

Elephant Wisdom – Caretaking always Disempowers



A few years ago I was sitting at a watering hole in the Addo National Park in South Africa watching a herd of elephants. The banks of the pan were slippery red clay. As I watched, a little baby elephant reached for the water with his trunk and his front legs started slipping down the bank. He tried frantically to scramble back up. It was to no avail and he slid into the water up to his shoulders! His mother was clearly a little distressed and all the aunty elephants started milling restlessly around as they watched the infant try to pull himself back up the bank.

In elephant herds the aunts share the responsibility of care of infants with the mother. They touched him with their trunk and gently encouraged him and urged him to try to get out. But try as he might he was just too little to get all the way out - as he reached the top he would start slipping down the bank again into the water. At first it was comical and cute but after 10 minutes I was getting frantic and could feel myself getting really irritated with the Mom and Aunties who just kept kicking up dust, restlessly milling around and exhorting him to try harder. I knew that any one of them could just scoop him out with their trunks and I couldn't understand their refusal to rescue the baby who could not have been more than a month or two old. Finally exhausted the little fellow just sat in the water dejectedly, thoroughly exhausted from his efforts and it was then that mama casually walked over and put her trunk under his belly and with soft little elephant snorts of encouragement helped him scramble out of the hole...all the aunties came and touched him with their trunks and then everyone went on calmly with what they had been doing and the herd settled down into the slow ponderous peaceful way of elephants.

The example of these great matriarchs made me pause and reflect on how often we as women have lost that inner wisdom of letting others, especially our children learn from doing and struggling with what they are capable of doing for themselves. We rush in to rescue, save, fix and do for others when they are capable of doing themselves or through trying, could learn to become strong, capable and independent. We disobey our own inner knowledge out of fear and anxiety that we will be blamed if something goes wrong, fear that we are bad and unloving if we do not anticipate the needs and feelings of others before they even realize them themselves. We fear the wrath and punishment of others if we do not find solutions and solve problems. And we end up enabling dependency, helplessness, self entitlement, demanding selfish behavior and are filled with resentment that we do not get more gratitude and appreciation for all we do to help, control negative outcomes, and fix and rescue others who are capable of finding their own solutions in life.

Perhaps we need to learn from the ancient wisdom of the elephants. Do not help unless it is absolutely necessary. In so doing we give others the message that we believe in them and trust them to be capable, strong and independent. We can convert our anxiety into careful observation and encouragement instead of taking over and doing, giving advice, controlling and fixing outcomes and rescuing others. When we rush in to rescue others inappropriately it is usually to allay our own anxieties or to seek to feel powerful, good and strong ourselves. It seldom helps anyone in the long run.

In reflecting on baby elephants experience I imagine he learnt about the treachery of slippery mud and water holes, he was strengthened by the struggle and he knew that when things got really hard, he would be helped to help himself out of the mud!

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How did your mother empower you?

What is your relationship to your inner power?

How were you robbed of your power?