

# Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage  
Unitarian Universalist  
Theology and Spirituality

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## The Elephant Story Version 1

There once was a village all of whose inhabitants were blind. A king who was traveling by stopped to spend the night outside the village. The king had elephants in his entourage, and since no one in the village had ever encountered an elephant before, several villagers visited the king's camp to find out what elephants were like. When they returned, they told excited groups of their neighbors what they had found.

The man who had felt the elephant's ear said, "It is much like a rug, broad and rough, hanging from a branch."

The man who had felt the leg said, "It is like a pillar."

The man who had felt the side said, "It is like a wall."

The man who had felt the trunk said, "It is like a huge snake," but the man who had felt the tail said, "More like a vine."

The man who felt the tusk insisted the elephant was like a spear.

Each of the blind men who had felt some part of the elephant gathered adherents to his version. Each founded a school, and to this day, in the village

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of the blind, those who hold one understanding of the elephant do not speak to those who hold a different understanding except to try to convince them of the error of their ways.

## The Elephant Manifesto

Mary-Allen Walden wrote the following as the statement of focus of The Elephant Club, a spiritual intensive that met from 1985 to 1991:

We are joined in fellowship to search for the elephant -- for the deeper larger reality that underlies the bits and pieces we perceive. It is by some inner conviction of rightness, by some intuitive sense, that we believe the elephant to exist, and because there have been others who have reported that this is so. It is by this same sense of recognition, this affect of things upon our intuitive sense, that we may know the elephant whenever and wherever we may find it, and we must hold firmly to that inner knowing, and not be led astray, for it is our only compass in this quest. Religion, along with myth, art, music, speaks directly to this deeper unconscious level, bypassing the rational mind. It is this fact of religion, this affective element, that is its power, and therefore, the part that we most fear, as it makes us vulnerable to manipulation. It is possible that by making this deeper knowledge more conscious, we can still partake of its transformative power, without falling victims to superstition

and manipulation.

Let us, therefore, reexamine the materials of religion (myth, sacrament, and ritual) from a different point of view: one more personal, symbolic, developmental, and affective.

Let us propose a hypothesis: that if we look carefully at religious myth and ritual, we will find a consistent pattern of human spiritual development. Let us examine these materials to see if this is true, and, to learn whatever we can that may help us consciously co-operate in our own process of development.

Let us also examine our own lives and personal experiences for what we feel to be symbolic of deeper reality, because the elephant is alive and well walking through each day with us, sometimes speaking to us, sometimes pointing out things for our notice. Let us, therefore, encourage in ourselves and each other a more personally symbolic life, as we learn to listen more carefully for the elephant.

Finally, let us learn and study, and experience, and then let us bring what we can into our community, for its energy and resources are our energy and resources, and its wealth is, indeed, what we share.



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## For Reflection 1

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In the August 1991 Atlantic Monthly, James S. Gordon quoted psychologist Leo Sprinkle. Sprinkle spoke of a recollection he had had under hypnosis of “standing on board” a UFO beside an alien. “... I found myself wondering, while I was still in a trance, ‘Am I making this up from everything I’ve heard?’ and then I felt a kind of shiver on my shoulder like the one I feel sometimes when I’m listening to music or feeling close to a client, and I knew it was the truth.”

What does a physical reaction mean? Is it a good indication of truth? How do you discern the truth?

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## A Religion of Science

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Symbols can be interpreted on four levels: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. Science deals only with literal truth or falsity. Since there is no intention of exploring the other levels, science is unlikely to provide a basis for a robust mythology. Sure, the origin of the universe in the Big Bang can fill us with awe, but after the awe, then what?

Science has destroyed the power of myths by showing they are not literally true, but this destruction occurs only because we think the myth must be believed in, and that belief means accepting it as literally true.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith has shown that we make a mistake in emphasizing belief. The verbs for “to have faith” in the languages of the great religions mean something like “to give one’s heart to” and “to commit oneself to.” Until the sixteenth century, “to believe” meant “to hold dear,” but the meaning has since drifted to become “to accept (a pro-

position) as being true.” (To learn more, see Chapter 2 of James Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, Harper & Row, 1981.)

Do not try to make a religion of science; it will not speak to you on the right levels. Instead, find myths that do speak to you and love them, but do not believe them.

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## Know thyself. - Socrates

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Would you like to know yourself? If so, you will need two things: non-attachment and compassion.

Non-attachment means, paradoxically, not identifying yourself with anything, not even your own virtues, eccentricities, habits, accomplishments, failures, character, appearance -- not anything. It is not the same as indifference. It simply means that you will not lose your sense of self no matter what you discover about yourself. To know yourself, you must have non-attachment, because if your sense of identity is at stake, you will be too anxious to look clearly.

You must also be compassionate toward yourself. You will not reveal yourself to anyone you don’t trust, to anyone who might scorn you, not even to yourself.

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## The Elephant Story Version 2

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A professor gave his class an assignment to write an essay on “The Elephant.”

The British student wrote an essay entitled “Elephant Hunting in East Africa.”

The American student wrote an essay entitled “Raising Elephants for Fun

and Profit.”

The German student handed in a hundred pages, single spaced, entitled “A Preliminary Bibliography Toward the Study of the Elephant.”

The French student wrote a charming piece entitled “The Love Life of the Elephant.”

And the Jewish student wrote an essay entitled “Elephants and Arab-Israeli Tensions.”



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## The Elephant Story Version 3

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Michael Brown used the following for contrast in a sermon on the elephant story in 1985:

A group of blind men and women went out one day hoping to find an elephant. They had been looking for one for days. As they arrived at a clearing in the woods, one of them happened to grab hold of a vine hanging from a tree. “I’ve found the tail!” he exclaimed. Another happened to lean up against the wall of an old shed, and she cried out, “I’ve found the side of the elephant!” Another had his arm around a tree and joyously shouted that he had found a leg. Soon they were on their way home congratulating each other on their success and making plans to spread the word.

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## For Reflection 2

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What is the difference among the assumptions about Ultimate Reality in the three version of the elephant story?