

# **THE ELEPHANT IN THE MIRROR**

**Annette Earl**



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## How to Read this Book

I know, I know. You managed to pick up the book and get a few pages in without any help so an instruction manual for how to turn the page is hardly necessary. But for the avoidance of doubt, *The Elephant In The Mirror* has been written sequentially and is designed to be read front-to-back in this order as new ideas are introduced, each one expanding and developing those before it. So far, so unremarkable. This is what you tend to expect from a book, so it's not a wild leap for me to suggest it.

The thing is, though, I've also included some exercises and activities throughout this book. Now, in an ideal world, you would complete each one as you came to it, spend time on it and reflect before reading on. Given that *The Elephant In The Mirror* exists precisely because we don't live in an ideal world, then let's be honest from the start – you and I both know you're going to read the exercises with every intention of returning to complete them later. But then maybe not actually coming back and doing them. Am I right? It's okay. I forgive you – we all do this sometimes, me included. If the thing stopping you is because you can't bear to write in a book, then I have the answer – go to [www.elephantinthemirror.com](http://www.elephantinthemirror.com) where you can download all the exercises and keep the book nice and clean 😊

Book scribbler or not, I suggest reading from beginning to end and then re-reading the chapters that most resonate with you. The book is divided up into four sections and is written to encourage you to think about the current state of your life, the contributing factors (positive and negative) of how you got to where you are and the direction in which you would consciously like to steer yourself. You can choose to read the parts in a different order if you wish, but I offer no guarantee that they will make even the tiniest amount of sense. (There's no strong guarantee even if you do read them in the order prescribed!) Whatever you choose, I do recommend starting with the Preface. We may as well start with convention, because I can't promise that's where we'll end up.

Ready?

Let's get started.

# PREFACE

## My Life as an Elephant

“You’re bigger than you should be for your age – you need to lose weight.”

I left the room mortified and rushed home in floods of tears. I had never given any thought to my size or appearance before that moment. To be confronted with it so bluntly had the same effect as crashing into a lamppost – bruised, sore, angry, upset, humiliated. And in that moment, I was overwhelmed with shame at the school nurse’s words.

I was eight years old.

As I got older, it wasn’t just my appearance that was a problem. I could always get a job easily enough, but for reasons it would take me years to understand, I could never stick with it. I did my best to work hard and be conscientious. More often than not, my managers would be pleased with my work. But that was never enough. I had the boredom threshold of a flea. (I don’t know whether any scientific studies on fleas’ boredom thresholds have been carried out, but I’ve always assumed a flea gets bored easily. Admit it, now that I’ve said it, it just makes sense.) Within two or three months, my tolerance had been exceeded. I trained and retrained but nothing ever made me feel like I’d found my purpose or vocation. It always felt like something was missing, like I was waiting for something, hoping to one day understand exactly what I needed to do to ‘fit in’ with the world around me.

I’m sure there will be people reading this – maybe you – who can empathise with the feelings of my younger self; shame, embarrassment and generally not feeling ‘good enough’ in terms of your appearance, your partner, your career choice. Perhaps you still feel that way; I know I do. We live in a society where it is simply not acceptable to be less than perfect yet we’re constantly seduced into believing it’s possible to attain perfection. I’m here to tell you that’s not true. Perfect doesn’t exist. And you know what? That’s okay. Few of us would claim to be perfect but we’re happy to accept that overall we are good, kind, decent people going through life trying to do our best. So why do the rules change as soon as we hold up a mirror and start comparing ourselves to everyone else? I’m going to share my take on why, how and what to do about it. But first, a little of my story.

Why *The Elephant In The Mirror*? Well, the title of this book can be attributed to a number of sources. First off, as a flat-footed teenager trampling up the stairs, it didn't take long for my dad to credit me with being a 'Heffalump'. It was never said with negative intention but it kind of stuck. Of course, there's also the well-known phrase 'the elephant in the room', which seemed rather apt; the idea that there is a 'thing' that everyone knows about but nobody dare mention. In this case, the 'thing' is how you 'should' in life; how you *should* look, how you *should* behave, who you *should* be with, what job you *should* have, what you *should* want... the list goes on.

This book is devoted to talking about and testing these shoulds. It's simply not socially acceptable to say you want something different to everyone else or be unhappy with your lot when you appear to 'have it all'. Many of us feel discontented but without knowing why. Even when we have what we need to lead a fulfilling life, we remain unfulfilled. We look in the mirror (real or metaphorical) and are often unhappy with what is reflected back. Perception is challenged by reality, but the trick is knowing which is which. There is so much pressure to conform to looking, behaving and living a certain way that when our lives are different from this – when we are different from this – it seems as though there is something wrong with us. It's not until we compare; it's not until we look in the mirror and are told our reflection is 'wrong' that we even knew it was a problem. That's when we start to feel 'less than' or simply 'not good enough'.

Several years of secondary school saw me 'win' the dubious accolade that was the year's Prize for Best Effort. Let me repeat that. *I repeatedly won the Prize for Best Effort*. Is there any better example of being told that your best simply isn't good enough? A prize for best effort is a prize for failure. None of the teachers ever realised this and sadly it's not much different when you become an adult. The unspoken rule is that if you know you're not perfect then the very least you can do is strive for it. Mirrors are held up all the time for us to compare how we're doing against an imaginary benchmark and the expectation is that we will be recognised for our 'best effort' – we're rarely encouraged to accept what we see.

We are conditioned to want more than we have and it should be bigger, better, faster than everyone else's thing that they have. Then when we don't achieve it, we wonder why we never feel like we've 'made it'. This book attempts to give some thought to that and leads us towards the idea that fulfilment can *only* come from living consciously and authentically. This requires a great deal of strength, the courage to reject what we're told is 'right' for us, and a decision to live by our own values and beliefs, not those imposed upon us.

*This* is the elephant in the mirror, the elephant in the room that nobody talks about; just because we're told something will make us happy and successful doesn't mean it will and doesn't mean it's right. Many of the ideas in this book will be familiar to you. My aim is to present them in a way that makes you see them in a new light and understand that, when you let go of who you think you 'should be', you can get on with the business of being who you actually are.

To do this, *The Elephant In The Mirror* is divided into four parts: Part A looks at acknowledging how your life is currently shaped; Part B focuses on appreciating the elements that have contributed to it being that way; Part C considers approaches that can be taken to accepting that if we want anything to change then it's up to us to make it happen; then Part D brings all those ideas together in an easy-to-follow action plan.

Finally, it's worth noting that elephants are incredibly clever, social and emotionally intelligent creatures; rather like people, come to think of it. It's true that they do have big bottoms. So yes, put an elephant in a dress and its bum will look big. Because it's an elephant. It is what it is and doesn't spend time worrying about what it's not. That's why it makes sense to take a moment and ask yourself whether life would be just that little bit better and that little bit easier if you were to make friends with your elephant in the mirror.

## **PART A: ACKNOWLEDGE**

### ***What Does Your Elephant Look Like?***

## CHAPTER 1

### Reflecting on... your relationship with others

The relationships we have throughout our lives are at the very core of who we are. From the day we are born, we are reliant on others to care for us and keep us safe. Our relationships are formative – they define us and are instrumental in what we become. They are a barometer of the world around us, and as we get older, the people we choose to surround ourselves with offer a realistic reflection of how we see ourselves and what matters to us, an idea expressed in the old adage, ‘You can judge a man by the company he keeps’.

Relationships provide us with a sense of security. In the dim and distant past, it was not the hermit who would survive the harsh winter alone in his cave but the community of people who worked together to hunt for food, build shelter and protect each other from predators. A healthy relationship with others was quite literally the key to survival.

While community may not be such a matter of life and death for us today, strong – and more importantly – *positive* relationships are fundamental to our well-being and fulfilment. Our earliest relationships, those we have with parents and siblings, give us our bearings in the world and our sense of place within it. It is these relationships that allow us to make our first mistakes as we discover right from wrong, our strengths and weaknesses, and our beliefs, values and prejudices. As we grow, our world expands and starts to include peers and teachers. We discover that other people think, say and do similar things in different ways, and we begin to question the world around us and our place in it.

All relationships are based on the idea of co-dependency – each side getting something from the other that they would not have on their own. When we’re young, these are often tangible needs or material items such as food, clothing and warmth. But we also receive things that cannot be touched – love, protection and a sense of belonging – and these are important too. As we become adults, we learn to provide the tangibles for ourselves, but the intangibles start to manifest in our relationships with others – the partners we choose, the friends we make and the colleagues we socialise with, all contributing to the person we are. Each of these groups provides us with something not quite captured by the others. Good colleagues are

great to have but can't act as a substitute for an unsupportive partner; a loving spouse can't negate a bad relationship with your boss. And therefore it's important to ensure each is supportive, positive and healthy, independently of the others.

As we mature and develop through life, so too do our relationships change and evolve to reflect this. They are unique to us in varying degrees of closeness and importance, but most are considered so ordinary and unremarkable that we often overlook them or take them for granted. Let's address this by focusing on the most common relationships we have – parents, partner, friends and colleagues – and look at each one in turn.

### **Parents**

For most of us, our parents are the earliest and most important influence in our lives. Long before we form our own opinions of the world, we learn about it and our place within it from them. They teach us what is safe and what is not. They give us our first moral compass by showing us what is right and what is wrong. They pass on to us their filters of the world, their likes and dislikes, their beliefs as well as their prejudices. And we take all this information in and accept it as truth without too much examination.

Our parents are the first role models we have and as children we look to them for our safety, our security and our reassurance that we fit in with the world around us. Generally, this works. Our parents do their best to teach us and we do our best to learn to be just like them. As we get older, we begin to form our own ideas and opinions. Sometimes this doesn't match what we've been told and we begin to ask questions, seek different views and reach our own conclusions.

Of course, there are always exceptions and some parents struggle to give up control of their children's lives, trying to keep their influence over them. Others end up becoming critical for all manner of reasons. Sometimes they want their child to be 'the best' and set impossible expectations, or they disapprove of the choices they make, or it may be they want the child to become independent and send them into the world before they are ready.

Most of the time though, parents are just doing the best they can with what they've got. This often results in them being both our biggest supporter and our fiercest critic. Our relationship with our parents is one of the most sacred, unconditional, long-lasting relationships we ever have, which also makes it one of the most important and complex as it forms the basis for all other relationships in our lives.

## **Partner**

Whether you're married, in a long-term or recent relationship, living together or separately, a partner is someone who should be just that – an equal who has chosen to share their life with you and you with them. When we enter into a relationship with another person, we're giving them a special status. We grant them access to our private world and we ask that they do the same for us.

As humans, we are programmed to seek the company of others, but a romantic relationship is unique in that it is often the relationship that demands the most from us in terms of time and energy. It is also the relationship that potentially offers the most in return. A good relationship results in us developing a partnership based on love, trust and friendship, and allows both people to share their dreams as well as their fears in a safe and secure environment. (Aside: if you're ever unclear as to whether it's love or lust, ask yourself this – do you actually *like* them? It's not a fail-safe approach but works more often than the majority of us would ever care to admit.)

Let me make it clear at this point that I do not believe being in a relationship is necessary for living a full and happy life. I know that many people believe they can't be happy if they're not part of a loved-up duo, but I would challenge this and ask... why not? I like to think of life as a cake. (Stick with me here.) To be delicious and stay bound together, the cake needs all the essential ingredients of life. Examples of these key ingredients may be money, health and independence, because each one of those has a vital role to fulfil. I'd like to suggest – and yes, I know this is controversial – that being in a relationship is not an essential ingredient for the cake. The cake is just perfect without containing a relationship ingredient.

Cakes, however, can be improved, much like lives can be improved. A relationship could be seen as one of these improvements, just like icing (or marzipan, or chocolate – it's your cake, decorate it however you wish). It finishes the whole thing off nicely. You don't need someone to *complete* you but they can certainly *complement* you. A partner is often the closest and most intimate relationship we have with another person in our adult lives, which is why it's so important that we treat that relationship with the respect it deserves and don't take it for granted.

Of course, not all relationships are balanced partnerships and not all relationships are healthy. Sometimes the thing that was once right for us is no longer in our best interests. Relationships without love, trust and respect can be detrimental to our well-being and overall health. In cases like this, the icing has turned rancid and there's not much to do but scrape it off and start again. But do so knowing that underneath the cake has always remained perfectly intact and is no more or less a cake despite its lack of decoration.

Of all our relationships, the one we share with our partner is the one from which we give the most and get the most, so it requires care and attention to nurture it and allow it to evolve and grow. Just remember a partner is a complement to your life and makes it a little brighter, but that person is never a necessity as you shine bright enough already all on your own. Get this right and not only do you grow as a couple, but you grow as an individual too.

## **Friends**

The first set of relationships we tend to take notice of comes early on in life when we start to make friendships. It's a fact of life that we don't get to choose our family so making friends is a big deal, because it's one of the first times in our lives that we have the opportunity to judge and be judged – *lucky us!* It's a process that usually begins at pre-school or primary school, and unless you renounce society altogether, then it's a process that's likely to remain with you for some time thereafter...

As with all relationships, friendships are complex beasts. When you're young, your-best-friend-can-become-your-worst-enemy-can-become-your-best-friend-again within the space of a day. It's not so very different when you're older – it just takes a little longer to break up

and make up. Friendship is vital to our health and well-being, as it brings a connection that is chosen, rather than determined for us. Our friends share our joys and our tears, are happy for our achievements, and support us in good times and bad. They judge us but still like us enough to stand by our side and we do the same for them.

However, problems can occur when we fail to recognise that what was once friendship is now just routine. As we get older we change and grow and this impacts our friendships. In some cases, we grow closer but in others the changes mean that what once glued us together has now dissolved. Friendship fulfils a number of needs; not least, it provides us with a reflection of how life is for others but also helps insulate us from isolation and loneliness. I firmly believe that isolation is an epidemic we need to focus on solving; in a world that gives you 24/7 access to millions of people online, we are in danger of losing access to the people around us. Our friends make us smile, they make us laugh and they blow away the clouds, letting the sunshine into our lives – that's what makes friendship so important and something to be cherished.

### **Colleagues**

When we think about our relationships, we often don't tend to include our work colleagues. This is rather strange when you think about it – most of us have jobs or are engaged with some form of work (paid or unpaid), which means we spend a lot, if not most, of our waking hours with people who are neither friends nor family and who we wouldn't necessarily choose to socialise with.

How we feel about our work is hugely influenced by what we think of the people we work with, be they our managers or peers. We absorb the attitudes, conversations and opinions of those around us, and for many of us, we work in hierarchical structures, which means we often have to hide or minimise our own thoughts and feelings based on fear of the consequences of sharing them. A typical work environment is a micro-society with its own rules and structures, generally designed to neither help nor hinder. Nonetheless, our relationships with work colleagues massively influence how we feel about ourselves, since annual reviews, 360-degree feedback and appraisals are never far away, comparing you to your past self and the performance of those around you.

We're forced into spending time day after day with strangers and expected to work collaboratively as though we were friends. If we're fortunate, we will make friendships through our work, but this tends to be based on luck rather than design. How we're treated at work contributes heavily to our perception of ourselves, our self-esteem and our confidence and so it's important to recognise the impact these relationships have on our daily life and whether this is a positive effect or one with room for improvement.

### **A thought about social media**

It would be remiss of me not to mention the relationships we develop through social media. What was once an alien concept reserved only for 'nerds and geeks' or 'the youth of today' is now part of everyday life for many of us, regardless of age or interests. The ability to talk with someone wherever they are in the world, cross-border and cross-time-zone means that we are now establishing relationships with people who we'd likely never know any other way.

It is a privilege to live in a time of such transition and opportunity. We have access to information that was previously unobtainable for most people and we are actively encouraged to make friends, find romance and trace our ancestors online, to name just a few of the new interactions open to us. Social media has enabled us to connect with more people virtually than we ever could in 'real' life and it allows us to target the people we want to communicate with without being constrained to only those we meet in person.

We can interact with others constantly and remain connected every waking moment. We need never be alone and we can be selective in whom we choose to communicate with. And for many of us this is incredible – staying friends with the people we may otherwise lose touch with, distance no longer being a barrier, maybe even making life-long friends or partners through the technology made easy to use through social media platforms.

Of course, the universe likes balance and with the good there comes the not-so-good. The omnipresent connection we now have to the rest of the world via our online life can adversely impact our offline life if we allow it. We can have hundreds of friends online but how many could or would be willing to meet for coffee this weekend if we asked them? We may spend hours chatting online but could we pick up the phone and talk if we needed someone?

We filter ourselves when we communicate online and try to present the best version of ourselves, all warts removed. This makes our relationships unstable as we are denying others the opportunity to like and accept us for who we really are. Of course, they are doing the same to us. As a result, we are actively enforcing the message that less than perfect is unacceptable. I mean, how many posts/tweets/pictures do you see that allude to anything other than, 'Hey! Look at me. I'm so successful and happy and life is great'? Not many, I imagine. We don't set ourselves these impossible standards in everyday life, but the rules seem to change once we're online and it can be exhausting. Social media is a wonderful way to interact with people you'd never meet any other way but it can become all-consuming to the detriment of other relationships. It should be an enhancement of the relationships we already have in our lives and not a replacement of them.

After all, sometimes it's just really nice to go for coffee.

### Elephant Exercise: In Three Words...

If you could sum up your relationship with each of these groups in three words, what would they be?

Parents: \_\_\_\_\_

Partner: \_\_\_\_\_

Friends: \_\_\_\_\_

Colleagues: \_\_\_\_\_

Online: \_\_\_\_\_

### How do our relationships with others affect our relationship with who we see in the mirror?

Who you surround yourself with is one of the most important factors in determining whether you are where you want to be in your life. If those people are people who inspire, motivate and challenge you to be your best, that's great and you don't need to read any further. In fact, feel free to get in touch and let me know your secret!

However, I suspect that most of us rarely think about how inspiring the people around us are. For the most part, we are surrounded by the people we have always been surrounded by – our family, our friends, our colleagues – and we rarely think about whether this is positive or not. We're comfortable with seeing the same familiar faces day after day, but never ask ourselves how this affects our goals, our drive, our ambition. After all, why should it?

Our relationships with others offer a reflection of the relationship we have with ourselves – respect, trust, kindness and love are all required if we are to lead a purpose-filled and meaningful life. The expectations we place on others, how we treat them and how we allow them to treat us is one of the cornerstones of the life we choose to build.

But living consciously is more than just the people you surround yourself with and the relationships you have. It's also the places and environments you choose to dwell in and absorb and how the external world is often a reflection of our internal world. With that in mind, let's reflect on how the world around us has helped forge the path to lead us to where we now find ourselves.