

Your Elephant Is Showing...

Pottawattomie Park Potluck Picnic

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
July 23, 2008

Prepared text of the Talk

No, this is not about your Republican Party affiliation if that be the case with you. Your Elephant is the total package that makes you you except for your reason – your faculty of critical rationality.

I am over my head here...but this is a picnic and I hope this can be fun for us to examine our assumptions, prejudices, and deeply held beliefs as we negotiate life's journey.

It may be especially interesting for us, many of whom have experienced a disruption in the pattern of our spiritual life and practice over the past four years and find ourselves in the midst of a political campaign that began in a much too lengthy primary season and now is heating up as we move toward the party conventions.

- How have I come to be the person I am?
- How have my religious beliefs been formed and how deeply do I hold them?
- Why am I a Republican, Democrat or Independent and how do I respond to the political discussion?
- What do I think and feel about nation and the rapidly emerging global community?
- Do I hope the U.S. maintains superiority – *the* imperial power? Is that nationalism?
- And isn't nationalism especially dangerous in the global community?
- Or, in our emerging global reality, don't we have to begin to form world government?
- And then, finally, what impact on my political, social, and economic views does Jesus' Sermon on the Mount have? Or, more broadly, am I shaped as a follower of Jesus with implications for my political, social, and economic views or is my religious life a thing apart from the nitty, gritty of my world?

I have been frustrated by these questions over the past couple of years. My valued conversation partner has been Peter Hart who has been pursuing an investigation of the make-up of the brain as it has evolved in the emergence of the human being. One of the critical areas of research and reflection in the last years has been the relationship of the brain and human consciousness.

The brain has been called a meaty computer – and some would reduce the human being to chemicals and electrical circuits – all a purely physical phenomenon.

But what of human consciousness? What of our capacity to transcend the purely physical reality in awareness, in social relationship, in spiritual experience?

You won't be surprised that I believe we are more than the totality of blood, nerves and neurons. Obviously I would affirm that "added plus" of spiritual being. However, I have been very interested in how the physical make-up of the human being – and particularly the brain – has evolved and how one's attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and prejudices are shaped by the physical underpinning of the spirit or mind.

One of the things that I learned from Duncan Littlefair was the amazing fact that matter has given rise to spirit. Here we are, creatures who live with awe and wonder, and, if we be religious, with reverence and gratitude and the spiritual dimension which has been birthed from matter. Matter has given birth to that which transcends the material.

Again, let me be honest: I am over my head here; I have only an inkling of what I am trying to express, but my point is that the material that has birthed the mind/consciousness/spirit is still immensely engaged in the determining of the human being's thoughts, feelings, beliefs and commitments.

That is where the Elephant comes in. In an interesting book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt uses a most interesting metaphor to describe the mind/body relationship. Picture an elephant with a human rider on its back holding the reins. The Rider is our Reason – our rational capacity. The Elephant is our whole physical being – nerves, hormones, emotions, etc. that make up our total being. Haidt writes:

Like a rider on the back of an elephant, the conscious, reasoning part of the mind has only limited control of what the elephant does. (p. xi)

The metaphor is a vivid representation of the relationship of our conscious, rational selves as we struggle with our unconscious biological, neurological structure that is the Elephant upon which we are perched.

We pride ourselves on being rational, thoughtful, conscious persons. And some of the time we are thoughtful, mindful, civil, rational, decent creatures. We take up

the reins and guide the elephant in paths of righteousness, love, compassion and civility.

But then something happens that goads the elephant, prods the beast and then the beast will demonstrate a mind of its own and our sane, deliberate reasonable response is washed away by the power and strength of our accumulated evolutionary past which finds place in our being. Suddenly the Elephant shows itself.

(Note: the Rider is not separate from the Elephant in the metaphor – Rider and Elephant are one.)

When all is calm and collected, the Rider (or Reason) guides the whole. When the Elephant is challenged/threatened/cornered, the reasoning part, the Rider, doesn't have a prayer.

Haidt's book goes on to describe the development of the brain, its respective parts as they developed in our long evolutionary past and I am not going into that. I have not the competence to do that, nor is that my purpose. I am using the metaphor and that to which it points to talk with you about the issues I mentioned above in order to prod you to ask yourself some interesting questions about what you assume are your well-thought-out positions on some important questions. I intend this to be fun – an exercise in self-exploration, hopefully bringing insight and self-awareness – an exercise in self-knowledge.

And so, let me come back to my introductory questions. Let's begin with *the religious dimension* of our lives: Why are you a Christian?

Well, because Christianity is the one true religion, right?

Now I suspect, were I addressing most Christian gatherings, the answer would be, "Yes, of course." But for this group, after some years of struggling with the issue of Christian exclusivism, I would expect a more nuanced response – We are Christian because, for most of us, we were born into Christian families.

We have come to understand the nature of religious tradition: a founding story / a community developing a tradition / a way of life / the moral dimension.

Our Elephants are exclusivists. Tell the Elephant there is light and grace in other traditions and the Elephant feels threatened.

Think back about how perhaps you struggled with that question. I remember my own painful journey. And remember we were judged to be outside the pale of Reformed Faith on this issue.

It is interesting that a recent study by the Pew Research Center claims the majority of Catholics and Protestants now believe there is salvation in other faiths – an encouraging sign. But you may remember, in our conflict with the Muskegon Classis, I said, “Scratch the word *alone* in the claim of ‘salvation through Jesus Christ alone’ and I will sign on” – and the answer was “No way.” A dozen years later I am amazed that was even an issue; but for me, for us, to come to that point was a struggle.

Our Elephants are exclusivists.

Does that mean I can go anywhere, to any kind of religious community and find my heart warmed, my mind opened, my spirit fed? No, not at all. My Elephant or, better, my being, has been hard-wired not only to be religious but has been formed by faith, vision, understanding, liturgy, worship experience, hymns, sacraments, etc., and it is those religious observances that touch me, move me, inspire me, challenge me and bless me altogether. My rational part – the Rider in me – understands I am the product of a long conditioning process that I have come to understand in its misty, mythological origins, in its evolving forms and present expression that I affirm, I choose.

To use an image that, when I first used it, got me into trouble – The Cathedral at Chartres: An Englishman, Malcolm Miller, gave fascinating lectures in the Cathedral. He told how, before the printing press, the cathedral was the village library – the stories told in stained glass. The biblical story was recorded in the windows of the respective sections of the cathedral. Depending on the section – nave, chancel or choir – you “read” one of the stories.

I thought to myself, one tradition reads one story, another one reads another – but the light that made the stories come alive was of a common source. I became a pluralist in that moment.

If I choose, perhaps I can move into another “picture”. If I’m seeking, I may explore. Some even cross over. But I’m not so inclined. My faith understanding at this point satisfies me. And for the rest, I bless them.

Perhaps I can say it this way: my rider has made peace with my elephant and in things religious my elephant is not easily roused. I have made a choice which ministers to the deep traditioning that formed me. I am at peace.

Let’s move to *the political dimension*. I know one is not supposed to mix religion and politics but I’ve been reckless before.

We are in the midst of a presidential campaign. Will it be McCain or Obama? Are you a Republican or a Democrat or an Independent?

We live in a time of too much media coverage – too many talking heads with too much air time. And since the real issue is audience share/ advertising/ the bottom line, the reality is not thoughtful, reasoned discourse appealing to our rational nature but rather which channel can best rouse the elephant in us. And the elephant does rouse, doesn't it?

I was raised in a staunch Republican home. I have said before, it seems I am always out of step with the times. As a child I remember table conversations in which FDR was the evil Satan. As the years went by, I learned FDR was ranked as one of the great presidents who constructed the safety net that has been in peril from the party of my birth. I find I'm not a very good party person anymore just as I am no longer a religious exclusivist.

Yet there is an elephant dimension in me that created a feeling of guilt the first time I pulled the lever for a democrat. In Chicago on Monday I paged through a few books at Borders. One was George Lackoff's *The Political Mind*. I was interested because I have recently read Drew Westen's *The Political Brain* and Lackoff refers very affirmingly to Westen's book.

The Political Brain does something like Haidt in *The Happiness Hypothesis* in that he demonstrates how we make our political choices. We only think we are being calmly reasonable in our political choices when it is really our Elephant talking most of the time. We find those political leaders highly reasonable and persuasive when they are feeding our elephant appetites, while their opponents sound off-key. What is really happening to us is the triggering of all sorts of factors below the level of our consciousness. It can be rather depressing at first blush when I realize what is really going on – I would like to think I'm an intelligent, balanced, well-informed, fair-minded citizen, only to realize that I am a bundle of sub-rational prejudices and predispositions that I paste on the respective candidates.

We wonder why politics becomes so divisive, so mean, so negative and then we learn that what is being appealed to is not our reason and civility but our passions, our prejudices, our fears – in a word, our elephant. Will that ever change? I'm really not sure. It is really not as though it is everyone else's problem; I too am a big elephant with a little reasoning rider. Awareness helps. I become aware that there are factors affecting me on issues and candidates that cause me to react positively or negatively and, from time to time, I may be tempered in my reaction or I may give the one who is not the candidate of choice for me a bit of leeway. But the closer the issue comes to my elephant core, the more difficult it is for me to keep some objectivity in place.

In the Democratic Primary there was much discussion about the issues of gender and race.

Did Hillary suffer from bias against the idea of a woman in leadership? Certainly there is a percentage of the population that would refuse to vote for a woman no matter who she was. And no doubt there is a percentage of the population that will refuse to vote for Obama because he is black.

And in each case this will be by some who will state the fact openly, but probably a large percentage for whom gender or race are determinative below the surface – that is, folks who would deny that consciously and yet be controlled by those issues subconsciously. I wish I could say for me such subconscious prejudice is not the case but that would only show how little I understand myself.

Are we doomed forever? No, I think we do make progress. In the case of religious exclusivism, as we saw, there is progress against exclusivism. And in the recent primary battle, it was between a woman and a black man. And it is highly possible that a black man (or bi-racial) will be elected. That is quite amazing. But the reality of the elephant remains as we make our political choice.

Finally, let me come to an issue I deem by far the most critical, namely, the question of what kind of a world we envision and are committed to strive for. I began with the religious issue and moved to the political issue, in each case attempting to point out how our reasoned judgment is strongly controlled or at least influenced by our subconscious formation and conditioning. The elephant when roused clouds the rational judgment, which we assume informs our judgments. All that background heritage we carry seeps through our reasoning processes.

So it is as regards our global vision.

Let me make a couple observations: In its founding vision and founding documents, ours is a truly remarkable nation. We began in bloody revolution. The heroes of the Revolution we celebrated on the Fourth of July were freedom fighters. We rebelled against the Royal Crown – the legally established authority which considered us terrorists.

We tend to forget that historical fact when we engage in pushing down revolts around the world.

But I would argue that the nation that was born – the founding vision – was remarkable – was ahead of anything at that time – the divine right of kings, the feudal systems and emperor worship.

I am no expert on all of this. I am attempting simply to make the point that our emergence as a nation was a remarkable move forward in the establishment of human dignity, human rights, and democratic government. We are still a young nation relatively speaking but have been a laboratory of human community. We

have established a free and prosperous, creative and innovative nation. In a word, this nation has been an impressive human achievement.

To be sure there are dark shadows aplenty in our history – one of the most glaring –slavery and the continuing racism that manifests itself. I am not denying where we have fallen short but the ideals of our founding and the embodiment of those ideals has been a remarkable human experiment.

Having said that, I must say that we are in serious danger of compromising those ideals. And here I want to suggest something that may rouse the elephant in you...

In 1989, I think it was, the Berlin Wall fell as the Soviet Union imploded. It was a glorious celebration. The long Cold War ended. We remained the one great super power. No one could touch us. What a moment that was and what grand possibilities that presented.

Leaving gaps in recording the history of the last two decades admittedly, there arose political thinkers who saw the possibility of a unipolar world – the era of America – one world power dominating the globe. A study paper was produced that outlined the future direction.

But the world was only apparently at peace. There were festerings of the human soul in many places. The most serious challenge from what we have named Islamic Fundamentalism – 9/11 happened.

And we are all too well aware of the failure to deal with that terrorist act as a police action. After removing the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, it became an occasion to invade Iraq. The rest is history...

In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush named North Korea, Iran and Iraq as “the axis of evil”. The 9/11 event gave power to the neoconservative movement that had produced that unipolar version during the presidency of the first President Bush. (At that time in a sermon I criticized that axis of evil characterization with its hostile tone suggesting we should rather use our position at the pinnacle of power to change the world.)

Imperial America was born – American Empire – and there we are today. I won’t bother you with statistics but military power is deployed around the globe. A war in Iraq – and Islamic terrorism still a threat to global community.

What might have happened if at the pinnacle of power we had changed the way the world relates in global community? What if we had used our overwhelming power/ wealth/resources to unite the world through the alleviation of poverty, world health care and education, lifting up people aspiring to a humane existence?

There is a problem with empire. It remains in power by domination, through military might. It is always threatened and needs to react to challenge. Empires must always look over their shoulder and guard their flank.

And this too – empires rise and fall, and in the meantime sustain themselves through endless war – until they die exhausted.

Now being a preacher I cannot help but refer you to Jesus who came preaching the Kingdom of God. He was born in a time of brutal empire to a people living under the heel of Rome. But he changed the world through the power of love. Love your enemies...and when they crucified him, he prayed, “Father, forgive them...”

And it worked too until the Church became the Empire with all the trappings of pomp, glory and power. But the memory of the dangerous life and message of Jesus has never been defeated.

Of what practical significance is this? You watch your elephant rise up....

1. Carefully, responsibly we must yield our sovereignty using all our resources to create a world government;
2. There must be total nuclear disarmament;
3. There must be an end to war.

I know, I know. I hear the “Yabuts”.

But what is making everything in you rise up to write that off as an “impossible dream”?

Oops – your elephant is showing...

References:

Jonathan Haidt. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, 2006.

Drew Westen. *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*, 2007.