



## Why It's So Hard To Talk About The Elephant In The Room

*By Julia Menard, MEd, PCC, Cert. Con. Res.  
www.juliamenard.com*

In my workshops on how to have difficult conversations, I often tell the story of the blind men and the elephant. I first heard it told at the Justice Institute's Centre for Conflict resolution when I was a student there in the 1990's.

The story goes there were 6 blind men and an elephant. Each blind man believed he knew the "truth" of an elephant. One held its tail and firmly believed an elephant is like a rope. Another believed an elephant is like a fan, as he held the elephant's ear. A third was convinced an elephant was just like a tree stump, as he held tight to the elephant's leg. They all fell to arguing until the Prince pointed out they each held a piece of the truth.

This parable has always held strong meaning for me, however I had never made a connection between the Sufi tale and the expression of an elephant in the room until recently. When there is something difficult to discuss that no one seems to be discussing, we call that the "elephant in the room."

I've come to realize that one key reason people have a difficult time discussing an elephant in the room is because most of us tend to subscribe to a "relativist" orientation and not a "perspectivist" one. Relativism is the idea that you have your reality and I have mine – and – live and let live. This orientation can have the unintended consequence of perpetuating a sense of isolation or detente: I have my reality and you have yours.

So talking about the elephant in the room with this underlying belief means I bring up what is impacting me negatively and you bring up what is impacting you and we can agree to disagree. You have your reality and I have mine. It's easy to think your truth is not as valid as mine even as I try to live and let live.

However, taking a perspectivist lens creates a completely different outcome. What would happen if we enter the conversation believing we each only have one part of the truth of an elephant – that we need the other parts to make sense of the whole?

With this belief, we come into a conversation saying: "I have this piece of the truth. Can you share your part? Let's figure this out together." I have seen time and again in my work that when this shift happens, acknowledging that your perspective can enrich mine, magic happens.

***"If we are to live together in peace, we must come to know each other better."***  
Lyndon Johnson

---

*This article was first published in the June 2017 edition of HEN – a monthly newsletter on conflict topics available for free at [www.juliamenard.com](http://www.juliamenard.com)*