

Understanding Resilience: The Blind Men and the Elephant

JEROME H. KAHAN

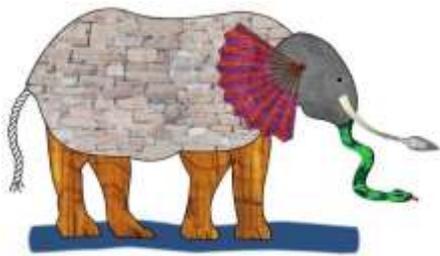
jhkahan@cox.net

Homeland security experts in and out of government have for the past decade used resilience in various ways for different purposes with a veritable host of meanings drawn from a variety of fields. There are lessons to be learned from the *Blind Men and the Elephant* — a poem written by John Godfrey Saxe (1816–1887) based on a parable believed to have originated in the Indian subcontinent that has also been associated with a range of religious traditions.

Following is the Saxe version of this parable. Adjacent to each stanza are versus of an alternate version of the poem aimed at informing the homeland security and emergency management communities. This modern setting entails six academic experts working in their own specialized fields who attend a conference on resilience. At this event, Professor Eric Schminkenfutter, a worldwide expert, will present a briefing titled “more than there is to know” about resilience. Since all seats were taken, our six actors sit in an adjacent room and hear the delivery, without seeing the words and pictures on the briefing slides. Each was asked afterwards to give their own short impressions of what the famous briefer had said and each vigorously explained how resilience is defined in his/her specialized discipline. The alternative version of the poem captures their impressions.

Blind Men and the Elephant

Poem by John Godfrey Saxe
(1816–1887)



It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

Poem by Jerome H. Kahan
(1938–?)



It was six scholarly experts
To publishing and conferences much
inclined,
Who listened to a Resilience *maven* (an
expert’s expert)
(Though each from their own academic

perspective),
That each by hearing such a presentation
Might insert the meaning of this elusive
term in his/her mind.

The *First* approach'd the Elephant,
And happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
At once began to bawl:
“God bless me! but the Elephant
Is very like a wall!”

The *First* listened almost too attentively
Thus spilling much coffee
And making an awful mess
At once began to bawl:
Upon my PhD, Resilience
Is about people and societies struggling to
cope with stress

The *Second*, feeling of the tusk,
Cried, — “Ho! what have we here
So very round and smooth and
sharp?
To me ‘tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!”

The *Second* listened carefully
As a builder of mighty edifices would be
prone to do
And said ‘tis mighty clear my views to
make
That the wonder of Resilience enables my
structures
When experiencing an earthquake or other
such disaster
To bend but not break.

The *Third* approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his
hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a snake!”

The *Third* listened as a business executive
might do
Concerned over supply route viability in
case of an adverse event.
And suddenly jumped up to observe that
Resilience though redundancy will limit
my losses
And allow a rapid return to full operations
As prior any such incident.

The *Fourth* reached out his eager
hand
And felt about the knee.
“What most this wondrous beast is
like
Is mighty plain,” quoth he,
“‘Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!”

The *Fourth* made sure the room was eco-
friendly
Taking neat notes as the speaker went on
Based on some quick calculations,
This listener opined
We need to strengthen the resilience of
our ecosystem
Before it is gone!

The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: "E'en the blindest man
can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact, who can,
this marvel of an Elephant
is very like a fan!"

The *Fifth* expressed concern
Whether a community would
Be willing and able to devote time and
resources
To be capable of absorbing terrorist
attacks or natural hazards
And retain key functions while recovering
from
A range of threats from many sources.

The *Sixth* no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Then, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a rope!"

The *Sixth* listened for the overall economic
implications
In terms of many indices such as GNP
Worried that the less than robust economy
might not be sufficiently strong to survive
large-scale adverse events
And wanted to find solutions to macro
economic problems
That Resilience as a concept might make

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

And so these homeland security experts
Disputed loud and long about the meaning
of Resilience
Each in his/her own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

So, oft in theologic wars
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
*And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!*

MORAL

So, oft in homeland security policy
making
The participants, we ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
*And prate about a concept
Not one of them has seen!*

The poem illustrates how perception is based on what a person is able to see or touch. In the story, each of six blind men touch parts of an elephant, but the individual characterizations of the same animal elephant are based only on what each blind man is able to perceive. This parable has been used to illustrate a range of truths and fallacies. At various times it has provided insight into the relativism, opaqueness, or inexpressible nature of truth, the behavior of experts in fields where there is a deficit or inaccessibility of information, the need for communication, and respect for different perspectives. More directly, the poem warns the reader that preconceived notions and perceptions can lead to misinterpretation.