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1st DAY LESSON: MEANING OF INTERPRETATION THROUGH A PARABLE

I remember feeling a little crestfallen on the first day of classes as an undergraduate. Every year, I would be excited to get back to school, and every year, I would have to wait until the second class to get to any of the good stuff.

With that in mind, I developed this lesson plan to introduce the concept of “interpretation.” It is a very short reading of “the parable of the elephant and the blind men,” which is well-known in several eastern religions.

After going through the syllabus, I begin this lesson with a discussion of the meaning of “interpretation,” adding similar terms like “explaining,” “analyzing,” and “translating.” I also put the suggestions of the students on the board, and then I give them the formula “X means Y” in order to discuss the function of interpretation, which I define roughly as the act of turning the text into another form that creates further meanings.

The great thing about parables is that they inspire a lot of different interpretations. First, I hand out the general storyline of the parable of the elephant. We read it together, and then I ask students where “interpretation” fits into the story. What do they think it says about interpretation?

Then I turn to the second portion of the handout, which gives five different morals for this story. We read and discuss each of these morals, comparing them as we go, and then in small groups I ask the students to discuss them and to choose the one that they feel is the ‘best’ interpretation and to list the reasons why.

After group reports, and a whole class discussion about the merits of different interpretations, I pose the question again, what does the story *say* about interpretation? Is there just one right interpretation/moral of the story? What makes one interpretation more or less ‘right’ than another?

Multiple interpretations are certainly valid, and desirable, and this lesson allows me to make that point while also stressing that not all interpretations are created equal.

Here are the storyline and the morals:

ELEPHANT AND THE BLIND MEN

Once upon a time, there lived six blind men in a village. One day the villagers told them, "Hey, there is an elephant in the village today."

They had no idea what an elephant is. They decided, "Even though we would not be able to see it, let us go and feel it anyway." All of them went where the elephant was. Every one of them touched the elephant.

"Hey, the elephant is a pillar," said the first man who touched his leg.

"Oh, no! it is like a rope," said the second man who touched the tail.

"Oh, no! it is like a thick branch of a tree," said the third man who touched the trunk of the elephant.

"It is like a big hand fan" said the fourth man who touched the ear of the elephant.

"It is like a huge wall," said the fifth man who touched the belly of the elephant.

"It is like a solid pipe," Said the sixth man who touched the tusk of the elephant.

They began to argue about the elephant and every one of them insisted that he was right. It looked like they were getting agitated...

DIFFERENT MORALS OF THE STORY

From Jainist version

A wise man was passing by and he saw this. He stopped and asked them, "What is the matter?" They said, "We cannot agree to what the elephant is like." Each one of them told what he thought the elephant was like. The wise man calmly explained to them, "All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently because each one of you touched the different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all those features what you all said."

"Oh!" everyone said. There was no more fight. They felt happy that they were all right.

The moral of the story is that there may be some truth to what someone says. Sometimes we can see that truth and sometimes not because they may have different perspective which we may not agree too. So, rather than arguing like the blind men, we should say, "Maybe you have your reasons." This way we don't get in arguments. In Jainism, it is explained that truth can be stated in seven different ways. So, you can see how broad our religion is. It teaches us to be tolerant towards others for their viewpoints. This allows us to live in harmony with the people of different thinking. This is known as the Syadvada, Anekantvad, or the theory of Manifold Predictions.

From Buddhist version (Udana 68-69)

-parable spoken by the Buddha in response to a question: "A number of disciples went to the Buddha and said, "Sir, there are living here in Savatthi many wandering hermits and scholars who indulge in constant dispute, some saying that the world is infinite and eternal and others that it is finite and not eternal, some saying that the soul dies with the body and others that it lives on forever, and so forth. What, Sir, would you say concerning them?"

-Buddha tells the story and concludes: "Just so are these preachers and scholars holding various views blind and unseeing.... In their ignorance they are by nature quarrelsome, wrangling, and disputatious, each maintaining reality is thus and thus."

-moral given: Then the Exalted One rendered this meaning by uttering this verse of uplift,

O how they cling and wrangle, some who claim

For preacher and monk the honored name!

For, quarreling, each to his view they cling.

Such folk see only one side of a thing."

From Chinese Folk Tale

-moral given: "How they argued! Each one insisted that he alone was correct. Of course, there was no conclusion for not one had thoroughly examined the whole elephant. How can anyone describe the whole until he has learned the total of the parts."

Kuo, Louise and Kuo, Yuan-Hsi (1976), "Chinese Folk Tales," Celestial Arts: 231 Adrian Road, Millbrae, CA 94030, pp. 83-85.

From John Godfrey Saxe poem

MORAL.

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!

Linton, William James, (1878) "Poetry of America: Selections from one hundred American poets from 1776 to 1876." [pages 150-152.](#)