

An Idiot's Idiom



an essay

by Charles Wolfegang Keane Tuomi

“Here’s an equation, everybody. Also, ‘*imagination is more important than knowledge.*’”

Albert Einstein

$$E = mc^2$$

Visualize c “squared.”

$$E = m \boxed{c}$$

Divide both sides by m.

$$\frac{E}{m} = \boxed{c}$$

Now...use your imagination.

$$\frac{\underline{\textit{Elephant}}}{\textit{memory}} = \boxed{\textit{see}}$$

"Have a memory like an elephant"

An idiom that means someone can remember things easily and for a long time. It can also be translated to "有惊人的记忆力" in Chinese.

Google AI


We cannot accurately remember what we do not first *truly witness*.

Elephants are known for their intelligence. They also demonstrate what looks suspiciously like compassion and seem to even feel grief, holding funerals for lost tribe members during which they circle the corpse and caress it with their trunks. Mother elephants have been seen grieving for lost children. But elephants do not acquire things or write laws. They do not establish permanent living situations and then build emotional, financial and sometimes literal walls around those fortresses. They are nomadic, paperless, and non-digital.

These qualities, some of the best of what makes up the human experience, *without any distorting moral judgement*, leaves you with *Elephant sight*. True attention. Which allows what is to be seen *as it is*, in all its beauty and complexity and messiness and difficulty. Faced directly. Allowed inside us, *purely*, untainted by opinion or selfish concerns, the way that physical light barges constantly through the doors of our eyes without bothering to ask for an invitation,

This leads not to “what does this mean for me?” cogitation but rather “what does this mean?” reflection. Sort of like Albert Einstein and his thought experiments. When he imagined himself running faster than light and realized this would make light no longer at light at all, he wasn’t asking how that could advantage or disadvantage him or his family, he was driven by curiosity, seeking pure truth, knowledge about reality, probably contrary to advice from people who may have told him he had his head stuck too far into the clouds. The distances and speeds and forces involved in some of Einstein’s physics and math would never be directly relevant to his life.

But Albert Einstein was an Elephant. So he paid attention like one.

Einstein = 
math

A creature like an elephant, or an Albert Einstein, or a Jesus Christ, or Siddhartha Gautma the Buddha, or Taoist sages like Lao Tzu or Chuang Tzu, or others, many, but still far too few, can really *see*.

Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam. The Sufi poet known as Rumi wrote a lovely poem entitled “The Guest House.” I include a translation of that poem on the next page, followed by some brief commentary, to demonstrate the insidious effect of the question “what does it mean for me?” even in a work created by a bright, remarkable person who spent a great part of their life seeking wisdom and attempting to connect selfless with divinity.

First I will provide the poem as is.

Then I will provide it again, with the “me” concerns highlighted. Maybe try doing this yourself before reading this second version. What words are concerned with how the truth of reality being expressed in the poem have to do with what it *implies the reader should do*?

Then I will provide a third version of the poem with the “me” parts redacted.

And a few tweaks, in an attempt to allow Rumi’s light to pass through the prism of me.

And also to entertain or, perhaps, I can dream, offend the reader.

ie, *you*, whoever you are pretending to be today

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,

Some momentary awareness comes

As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all !

Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,

Who violently sweep your house

Empty of its furniture,

Still, treat each guest honourably.

He may be clearing you out

For some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,

Meet them at the door laughing,

And invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,

Because each has been set

As a guide from beyond.

– Rumi

from: Barks and Moyne. Copyright 1995 by Coleman Barks and John Moyne,
originally published by Threshold Books.

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*Now look. We have a beautiful poem bursting with amazing truth about acceptance and the virtues that can come even from suffering, now loading us up with a bunch of rules for not only how to behave, but also how to feel. “Act happy! Welcome people in smiling and laughing, no matter how you feel at the time.” Which means hiding any pain or discomfort you are feeling from them, **eroding the fidelity of the connection** between you and they. Let’s define a whole new set of rules about what constitutes “honourably” too - because what does “honourably” mean here? - instead of just spontaneously showing affection, admiration, appreciation, compassion, and love from our child hearts. And “be grateful. **Feel** thankful.” Now we have to **control how we feel**. Meaning if we find ourselves not feeling grateful, well, you are doing something wrong, aren’t we? And we wonder why people fly planes into buildings. This almost make me want to drive my own Mustang off a bridge. Rumi, Rumi, oh, Rumi....now let’s ask Tuomi.*

The Cabin at World's End

Being human? A Cabin on a Beach.

Every moment another wave.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,

Each breath arrives

Like an uninvited visitor.

Even a mob of enfante terribles,

Who sweep your house haphazardly

Empty of its furniture with their shrieking violins,

may be clearing you out

For some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice...

each has arrived from somewhere, probably, but

who actually knows where, and, really how does that matter?

Now please send me a topless photo of yourself

We can co-author a new poem together and call it The Breasts House

603-828-3496

– Tuomi

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Elephant = *memory*

“The Blind Men and the Elephant” is a Hindu parable. The traditional version doesn’t go exactly as I describe it in what follows - I have added quite a lot - but I believe this version is close enough to the original and true enough to the spirit of it to still be called by the same title. Which I don’t, by the way. My title is at the top of this page, where titles normally go. I’m just sayin I could if I wanted to. Anyway, here it is.

An elephant arrives in a kingdom. It is the first elephant anyone in the kingdom has ever come across. Considering its newness and strangeness and size, a decision is made to quarantine the beast, in order to determine its nature and ascertain whether it constitutes a threat to the kingdom or its citizenry. The elephant is put in a large barn, and the king asks his wise men, who are all blind, to go there to inspect it. They each have an opportunity to feel a part of the elephant with their hands. But only a part. One blind man feels the trunk. Another the ears. Another the legs. Someone else gets the tail. And the tusk. And the side.

After the inspection, the blind men are all ushered back into the king’s hall to reveal their findings.

The man who felt the trunk describes the elephant as a large serpent. The man who felt the ears believes it to be a giant bat. The one who got the legs thinks it might be some kind of rhinoceros. He who grabbed the tail thinks it’s perhaps a mutant giraffe. The dude who felt the side, a bit hesitant, suspects it’s a weird breed of hippo. And the man who felt the tusks has the fanciful notion that it’s a dragon with massive, sharp teeth.

In response to this apparently incoherent depiction, the irritated king, who has not seen the animal himself, snarls this.

“WTF are you people talking about?”

Thankfully his wife and better, wiser half is sitting next to him. The Queen leans over and whispers something in his ear. His eyes light up with understanding and agreement. He snaps his fingers at a servant.

“Summon the Girl.”

The servant bows and hurries out of the room, returning a short while later with a young girl, clad in a simple dress. She is holding an art book, a sharp pencil, and an eraser. The girl approaches the Queen and climbs up to settle herself on the Lady’s lap. The King then instructs the blind men to repeat their observations for the Girl to hear.

The girl listens quietly and intensely. As she does, she draws. (Incidentally, this episode makes her the progenitor and patron saint of every police sketch artist who will follow in millenia to come)

After the men have (finally) finished talking, everyone in the hall waits as the girl refines her picture. Her brow furrows and she gnaws gently on her bottom lip while she erases a line or curve here and there. Her small head tilts to one side, then the other, as she adds and removes details. She blows on the paper a couple of times to clear away remnants of pink eraser. Finally, seemingly satisfied with her work, she holds the completed picture up over her shoulder for the queen to see. The queen looks, then smiles and pats the girl tenderly on her head.

“Well, done, Dawn,” she says softly, so softly that only the girl can hear the words. “Very well done, indeed, my darling.” She kisses Dawn softly on the top of her hair. The girl smiles. Then the Queen holds up the picture up for her King to observe.

To the King, the Beast on the paper does not look like a threat. Its eyes are dark and kind and deep and gentle. It’s posture is gentle, too. Despite the depiction being a still drawing, one can feel a calm, slow, deliberateness in it, the creature’s innate thoughtfulness captured in its muscular bulk. It’s strength is evident, too, of course. It is unquestionably a being of immense power. This thing certainly has the *capacity* for violence. But it would not be accurate at all, the King decides, to describe what he is looking at as a “violent animal.” Inciting violence from a miracle like this would require atrocity. (For instance, keeping it caged for its whole life and beating it to get it to behave the way one wants, which, I mean, the King thinks to himself, what kind of total self-centered imbecile would ever do something like *that* to a glorious creation like *this*?)

“Bring me the Beast,” the King says eventually.

And some people do. And the picture is found to be true in the King’s eyes, as true a depiction as a picture can possibly be.

Because it was drawn by the little girl Dawn, a high fidelity light beam in human form. This is Dawn as a formula.

$$b^2 + a^2 = E/m$$

The King feels deeply the love for the creature that Dawn herself feels in the picture that she drew of it. He immediately decrees that anyone harming the creature or attempting it to get to do *anything other than what it is naturally inclined* to do will be farted on by each blind man, the light child, his Queen, the King himself and also, importantly, the elephant, until Dawn Herself reports that she sees in the criminal’s eyes that they understand the seriousness of their mistake. Prior to this event, a dinner celebration consisting of foods designed to maximize the olfactory intensity of this funishment will be held, and each designated “emitter” will be instructed to partake of various cabbages, fungi and legumes as liberally as their anatomy allows. If the perpetrator apologizes, the whole thing will be repeated. Apologies expend energy that is better used for changing behavior. There is no place for apologies in Dawn’s Kingdom. (incidentally, this is also how the wise King replaces the horror of psychological manipulation using “gaslighting” with something much funner and more useful)

The traditional version of this story is often used as a morality tale of sorts to convey the importance of intellectual humility, based on the reality that any one of us only has a narrow perspective on things. The amount of time we live is infinitesimal

compared to the life of the universe. What we witness is puny compared to what there is. Armed with that information, truly keeping that top of mind, naturally leads to a yin (listening) approach rather than a yang (talking) approach. Forgetting it does the opposite.

The narrative also clearly advocates for holistic thinking, because of the importance of seeing as much of the entire picture as one can, which requires the aforementioned humility/listening, as well as patience, relentless curiosity and also, sometimes, disobeying instructions. For instance, as a blind man, if you are being asked to only examine a part of an animal and then describe the whole thing, and maybe you have petted your guide dog before (an animal), and know that you felt ears and fur and fangs and legs and a snout on it in different regions, you can either reject the instructions given to you because they are invalid and will lead to a misunderstanding (when the spirit of your instructions are to provide understanding), or disobey them and go feeling around where you “shouldn’t” to learn what you need to know. Most of the great journalists who broke the biggest stories did this last type of thing.

Just FYI. As a blind man, “fumbling around” for “info” has the added advantage of providing you with a defensible opportunity to “accidentally” grope other members of your team. For instance, you might be able to answer for yourself the burning question, “is what the ladies all say about Kevin’s equipment really true?”



Oh, sorry. Thought “that” was the, um, trunk. Also, congratulations. Wow.

Another important aspect of the story’s message that I myself have not seen emphasized quite as much in commentary is the importance of directly sharing *impressions rather than conclusions*, of *sharing information* and not always injecting *opinions about* that information. I am perhaps more sensitive to this than some, after watching my brother-in-law perform at family events, and also after working as a software engineer/architect for more than twenty years, during which time I many times saw projects run into trouble because the businessperson providing requirements crossed the line between expressing the business need for which they are responsible and heavy-handedly specifying system behavior, or even aspects of system design. This can lead to the purpose, the *why* of the project, becoming muddled or even lost, and everyone staring at a finished project and saying, “this isn’t what we needed at all.” In my experience, the best architects I have learned from therefore ask a lot of non-technical, why questions.

Each blind man in the story provided useful information by providing their *guess* as to what the elephant was. But the fact that they expressed a *conclusion* based on partial information garbled the picture. If the guy who thought it was a snake instead said, “This is what I felt,” and did his best to simply describe the aspects of the trunk that he discovered, and everyone else did the same, maybe it would not have required a deep listener to suss out the truth. Maybe the King or Queen or someone else in the hall who had also seen or petted a dog could have put one and two and three and four together and drawn a picture much like Dawn eventually did. The fact that each blind man instead felt pressured to provide an “answer” is behind the confusion, I think. Pressure, including such things as time pressure (urgency) or selfish concerns (“this is my chance to make a name for myself by being ‘right’”, etc.), generates yang, masculine, assertive energy. We have all probably felt a need to “get our point across” in moments of pressure, when we seem to have very little time in which to communicate, or when stakes are high. To the extent possible, this type of pressure should be avoided. When it is present, as it sometimes will be, I believe it is skillful to be aware of its presence and its potential effect, and do one’s best to mindfully counterbalance it with as much *selfless yin energy* as one can summon at the time. This can be challenging when others are yapping and yanging, but whatever one can do along these lines tends to be virtuous and lead to better long terms results.

(Also, above I posed a hypothetical: that the first guy to tell his story provide an example for others. And second, that the others recognize a good idea and follow suit. Both of these things are important. Also, when you are the first in line for something, you have an extra responsibility. People tend to follow suit. It’s easier. The blind lead the blind, as they say. It may be that the first man’s choice to describe his conclusion affected the way the others provided their own information.)

Rumi’s poem “The Guest House” is full of selfless yin energy, but yang slips in because of a self orientation. OK, here is how the world is, reader. Isn’t it gorgeous? Now let me distort that picture with what I think it means for *me* and then start trying to boss *you* around under the guise of a gentle, caring teacher, thereby making it far more difficult for you to disagree with me, because in all likelihood you have been raised to ask, “well, hey, who am I to disagree with a guy like this?.”

The key is that everything has the truth in it, but just about everything also contains lies. And it takes independence of thought, patience and yin energy to see the difference.

I did my best to clear out what I believed was self-oriented in Rumi’s poem with my own version. The reader is of course entitled to disagree with, despise, or dismiss mine and produce their own version. More than entitled, I would encourage it. My version is deliberately tainted with my own concerns. I put them there to be funny (or try), but also because those are real things I would be interested in seeing happen. They are an expression of a true desire. I did phrase them as Rumi-like instructions with terrible, infantile Tuomi-ishness and highlight them in order to help the reader clearly see the difference and not get confused, though. Whether any reader decides to take me on the suggestion is also of course up to them.

Everything is multi-level. My poem, aside from being an example to use in this essay, and other things, is also an homage to one of my favorite TV commercials of all times from the 1980’s: the fictional “Show Us Your Can” contest held by the makers of 7-Up soda, featuring Orlando Jones. This ad just makes me laugh and laugh, and expresses a funny, important point about confused language (Genesis 11:1-9) that is relevant here, I think. You can find the commercial using a link on the next page. 😊

7-Up - Show Us Your Cans (1999, USA)



“Mom?”

Here's mine.
How about yours?



“Dad?”

Namaste, weirdos.

Consider using Your Flaming Sword.