

Are We Too Blind to Hear the Truth?

“The Wise Men and the Elephant” and “Seven Blind Mice”

A wise man once noted, “If one truly wishes to experience truth, he must be willing to see beyond his own limitations.” “The Wise Men and the Elephant” and Ed Young’s “Seven Blind Mice” both explore this idea, a condition many of us fail to see in ourselves...blindness, not the kind that comes from damage to the eyes, but the kind that comes from the limitations of our own point-of-view. Even though both of these stories share a similar exploration of a common human problem, the wise men leave the reader to figure out the solution for themselves while the mice offer a smarter approach and a clearer solution to that problem.

Both of these stories share some basic qualities. The characters in both stories are literally blind. And in both stories, their blindness symbolizes a blindness that many of us experience ourselves when we are blinded by our own point-of-view. Both groups of characters are trying to solve a basic problem that has come into their lives. What is an elephant really like? Since none of the characters can use their eyes, they come up with the plan of using their sense of touch to “see” what an elephant is really like. In both stories they experience the same problem. Since each character feels a different part of the elephant, they “see” the elephant differently. This contributes to an argument since each character knows what they experienced themselves and assumes that everyone else must be wrong. But this is where their similarities end and where their differences take a dramatically different approach to this problem.

The men in “The Wise Men and the Elephant” approach the problem of the elephant a little differently than the mice, and the result is an ending that is very different from “Seven Blind Mice.” The wise men all approach the elephant at the same time, and the argument begins almost immediately since they are all touching different parts of the elephant. “The elephant is like a fan,” cries the first man who is touching the elephant’s ear. A second man feeling the elephant’s leg cries, “He’s like a tree.” A third man points out “You’re both wrong. The elephant is like a rope.” He was feeling the elephant’s tail. The argument continues like this as they “shouted at each other for over an hour.” Their conflict is never resolved, and they never figure out what an elephant is really like. Hopefully the reader can “see” the message *suggested* by the failings of the characters in this story. These “Wise men” aren’t wise at all. If they had been wise, they would have figured out the problem. The real issue is whether we can “see” what they couldn’t. Can we apply that lesson to our own lives?

“Seven Blind Mice” gives the reader some help that isn’t offered in story of the wise men. Instead of going all at once to see the “something” in their pond, the mice go one at a time. Since Ed Young’s story is a picture book illustrated for children, he adds some helpful symbolism in the illustrations that is impossible in the other story. Each mouse is a different color representing its own unique point of view. When each mouse returns to tell his tail about what he experienced, his story is represented in his color, and his tail cleverly points in that direction. Whenever a mouse leaves to investigate “the something,” all the other mice are quite interested, but when that mouse reports what he experienced, only the mice that haven’t yet gone seem to be paying attention. The others, hearing something different than they experienced themselves break off into their own arguments. By the end, only white mouse has listened to every report, and this is the mouse that puts all of the pieces together. She is able to help the others see the true nature of the elephant and of the relationship shared by all of the individual experiences. Their conflict is resolved, and the reader is actually presented a solution for overcoming the challenge that defeats the characters in the other story.

In “The Wise Men and the Elephant,” the men never accomplish what the mice do because none of them do what the white mouse did, to simply listen to the ideas of the others. Interestingly, most of the mice also suffered from this condition. These two stories may share much in common, but the mice have something that the group of men doesn’t, one member who listens to all of the others before coming to her own conclusions. All of us occasionally suffer from the type of blindness experienced by the characters in these stories. Sometimes it’s hard listen to ideas that seem to be different from what we “know” to be right. However, if we can listen thoughtfully like the white mouse, we may discover a truth that is bigger than what we thought we knew. And in doing so, we may help others see that we all have something to learn from each other...that is if we are not too blind to listen.