

Charles Siebert, “An Elephant Crackup”

1. “Elephants, when left to their own devices, are profoundly social creatures. A herd of them is, in essence, one incomprehensibly massive elephant: a somewhat loosely bound and yet intricately interconnected, tensile organism. Young elephants are raised within an extended, multi-tiered network of dotting female caregivers that includes the birth mother, grandmothers, aunts and friends. These relations are maintained over a life span as long as 70 years. Studies of established herds have shown that young elephants stay within 15 feet of their mothers for nearly all of their first eight years of life, after which young females are socialized into the matriarchal network, while young males go off for a time into an all-male social group before coming back into the fold as mature adults” (Siebert 324).

Describe the social network of the elephant community.

Young elephants have a multi-tiered network of female caregivers: the mother, the grandmothers, aunts and friends. They stay within 15 feet of their mothers for the first 8 years of life and then the females become part of the matriarchal network and the young males join an all-male social group before going off on their own.

2. “When an elephant dies, its family members engage in intense mourning and burial rituals, conducting weeklong vigils over the body, carefully covering it with earth and brush, revisiting the bones for years afterward, caressing the bones with their trunks, often taking turns rubbing their trunks along the teeth of a skull’s lower jaw, the way living elephants do in greeting. If harm comes to a member of an elephant group, all the other elephants are aware of it. This sense of cohesion is further enforced by the elaborate communication system that elephants use. In close proximity they employ a range of vocalizations, from low-frequency rumbles to higher-pitched screams and trumpets, along with a variety of visual signals, from the waving of their trunks to subtle anglings of the head, body, feet and tail. When communicating over long distances — in order to pass along, for example, news about imminent threats, a sudden change of plans or, of the utmost importance to elephants, the death of a community member — they use patterns of subsonic vibrations that are felt as far as several miles away by exquisitely tuned sensors in the padding of their feet” (Siebert 324-5).

What makes the elephants stand apart from other animal species?

They mourn their dead. They also have an elaborate communication system, like dolphins and whales, which includes a range of vocalizations-rumbles to screams, and subtle anglings of the head, body, feet or tail. To communicate long distances they pick up subsonic vibrations through the padding of their feet.

3. “This fabric of elephant society, Bradshaw and her colleagues concluded, had effectively been frayed by years of habitat loss and poaching, along with systematic culling by government agencies to control elephant numbers and translocations of herds to different habitats. The number of older matriarchs and female caregivers (or “allomothers”) had drastically fallen, as had the number of elder bulls, who play a significant role in keeping younger males in line. In parts of Zambia and Tanzania, a number of the elephant groups studied contained no adult females whatsoever. In Uganda, herds were often found to be “semi-permanent aggregations,” as a paper written by Bradshaw describes them, with many females between the ages of 15 and 25 having no familial associations” (325).

What has changed in the elephant community and why?

The network and community of the elephants has been damaged and frayed through poaching and cullings. Many of the elder elephants have been killed, leaving the younger ones with no family or caregivers. This has occurred due to the civil war in the areas of Uganda, Zambia, and Tanzania.

4. “As a result of such social upheaval, calves are now being born to and raised by ever younger and inexperienced mothers. Young orphaned elephants, meanwhile, that have witnessed the death of a parent at the hands of poachers are coming of age in the absence of the support system that defines traditional elephant life. “The loss of elephant elders,” Bradshaw told me, “and the traumatic experience of witnessing the massacres of their family, impairs normal brain and behavior development in young elephants” (325).

How can the behavior of elephants be compared to that of humans?

When children are born into chaotic situations with inexperienced mothers or teen mothers, it influences their upbringing. Their lack of a support system ultimately causes stress and a deterioration of normal brain function.

5. “What Bradshaw and her colleagues describe would seem to be an extreme form of **anthropocentric** conjecture if the evidence that they’ve compiled from various elephant researchers, even on the strictly observational level, weren’t so compelling. The elephants of decimated herds, especially orphans who’ve watched the death of their parents and elders from poaching and culling, exhibit behavior typically associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and other trauma-related disorders in humans: abnormal startle response, unpredictable asocial behavior, inattentive mothering and hyperaggression. Studies of the various assaults on the rhinos in South Africa, meanwhile, have determined that the perpetrators were in all cases adolescent males that had witnessed their families being shot down in cullings. It was common for these elephants to have been tethered to the bodies of their dead and dying relatives until they could be rounded up for translocation to, as Bradshaw and Schore describe them, “locales lacking traditional social hierarchy of older bulls and intact natal family structures” (325).

What is anthropocentrism? Are the researchers thinking in an anthropocentric way about their findings?

Anthropocentric is man-centered thinking. Even though humans are generally anthropocentric, here it helps to expand one’s consciousness and awareness. And there are noteworthy correlations between elephants and humans. When orphans watched the death of their parents from poaching and cullings, they exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder, much like that of humans engaged in war. They exhibit behaviors such as abnormal startle response, unpredictable asocial behavior, and hyperaggression. They also mourn their loved ones, just as we do.

6. “We know that these mechanisms cut across species,” Schore told me. “In the first years of humans as well as elephants, development of the emotional brain is impacted by these attachment mechanisms, by the interaction that the infant has with the primary caregiver, especially the mother. When these early experiences go in a positive way, it leads to greater resilience in things like affect regulation, stress regulation, social communication and empathy. But when these early experiences go awry in cases of abuse and neglect, there is a literal thinning down of the essential circuits in the brain, especially in the emotion-processing areas” (326).

How is the elephant’s brain much like a human’s brain?

In the early stages of development, the brain is being shaped. Experiences that are positive lead to stress regulation, greater communication, and empathy. In contrast, experiences that involve abuse, neglect, or violence cause a thinning in the circuits of the brain responsible for processing emotion.

7. “For Bradshaw, these continuities between human and elephant brains resonate far outside the field of neuroscience. “Elephants are suffering and behaving in the same ways that we recognize in ourselves as a result of violence,” she told me. “It is entirely congruent with what we know about humans and other mammals. Except perhaps for a few specific features, brain organization and early development of elephants and humans are extremely similar. That’s not news. What is news is when you start asking, What does this mean beyond the science? How do we respond to the fact that we are causing other species like elephants to psychologically break down? In a way, it’s not so much a cognitive or imaginative leap anymore as it is a political one” (326).

“I started looking again at what has happened among the Acholi and the elephants,” Abe told me. “I saw that it is an absolute coincidence between the two. You know we used to have villages. We still don’t have villages. There are over 200 displaced-people’s camps in present-day northern Uganda. Everybody lives now within these camps, and there are no more elders. The elders were systematically eliminated. The first batch of elimination was during Amin’s time, and that set the stage for the later destruction of northern Uganda. We are among the lucky few, because my mom and dad managed to escape. But the families there are just broken. I know many of them. Displaced people are living in our home now. My mother said let them have it. All these kids who have grown up with their parents killed — no fathers, no mothers, only children looking after them. They don’t go to schools. They have no schools, no hospitals. No infrastructure. They form these roaming, violent, destructive bands. It’s the same thing that happens with the elephants. Just like the male war orphans, they are wild, completely lost” (328).

How is this problem that is occurring in the elephant community tied to the political situation in Uganda?

Male orphans are being made into child soldiers due to the consistent civil war and strife in those areas like Uganda, Zambia, and Tanzania. Due to the constant killings and violence, the elephant communities are being affected as well. Elephants are being killed and left mother and father-less like the adolescent males, and as a result are lashing out, acting atypically violent and unruly.

8. “With cries from the townspeople to “Kill the elephant!” and threats from nearby town leaders to bar the circus if “Murderous Mary,” as newspapers quickly dubbed her, remained a part of the show, the circus’s owner, Charlie Sparks, knew he had to do something to appease the public’s blood lust and save his business. (Among the penalties he is said to have contemplated was electrocution, a ghastly precedent for which had been set 13 years earlier, on the grounds of the nearly completed Luna Park in Coney Island. A longtime circus elephant named Topsy, who’d killed three trainers in as many years — the last one after he tried to feed her a lighted cigarette — became the largest and most prominent victim of Thomas Edison, the father of direct-current electricity, who had publicly electrocuted a number of animals at that time using his rival George Westinghouse’s alternating current, in hopes of discrediting it as being too dangerous.”

“Sparks ultimately decided to have Mary hanged and shipped her by train to the nearby town of Erwin, Tenn., where more than 2,500 people gathered at the local rail yard for her execution. Dozens of children are said to have run off screaming in terror when the chain that was suspended from a huge industrial crane snapped, leaving Mary writhing on the ground with a broken hip. A local rail worker promptly clambered up Mary’s bulk and secured a heavier chain for a second, successful hoisting.”

“Misty’s fate in the early 80’s, by contrast, seems a triumph of modern humanism. Banished, after the Lion Safari killing, to the Hawthorn Corporation, a company in Illinois that trains and leases elephants and tigers to circuses, she would continue to lash out at a number of her trainers over the years. But when Hawthorn was convicted of numerous violations of the Animal Welfare Act in 2003, the company agreed to relinquish custody of Misty to the Elephant Sanctuary. She was loaded onto a trailer transport on the morning of Nov. 17, 2004, and even then managed to get away with one final shot at the last in her long line of captors.”

“The details are kind of sketchy,” Carol Buckley, a founder of the Elephant Sanctuary, said to me one afternoon in July, the two of us pulling up on her all-terrain four-wheeler to a large grassy enclosure where an extremely docile and contented-looking Misty, trunk high, ears flapping, waited to greet us. “Hawthorn’s owner was trying to get her to stretch out so he could remove her leg chains before loading her on the trailer. At one point he prodded her with a bull hook, and she just knocked him down with a swipe of her trunk. But we’ve seen none of that since she’s been here. She’s as sweet as can be. You’d never know that this elephant killed anybody” (329-330).

What happened to Mary? How was Misty’s fate in contrast to Mary’s?

Here we can see the impact of therapy on elephants which can be transferred to humans. Due to mistreatment, Mary and Misty lashed out and killed a man. Mary was brutally hanged, and Misty was lucky and sent to an animal sanctuary. There she received treatment and was rehabilitated. There is hope then, that unruly humans could quite possibly be rehabilitated too.

9. “For de Zulueta, the parallel that Abe draws between the plight of war orphans, human and elephant, is painfully apt, yet also provides some cause for hope, given the often startling capacity of both animals for recovery. She told me that one Ugandan war orphan she is currently treating lost all the members of his family except for two older brothers. Remarkably, one of those brothers, while serving in the Ugandan Army, rescued the younger sibling from the Lord’s Resistance Army; the older brother’s unit had captured the rebel battalion in which his younger brother had been forced to fight.”

“The two brothers eventually made their way to London, and for the past two years, the younger brother has been going through a gradual process of recovery in the care of Maudsley Hospital. Much of the rehabilitation, according to de Zulueta, especially in the early stages, relies on the basic human trauma therapy principles now being applied to elephants: providing decent living quarters, establishing a sense of safety and of attachment to a larger community and allowing freedom of choice. After that have come the more complex treatments tailored to the human brain’s particular cognitive capacities: things like reliving the original traumatic experience and being taught to modulate feelings through early detection of hyperarousal and through breathing techniques. And the healing of trauma, as de Zulueta describes it, turns out to have physical correlatives in the brain just as its wounding does.”

“What I say is, we find bypass,” she explained. “We bypass the wounded areas using various techniques. Some of the wounds are not healable. Their scars remain. But there is hope because the brain is an enormous computer, and you can learn to bypass its wounds by finding different methods of approaching life. Of course there may be moments when something happens and the old wound becomes unbearable. Still, people do recover. The boy I’ve been telling you about is 18 now, and he has survived very well in terms of his emotional health and capacities. He’s a lovely, lovely man. And he’s a poet. He writes beautiful poetry” (332-3).

Who is Abe? How do the stories of war orphans mirror the impact on the elephant community?

Abe is an ethologist and wildlife management consultant who has been personally affected by the violence in Uganda and whose family moved from Uganda to Kenya to escape the violence. The families in Uganda are broken, people are displaced, children are growing up without fathers and mothers, they are wild and lost just like the elephants. They have no infrastructure just as the elephants have lost their multi-tiered network of caregivers.

10. “The other part of our newly emerging compact with elephants, however, is far more difficult to codify. It requires nothing less than a fundamental shift in the way we look at animals and, by extension, ourselves. It requires what Bradshaw somewhat whimsically refers to as a new “trans-species psyche,” a commitment to move beyond an anthropocentric frame of reference and, in effect, be elephants. Two years ago, Bradshaw wrote a paper for the journal *Society and Animals*, focusing on the work of the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya, a sanctuary for orphaned and traumatized wild elephants — more or less the wilderness-based complement to Carol Buckley’s trauma therapy at the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee. The trust’s human caregivers essentially serve as surrogate mothers to young orphan elephants, gradually restoring their psychological and emotional well-being

to the point at which they can be reintroduced into existing wild herds. The human “allomothers” stay by their adopted young orphans’ sides, even sleeping with them at night in stables. The caretakers make sure, however, to rotate from one elephant to the next so that the orphans grow fond of all the keepers. Otherwise an elephant would form such a strong bond with one keeper that whenever he or she was absent, that elephant would grieve as if over the loss of another family member, often becoming physically ill itself.

To date, the Sheldrick Trust has successfully rehabilitated more than 60 elephants and reintroduced them into wild herds. A number of them have periodically returned to the sanctuary with their own wild-born calves in order to reunite with their human allomothers and to introduce their offspring to what — out on this uncharted frontier of the new “trans-species psyche” — is now being recognized, at least by the elephants, it seems, as a whole new subspecies: the human allograndmother.

“Traditionally, nature has served as a source of healing for humans,” Bradshaw told me. “Now humans can participate actively in the healing of both themselves and nonhuman animals. The trust and the sanctuary are the beginnings of a mutually benefiting interspecies culture” (331-2).

Is Siebert correct in asserting that we need to create a trans-species psyche? What would happen if we didn’t? How might our thinking change if we did?

A trans-species psyche would give people a wider scope on the world. It would help us to realize that our actions affect more than just ourselves but everything around us. By understanding the elephant population, an animal that is very similar in brain structure and emotional behaviors to ourselves, we will ultimately be able to understand ourselves better.