

To find the truth, look somewhere else

So the parable goes, five blind men were shown an elephant and asked what they “saw.” The first blind man, standing in front of the elephant, carefully examined the trunk. “It’s a large hosepipe,” he reported. The second blind man, standing at the back of the elephant, examined the tail and reported that it was a brush made up of long, wiry strands. The third blind man, standing at the side of the elephant said that, without a doubt, what he was standing before was a large leather wall. The fourth blind man, examining the elephant’s ear said that he believed he was standing before some sort of sailing vessel because of the large, durable sail he could feel. The fifth blind man, standing at one of the elephant’s legs, was convinced he was standing next to a tree trunk.

When each heard the other report what the object before them was, each blind man argued from their own perspective and their own experience. And argue they did. They mocked the intelligence of, and insulted each other. They called each other fools. And when they heard each other’s arguments, they would reexamine their own perspectives to prove to themselves that they were right and the others were clearly mad. After all, the evidence proved it.

The truth, plainly, cannot be revealed from a single perspective. The failing of each blind man was not the quality of their own examinations. It was not a problem of intelligence. The problem was that none of them changed where they stood. None of them asked to trade spaces with another. None tried to understand the perspective of the others. Worse still, the more heated the debate, the more entrenched they became in their own perspective and the more they saw themselves as the voice of truth.

The saddest part of this little story is that none of them, not a single one, could actually see the truth of what stood plainly before them. None could see the elephant. They were all completely blind.

It turns out having sight makes us no less blind. We all only see the world from our own perspectives. We all assess the “truth” based on our own experiences. And when we argue, we don’t ask questions, we don’t listen, we don’t seek to understand the reason why someone would so vehemently disagree with us. Instead we dismiss them as fools and press forward based on our perception.

This polarization of truths is happening in our society right now. Just look at how divided politics has become. Politicians are becoming more and more polarized in their views in an attempt to rally passion in order to get elected. But politicians are a weather vein of our population. The reason politics is becoming more angry, more negative and more polarized is not because of the politicians...it's because of us.

And don't blame the media, either. They too only respond to what we demand. They are in business. Their job is to increase ratings so they can sell more advertising - that's their business model. As the population becomes more polarized, they will produce more polarized programming and invest in more polarizing personalities that appeal to one of the poles. The more polarizing programming that exists, the more each end of the spectrum gains more proof, more fodder to reinforce their own, single perspective.

James Fallows, UCSD professor and author of *Connected*, reports that our media consumption has become intensely polarized. His data is overwhelming. The right only watch right leaning news and the left only watch left leaning news. There is very little cross viewing. In other words, to prove to ourselves that our side is right, we seek not to see what the other side sees, instead we only want to listen to those who already share our perspective. To reinforce our version of the truth. I mean, "truth."

For those who understand that something doesn't feel right, we criticize politics or the media. And for all the influence that politicians and the media have, it is we who must change. If we change, they will follow and not the other way around.

If we want to leave our country in better shape than we found it, if we seek to rebuild our economy, figure out social security, confront the threats of our enemies and once again become a beacon of light to the rest of the world, then it is we that must open our eyes and try to listen, learn and understand what the others can see. We must all be anthropologists. We must all set out, not to impose our beliefs on each other, not to beat them with our version of the truth, but to understand the reasons they have the beliefs they do. We must set out to understand.

If you're left of center, try to understand the perspective of those on the other side of the spectrum. Don't get mad. Don't insult their intelligence. Just listen. Try to understand the perspective from which they are looking at the elephant.

If you are right of center, try to understand the perspective of those on the other side of the spectrum also. Don't get mad. Don't insult their intelligence. Just

listen. Try to understand the perspective from which they are looking at the elephant.

If enough of us do this, we may just see this country for what it is. A large, majestic animal. Strong and powerful. America is more than what we see from one or two perspectives. There is much more there that we can't see. This is more than idealism, this is practical advice. After all, how will we know what's best for the elephant if we can't even see that it is an elephant that is standing before us?.