

The Paradox of Perception

John Godfrey Saxe (1816 - 1887) was an American poet whose fable, "Six Blind Men and the Elephant," has entertained and provoked thoughtful reflection for nearly one hundred and fifty years.

*It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined,
who went to see the elephant (Though all of them were blind),
that each by observation, might satisfy his mind.*

*The first approached the elephant, and, happening to fall,
against his broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the elephant, is nothing but a wall!"*

*The second feeling of the tusk, cried: "Ho! what have we here,
so very round and smooth and sharp? To me tis mighty clear,
this wonder of an elephant, is very like a spear!"*

*The third approached the animal, and, happening to take,
the squirming trunk within his hands, "I see," quoth he,
the elephant is very like a snake!"*

*The fourth reached out his eager hand, and felt about the knee:
"What most this wondrous beast is like, is mighty plain," quoth he;
"Tis clear enough the elephant is very like a tree."*

*The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, Said; "E'en the blindest man
can tell what this resembles most; Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an elephant, is very like a fan!"*

*The sixth no sooner had begun, about the beast to grope,
than, seizing on the swinging tail, that fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant is very like a rope!"*

*And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long,
each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!*

*So, oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,
tread on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,
and prate about the elephant, not one of them has seen!*

We seem to have the inherent belief that our perceptions are always correct and that the contradictory perceptions of others are always incorrect. In fact, the paradox is true that a perception cannot be incorrect, and it is always correct. An "incorrect perception" is actually an oxymoron.

This may sound confusing, but it represents one of the most difficult problems concerning communication and relationships. We get so entrenched in the correctness of our personal perceptions we forget that the perceptions of others are just as correct to them as our perceptions are to us. Forgetting this reality, we can only see one goal, and that is to convince the other person that we are **right**. Since they are just as convinced of their

infallible perception, a disagreement, argument, or fight is the result. I believe we struggle with this paradox all our lives.

In individual counseling and marital therapy a primary goal is to help people comprehend the paradox of perception and to seek to understand rather than to convince. To achieve this kind of maturity requires the self-confidence, self-awareness, and self-respect that enables one to listen and understand without the need to be right and to win. The positive effect this has on relationships is really quite amazing. When we feel understood, our need to be right seems to be far less important and we are not controlled by the paradox of perception.

Sam Sligar

770-314-8247