

## WHEN AN ELEPHANT FOLLOWS YOU HOME

by  
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Sometimes you're minding your own business, out for a simple stroll or getting some exercise and fresh air, wishing others a good day and stopping to help a white-haired woman down the stairs, and out of the blue an elephant follows you home. You never asked for it. Heaven knows you don't deserve it. But here it is, squeezing through your door and bending the floor joists in your living room. You tell it to go away, but it follows you into the kitchen, knocking over the entertainment center and dropping something foul on the carpet.

You don't speak elephant. And even if you did, you don't know if he's trained. Most of all, you're wondering how you're going to feed it.

Just then that problem takes care of itself—at least for the moment. He's eating your houseplants and sucking out the fish tank.

It usually happens at the most inopportune time. Not that there would ever be a good time to have an elephant follow you home, unless you're employed by Circus Vargus. You have job stress and your mortgage is late and the last thing you need is an elephant sniffing you over with his trunk.

I've had a few elephants in my house. Most of them, I must admit, I invited in--unaware, of course. Then I ranted and raved because they wouldn't leave. But in the process I learned some lessons and picked up a few elephant training tips.

### **Size Up Your Elephant**

When you first discover your elephant take some realistic measurements. How big is this problem in comparison to problems you've had before? to others' problems? How big

is it in God's eyes? Have you exaggerated the size of this elephant? Perhaps it's more like a cow or even a cat.

For three years I worked with a woman who exaggerated every task to the point that she accomplished little. She could turn a one-week assignment into a lifetime work. She whined over the slightest interruption or mishap and when her boss gave her a new assignment she spent days complaining that it couldn't be done with her resources. It was just her worldview. Every problem was an elephant to her and after she thought about it she could show you how it was not just one elephant but an entire herd of mad elephants stampeding right for her.

People who think this way have the Jonah worldview: *God always wants me somewhere I don't want to be. Or, God gives me only the things I want the least.* Like an elephant in my house the day after I get new carpet.

Get a friend to help you see the problem realistically. Size up the intensity as well. Is it really the fierce angry bull you tell yourself it is? Or is it a gentle mother elephant? Get it down on paper. That makes it defined and clear. Seeing the problem for what it is will help you to establish a realistic plan for dealing with it.

### **Don't Stuff Your Elephant into the Attic**

Don't try to hide your elephant. While you're trying not to exaggerate the problem, don't minimize it either. What does it really look like? Call it what it is and when the neighbors come over, let them squeeze around it to get into your kitchen. Maybe one of them has some experience with elephant training. Yeah, they might talk about you. They might avoid you. But a true friend will sympathize with you and probably bring over a bag of peanuts or a bail of hay.

When something bad happens, the first stage we pass through in the process of grieving is *denial*. We want to pretend it didn't happen. We want to move back in time and set up some kind of prevention. Some of us may deny our true feelings and say things like, "I didn't really love that person anyway. I would have broken off the engagement if he hadn't." It's okay to have these feelings for a while, but eventually, in order to grieve successfully, we need to openly face what has happened.

Grieve it. Be angry about it. Let yourself be sad for a while. Accept the pain that it brings. Don't try to shortcut it. Don't sell the elephant to the circus. The more open you are about your struggle, the more thorough and deeper the healing will be.

When I first moved to California I was so excited that I didn't think I needed to grieve leaving my thirty-years in the Midwest. But in our first year on the west coast I sensed this

gnawing feeling inside. I could smell elephant, but I refused to believe one might be in my house. During the second year I realized that I felt homesick. I told my friends how I felt and found out that most of the California transplants had hosted the same elephant in their first two to three years. What a relief! I told myself that missing my family and Midwest culture did not mean that I made a mistake by moving. I let myself grieve. And sometime during the third year that pachyderm went packing and I never saw her again.

### **Name Your Elephant**

One side effect of grief is confusion. When you're under stress you forget numbers and names. You make wrong turns. Your mind wanders. Naming your elephant will help you clarify what you're up against. Say it out aloud. "My son isn't speaking to me." "I have bone cancer." "I've lost my savings in the stock market."

Elephants with names are much easier to live with than unnamed elephants. Some will be with us for life so we have to get comfortable with them. Name them and make them part of the family. When doctors found enlarged lymph nodes on seventeen-year-old Sharon Elliot, and then discovered her high white cell count, her family went spinning into hysteria. Her mother couldn't stop weeping in her presence. Later Sharon wrote:

Mom kept calling it "this thing." "I can't believe this thing is happening to you." One day she came to my room and started saying, "I hate this thing. I hate it." And I made her sit down and listen to me. I showed her the encyclopedia I was reading. "Mom, they call this disease Leukemia. It's a disease of the blood. I want you to read this with me." And we started reading about it. And something happened. We weren't crying, at least not then. We were talking about it--about Leukemia.

When you call an elephant by its name, you feel more in control. You may not be able to make it go away, but now you

can talk about it and get the pain out. Now the cause of pain has a name. Now you have someone to blame: a disease named alcoholism, a broken relationship called adultery, a crisis called unemployment. Once you name your elephant, you can define it. You can get to know how it thinks and feels, how it behaves. Then you can form a counterattack to remove it from your house.

### **Make Your Elephant Comfortable**

Some elephants hang around a few days and others take up permanent residence in your home. Even if the elephant goes away, the carpet stains are permanent. The damage can be repaired, but you can never completely get rid of the odor.

So get used to it. Accept it. Make her comfortable and you'll be more comfortable too. If she's restless, you can bet you will be too.

My son Jeremy and I were walking in a wooded area next to our neighborhood. He was about seven and we were joyfully watching quail and rabbits. We climbed a steep hill and at the top Jeremy tripped and scraped his knee. It was a small scrape but painful, and we sat for several moments while he cried and I said, “Yeah, I know that hurts. When we get home we’ll clean it and put a bandage on it.”

In a moment he decided he was ready and wanted to hurry home to take care of the scrape. He limped on tiptoe and held my hand. He wanted to be carried, but I insisted that he walk since we were only five minutes away and he was getting too big to carry. After about ten steps he limped less—on his flat foot this time—and the tears stopped. Another ten steps and he let go of my hand. As we walked his spirit mended and the pain seemed to fade. We even stopped to watch a spider. At home we doctored the wound and he winced when I poured

on the peroxide. As soon as the bandage was on he rushed outside to play.

It’s not just time that heals us. It’s getting busy with life. Sure, we need time to doctor the wound and take care of the injury, and when we take action, we’re not only healing the wound, but healing the spirit. Work and progress heal the inner self. We feel better if we get up and move on. The farther we go the better we feel. Like Jeremy, if we just start limping along we’ll find ourselves better with every step and eventually running again.

Darwin wrote, “It’s not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.” An elephant forces us to change or be trampled. We can try to flee, but our elephants eventually pick up our scent and follow.

I’m not suggesting that you give in and stop fighting to get rid of the problem. Do everything you can to send that

elephant away or sell him to the circus. But accept his presence for today. If you've got a permanent disability, you may have to struggle every day to rehabilitate, but at the same time you've got to accept that disability and the changes it brings to your life.

Right now I'm in the middle of a financial crisis. It's a temporary elephant. And I'm researching, negotiating and working hard so that within the next year I can send this pachyderm packing. In the meantime, I'm disciplining myself to live within the parameters of my limited budget. I'm not giving up. I'm not letting this elephant take up permanent residence. But I'm letting him lay on my sofa while I work to resolve the root of the crisis.

We all have an elephant drop in once in a while. Sometimes we invite them in and sometimes God lets one follow us home, either as a guest for a while or as a permanent

roommate. In either case, with a little training you'll be riding your elephant--which is always better than him riding you.