Raising the Gaze

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There is an old, very familiar Sufi story about six blind men who encounter an elephant for the first time while walking down a road in India. Overcome with curiosity, they begin to describe their understanding of the elephant. Bumping into the side of the elephant, the first man proclaims, "An elephant is like a wall." The second touches the tusks and likens the elephant to a spear. The third feels the trunk and says the elephant is a snake. The ears become a fan, the legs a tree, and the tail a rope. The point of the story, of course, is that we each bring a different perspective to how we perceive reality; none of us grasps the full truth of our surroundings and community.

At a recent conference of the American Evaluation Association, I heard a new spin on this very old tale. Michael Quinn Patton suggested that sharing our perceptions about the elephant is only a first step. We can't really know the elephant without understanding where it lives, what is happening to the surrounding environment, the effect of the drought, the impact of the poachers who seek its tusks, the expansion and encroachment of human communities on the elephant's territory, changing vegetation, and much more. To understand the elephant, we have to raise our gaze beyond a single point of engagement and even beyond the elephant itself.

When I first set out to write this article, I knew I wanted to reflect on our joint efforts to address the challenges of our complicated world. I thought about sharing some insights on the process of working in coalitions in a "how to" or "here are some tools" approach. But as I thought more deeply, I realized that what is most needed at this particular moment is reflection about how we come together to support one another with wisdom and the courage to act.

We live in complex worlds with intertwining issues that often cannot be separated from one another. A homeless mother in Boston not only faces the lack of a home; she may also need employment, additional education, healthcare, childcare,

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transportation, academic support for her children, or a caring social network. Yet, the resolutions to these problems often reside in separate systems with distinct processes, rules, and regulations. Her life becomes even more splintered and fractured as she attempts to journey toward stability for her family.

As social-service and social-change agents, we know such a broken system does not meet the needs of this homeless mother, yet we are stymied by the complexity of the situation. We scramble to respond and do the best we can to make the system work for her, often in very creative and innovative ways. We attempt to buffer the family from the unsettling and jumbled process. We develop strong relationships and a network of interconnections with other agencies that support us in the endeavor. We create a caring, agile organization that works efficiently within the system, recruiting allies and providing incredible service, spirit, and support. Yet, unintentionally we often contribute to sustaining a fragmented system.

The way our society is organized seems to be at the core of our joint dilemma. Peter Senge and Fred Kofman suggest that our success in building an efficient scientific culture has created some debilitating blind spots.[1] According to the authors, the scientific milieu is predisposed to fragmentation, competition, and being reactive.

In short, we try to solve and understand problems by taking them apart and analyzing their smallest component. We specialize and become experts, moving us further from an understanding that the parts intertwine to comprise a whole. We desperately want to find and possess answers that may not be found in single institutions or even combinations of institutions. We separate the world into those who know and those who do not, those who help and those who receive.

If we dig deeper into this scenario, we find an underlying belief that knowledge can be acquired in bits and pieces, and problems can be addressed by treating symptoms and creating specialized departments and organizations. If we are efficient enough, we can resolve any issue. Further, answers are available for each part, but they are the domain of specialists.

An environment of competition and reactiveness undergird and reinforce the fragmentation. Laboring under a "scarcity mentality," we encounter an underlying belief in a finite number of resources that are to be acquired through healthy competition and hard work. Our society rewards individuals and organizations that project an image of "success," give the appearance of "knowing" the answer and "producing" results. This leaves little room for uncovering complexity and admitting that we don't know what to do about the fragmented systems we encounter. In order to maintain the image of "knower" we attempt to solve the problem immediately, without fully understanding the underlying causes.

These beliefs are deeply seated in our culture, affecting the way we think and operate — even of our nonprofit organizations dedicated to building a better and more

just society. I have come to believe that the only way to counter these strong forces and to raise our gaze is to do so collectively. Peter Senge refers to this as building "communities of commitment." The notion of commitment connotes action, and community reminds us that we cannot do it alone.

Communities of commitment support us to hold uncertainty and not knowing and set the stage for wisdom to emerge. Realizing that we do not have the answers is a first step. Having the courage to admit it publicly is quite another endeavor. It takes tremendous openness and personal courage because such an admission is so different from the way cultural forces have marked our understanding and way of operating.

The collective environment begins to provide space for exploration and understanding. Fully understanding and believing that answers and solutions are a collective effort is perhaps the hardest challenge. It requires us to listen closely to one another and to understand that wisdom and knowledge come from many sources. It requires letting go of our concepts or at least allowing them to mix with the ideas of others. Listening to our "competition," "opposition," or the "nonexpert" does not come naturally. It takes practice to recognize that all of us are a part of the whole, not just some of us.

We spend much of our time sorting through information, judging it as worthy or unworthy of consideration. We have preconceived notions of what is good and what is bad. Unfortunately, this process leaves little room for creativity and the emergence of new understanding. While each of us must work to remain open on a personal level, we need each other to really see beyond the circumstances of our particular organization or community.

We need each other to understand how deeply interconnected we are. Some have referred to this as moving from an "I" consciousness to a "we" consciousness.[2] When we understand ourselves in this context, we can better see what is needed and who or what organizations might possess this quality. This is indeed a difficult personal and organizational challenge that many of us may have experienced in the form of ideological or turf warfare. On the other hand, many of us have begun to see the power of collaborating from a more open perspective.

Ironically, science, one of the strongest forces promoting fragmentation, is now teaching us to think about interconnection. Growing awareness of global warming, how the flap of a butterfly's wings can have an effect thousands of miles away, complexity theory, neuroscience, the new cosmology, and quantum physics are all revealing that the universe is much more connected than we had ever thought. In high school, we learned about the atomic subparticles of photons and neutrons and their orderly and predictable patterns only to learn recently that their behavior is actually random and interconnected: both a wave and particle at the same time.

I believe that cultural forces of fragmentation are so prevalent in society that until

we shift this seemingly simple yet tremendously challenging paradigm, we can only experience limited success in bringing about a just society. I see no other way of making change, other than bringing our collective energy together. In doing so, we must be willing to let go of the very structures we have developed to respond to the injustices and splintered reality. For example, to eliminate homelessness, we must be willing to consider doing away with homeless shelters. We must be willing to let go of the "way we do things." We may even be challenged to create new structures of coalitions that more accurately mirror the random and interconnected nature of our world.

The Learning Exchange between Boston and Haifa provides a wonderful example of a "committed community." It provides a space for participants to learn together and to grapple with common issues. But more importantly, I believe, it gave me courage to speak about and explore different ways of looking at my world, far from the daily pressures of our busy lives. I believe it takes courage to think outside of the norm — beyond even the nonprofit norm.

Critics may claim that there is no "productive" agenda for committed communities, that they divert our energy from the important tasks at hand. I would claim that these communities help us to focus our energy precisely on what is most important so that we can act with as much wisdom as possible.

Returning to the parable of the elephant, our challenge is to move beyond our current vision. We must move beyond sharing our impressions of the elephant to seeing the elephant within its broader context. This kind of vision requires our joint effort and a willingness to live with uncertainty until clarity emerges through the chaos because we have been willing to look.

Notes

1. Fred Kofman and Peter Senge, "Communities of Commitment: The Heart of Learning Organizations," in *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*, ed. Chawla and Renesch 14–43 (Portland, Oregon: Productivity Press, 1995).
2. A. L. Keating, "Transforming Status-quo Stories: Shifting from 'Me' to 'We' Consiousness," *Education and Hope in Troubled Times*, ed. H. S. Shapiro, 210–223 (New York: Routledge, 2009).