Beyond Ghor, there was a city. All its inhabitants were blind. Reprinted here with the permission of Chelsea Green Publishing.

A king with his entourage arrived nearby; he brought his army and camped in the desert. He had a mighty elephant, which he used to increase the people’s awe.

The populace became anxious to see the elephant, and some sightless from among this blind community ran like fools to find it.

As they did not even know the form or shape of the elephant, they groped sightlessly, gathering information by touching some part of it.
Each thought that he knew something, because he could feel a part. . . .

The man whose hand had reached an ear . . . said: “It is a large, rough thing, wide and broad, like a rug.”

And the one who had felt the trunk said: “I have the real facts about it. It is like a straight and hollow pipe, awful and destructive.”

The one who had felt its feet and legs said: “It is mighty and firm, like a pillar.”

Each had felt one part out of many. Each had perceived it wrongly. . . . *

This ancient Sufi story was told to teach a simple lesson but one that we often ignore: The behaviour of a system cannot be known just by knowing the elements of which the system is made.


Reprinted here with the permission of Chelsea Green Publishing. For more information, visit www.chelseagreen.com.