which is; to cherish, to celebrate, to delight in the many gifts and joys of life.

Part II Vision and Hope

A second way to approach the spiritual theme of “vision” is as an ideal. The OUUC community has a vision of an interconnected world that is loving, just and healthy. This vision was created in 2021 in a several months-long

process where we identified our values and goals to create our vision for the world. We say that vision every Sunday when we gather together to worship to help us remember the world that we want to help create.

And even as we say this vision, we know that it isn't the reality. The world is not always loving, just or healthy. That utopia does not yet exist, if it even can, and that can be a source of grief and sadness.

A few weeks ago, I attended the Spring gathering of UU ministers in the Pacific Northwest. We gather regularly to compare notes, learn together, and support each other. This Spring gathering was led by UU activist Chris Crass, a dynamic and powerful teacher who envisions a multiracial beloved community.

Chris taught us that in justice work there is always a gap between what we envision and what we can do, what we have capacity for. There is always a gap between what we want and what we can realistically achieve. It's the capacity gap. And that gap causes us to grieve. I hear that grief from those of you who marched for civil rights in the 60's when you say, "I thought we took care of racial injustice!" Yet, how realistic was it to expect that we could undo centuries of racial oppression in a decade? And now some of you lament that you can't do what you did then, you don't have the energy or stamina or maybe don't quite understand how the issues have shifted and changed. There is a gap between what we want and what we have the capacity for.

In our minister's gathering, Chris led us in a ritual for naming and mourning that gap as it existed for us. The ritual helped us face what is real and what we cannot change. Then we could move on to clarify our vision and practice hope.

Clarifying our vision, our ideal, is also connected to the first idea of vision that I spoke about earlier. When we create a vision for an ideal or utopia, how do we know if it is the truth? The vision for racial justice that Dr. King spoke of, his dream, didn't include equal rights for women. The first and second wave of feminism didn't envision equality for women of color. The first movement for gay and lesbian rights didn't include non-binary and trans siblings. Each time we add voices, each time we widen the circle, the vision changes. And it should. No vision of utopia can be complete; we each contribute a part. It takes all of us to see the whole and cast a vision for how we want to be in this world.

If our vision is not always inclusive and we mourn the capacity gap, how are we to hold hope?

In our reading, Dr. Welch suggests that the source of hope comes from gratitude. Yes, people have died, there is suffering, we have limits on our capacity, and we make mistakes. And we can be grateful for the gift of life. Welch says that the wellspring of moral action “is a deep affirmation of the joy, richness, and blessing that the world is.” I think what she’s saying is that it doesn’t matter if the glass is half full or half empty. I think she’s saying “Let’s be grateful that there is a glass! And it has water in it! Water that can sustain a flower or hydrate an animal or shelter a goldfish. There is life. We are alive.” We are here now. And we are here together. From that place of gratitude, we can find hope and the energy to combat exploitation, injustice, and oppression.

During this month, we will discuss revisions to our congregational covenant, today after service, in fact. We will use a democratic process to make decisions about our future by electing leaders and adopting a congregational budget. If we begin with gratitude, then by our actions we can live into our vision of love, justice and health. And with that we begin the spiritual practice of hope.

As we move into this month, may our vision together be as clear as it can.

May our vision together be as inclusive as it can.

And may gratitude for the joy, richness and blessings of this world serve as the wellspring of our actions and our hope.