

Reality is not always what it appears to be

By Goldwin Emerson

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A few years ago, my three-year-old granddaughter, Kendra, and I went to see a statue of Jumbo in St Thomas. Jumbo was a large performing elephant who, on September 15, 1885, was being led back to his rail car. Unfortunately, on that occasion, he was struck from behind by a locomotive and was killed.

Kendra already knew this sad story of Jumbo's fate. Conceptually, she understood that we were seeing Jumbo's image, not a real live elephant. I asked Kendra if she would like to have her picture taken with Jumbo, and she happily agreed. After hoisting her onto the concrete platform, I told her I needed to get farther away in order to include all of Jumbo in our picture. Her anxiety increased as I crossed the street, and she began to wonder what she should do if the statue suddenly came to life. Should she run across the street for protection, or should she escape to our car? Could she get down off the high platform by herself? I assured her of what she already knew: Jumbo was a statue and statues are not living. Nevertheless, Kendra found comfort in repeating what I had just told her. Later, at home with her mother and grandmother, she proudly recounted her experience. She wanted these two important people to know that she had stood up on that high platform alone with Jumbo.

I tell this story because, even as adults, much of our own lives is devoted to distinguishing reality from the imaginary. We are not content to accept everything we are told even when it sounds pleasant and comforting. There are many things about our society that are designed to divert attention from reality. Some children, especially at an early age, have anxiety about ghosts, witches, and other unreal characters. A profusion of such fanciful characters appear on television, children's movies and occasionally, in children's books. Even more benign images of fairies, elves, Santa Claus, tooth fairies, or dinosaurs on the loose, can increase a child's difficulties in separating reality from fantasy. For this reason, children can benefit from caring parents who help them choose constructive stories and experiences.

As adults, we invent ways to remove ourselves from the realm of reality. Movies, theatre, sports, art, fine dining, fashionable clothing, and classical music, sweep us away from work, worry, pain or disappointment. Of course, if these diversions are well chosen, they can bring us closer to reality. But it is important, even while enjoying these pleasures, to keep in mind that, in many instances, they are not the

stuff of real life. The finished product is often meant to be more entertaining and fanciful than the basic reality behind such choices. We choose to be entertained by experiences that divert us, if not from reality, at least from the monotony of the work-a-day world.

In the end, we are left with the task of separating reality from unreality. The reality of the physical world can be measured and, for the most part, seen and experienced. There is, however, another important area of life and of basic reality that does not lend itself so readily to physical measurement. This part of reality has more to do with positive ethical attitudes. These include compassion, caring and concern for others, respect for our environment, and engendering peaceful resolutions to human conflicts.

Parents can help children separate fantasy from reality. By thoughtfulness, caring, and critical thinking, parents can assist citizens of future generations in solving challenges of human-kind. If human-made problems such as war, poverty, over population, pollution and starvation are to be solved at all, they must, of necessity, be solved by human-made solutions.

As I reflect upon my earlier experience with Kendra and the statue of Jumbo, I am impressed that her concerns are not very different from those of adults. Jumbo represents her wonderment at new ideas that are over-powering, magnificent, unpredictable, and mysterious. For both children and adults, it is important to be able to distinguish reality from superstition, unwarranted fears, and unfounded anxieties. I feel privileged to have had a part in reassuring Kendra in her sense of awe and wonder.