

# To go from intolerance to inclusion, let's create a shared narrative (Commentary)

Updated Jan 29, 2021; Posted Jan 29, 2021



In this photo taken on Thursday, Oct. 1, 2015, an elephant is seen in Hwange National Park. The story of the elephant and the five blind men is an exercise in perspective. AP

**845**

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**By Ralph Singh | Wisdom Thinkers Network**

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Congratulations, we've taken the first step to preserve our democracy. We've proven that when enough people come together, we can push back against hate. At least as far as an election is concerned. But changing hearts and minds is another matter.

We've also proven that even the greatest democracy on Earth is still fragile enough to subvert with one lie — a lie that creates an alternate reality so seemingly real that it becomes embedded in some of our psyches and woven into the moral and social fiber of our nation, tainting everything with hate and fear.

Now we have to address the elephant in the room of our democracy. Some call it the “Big Lie,” that our election was stolen by a corrupt group of conspirators. Others see “The Steal,” as Truth, with a capital T. That's hard to reconcile.

There's a story my organization uses to help students (and adults) learn to appreciate each other's perspectives. Most states now requires these skills, under the heading of social and emotional learning. As “the Elephant and the Blind Friends” story goes, five friends who are blind bump into an elephant. While one grabs the tail and declares they have found a broom, the next quickly grabs a leg and announces it's a giant pillar. Another slowly rubs their hands across the leathery side declaring, “It's a huge wall.” The next stumbles on

the tusk, and recoiling, shouts, "It's a giant spear," while the last friend grabs hold of the trunk and says, "It's a giant snake!" Then they begin to fight over their points until the Elephant, representing the transcendent Truth, becomes quite amused, and explains to the blind friends (representing us humans) that while they are all correct from their perspectives, the Truth is very large, and we can only see a small part of it.

So now, as we seek to recover from our national trauma, we must replace the Big Lie with a Big Question. Not whether we want to live together, because that really is a given. It is: How we can live together in community, even when we don't agree on some of our core "Truths"? might we share our perspectives and discover some empathy for those who hold such sharply opposing views?

## **Let's create a shared narrative. Let's start by listening to each other's stories.**

We at Wisdom Thinkers are helping communities with two student-driven approaches to this challenge.

First, we help children find their stories and understand that they can, indeed, change the story of the world around them.

We use traditional multi-cultural wisdom stories to allow kids to internalize a story with a clear moral lesson. In the process, they suddenly recognize their own feelings or a trait that they identify with the character that lifts them up in their own development. They find simple strategies to verbalize, and act, and carry the stories with them into their homes and communities to better control their anger, build their self-esteem, show more concern for others around them. It's like magic. Our stories have shown in multiple settings, across the state and country, that students who were struggling can flourish personally and help create an inclusive school community.

Second, we are working to heal the divisions among adults. We have created community roundtables, bringing diverse thought leaders together. And we create intergenerational connections that highlight the stories and values that built a community and provide people the opportunity to reflect on how they might need to expand their circle to become more inclusive without sacrificing their values. Once students interview the elders in their community, they assemble videos and come together in a community meal or virtual setting.

Based on the arson at Gobind Sadan, USA, I learned early on that we each define our own communities, like the blind friends, by how we are taught to perceive truth. As Sikhs, we were taught by Baba Virsa Singh, in Guru Nanak's words,

“everyone is part of my community, no one is an outsider.” I once asked a class how they could accept everyone in school as part of one community. Many defined community as their clique, rejecting outsiders, saying “I don’t like *those* people.”

So I asked them to identify what Truth they would adopt as their standard for admission and who they would exclude. I drew a line on the board and used the concepts of standard and standard deviation. No one always stays on that line, lives by the Truth every moment of every day of our lives. We are all human and we all err.

So I put the question to them: “How much deviation from ‘our norms’ would you accept to live in community together?”

After much debate they came up with a simple formula. “I don’t have to agree or even like everything about everyone to accept that they are part of my community. I can live together in community and feel responsible for their needs if they accept some common standards: high character, honesty, hard work, caring. But there is one thing we don’t want in our community. “Hatred!” Twenty-five years ago, a diverse class of high school kids determined they didn’t want their community tainted by hate.

We call this process changing the story from intolerance to inclusion.

Can we do likewise? If we can come together in honest respect and love for one another, as each of our traditions demand, then we will find a way forward to rekindle the light that will once again serve as a beacon of hope to the world and lead us forward to the next great chapter of our story of the USA.