

GRACE

NOTES XVII

DR SALMA SIDDIQUE wonders if we can ever really understand another's perspective?

WHO AM I to you? This is the question that often swirls around in my head and I would like to ask who am I to myself? When I consider the lived experience of the 'other' I feel it's reminiscent of the Jain parable of the six blind men and the elephant (Bailey, Fisher, 2007) where each blind man reaches out to feel a different area of the elephant from where they are standing.

In the parable the King asks each blind man to describe the part of the elephant they are touching to explore what kind of thing is this thing known as an elephant. The first blind man reached out and brushed his hand against the elephant's leg and called out 'this elephant is like a pillar'. The second blind man was slapped by the elephant's tail and described the sensation of 'being struck by a coarse rope and so the elephant is a rope'. The next, a tall blind man, reached out and grasped the head of the elephant and spoke about holding a heavy pot; and the fourth blind man standing behind the trunk of the animal stated 'the elephant is like a tree branch' and so the story goes. The phenomenological experience only comes into being through the co-creation of the elephant by each blind man offering up his own experience of the sum of the parts to make up the whole elephant. This is how I understand the subjective lived experience of individuals trying to communicate (in)difference and diversity to the other. This parable is about the elephant being all the things described from a particular position or discount.

The stories we make are through the values we place on our engagement with everyday objects, spaces and places that make sense of cultural values. We gather meaning through transactions which make up the dialogical relationships (Hargaden and Sills, 2014) of experiencing the other. I am left wondering how we can co-create events or objects and not recreate or reinforce the dominant ideology of a state, institution or group? The curious thing is do we really ask why and how the elephant got its name? (Kipling, 2010).

Berne offers a way of experiencing and understanding human behaviour and communication by inviting the child's inner world to 'Think Martian' (Berne, 2010),

through a literal interpretation of the transaction and speaker's true meaning. However the alternative view (or vantage) point of the 'Earthian' (Berne, 2010) is that individuals and/or groups' judgments are constructed from preconceptions and not actual events. The concept of viewpoint is interesting in terms of the (re)production / (re)creation of dominant discourses in society and groups. This is demonstrated for example in media reportage of refugees and asylum seekers as 'illegal immigrants' to whom we are 'opening the floodgates'. During such times Berne's (2010) concept of viewpoint becomes a very powerful concept to explore diversity and (in)difference in society. The online dictionary defines viewpoint in one of two ways: as a place or position from which to observe, such as 'she observed the daybreak from the train'; or as an attitude of mind.

So I am curious how we use stories to communicate the unspoken; to fill the space between things. Is it not time for more of us to become narrators of our stories and to shift our vantage/viewpoints and see things from the experience of the other and not merely as character(istics) atomised in someone else's story? I guess for me as a child of an immigrant there is a tyranny in such a fixed/oppositional empty space which creates a gulf between us and positionality. In understanding and accepting the 'just so story' can we begin to transform the cultural script (Drego, 1996; White and White, 1975). Let's meet each other in dialogue to transform objects into relational practices, honouring our subjectivity. Maybe we just need to recognise that we are all reaching out and describing our lived experience from our fixed view/vantage point on the edge of awareness. As Nina Simone's vocals float over the radio in the background 'I wish you could know, what it means to be me...' (1967)

References

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Dr Salma Siddique CTA(P) PTSTA is a clinical anthropologist, researcher and academic in counselling and psychotherapy at the University of Aberdeen. She works with RTEs on a consultancy basis for research skills and CTA prep. groups.