

The Lioness, the Elephant and the Trojan Horse

Part Four: The Trojan Horse

South Africa has more types of tortoises than anywhere else on the planet. (So say the people who count tortoises slowly.) And yet, I don't recall seeing a single tortoise on our hike through the African bush. Why was that? Because I am not frightened of a tortoise even though a tortoise in the grass looks like a snake with an umbrella. My eyes were not seeking tortoises. My eyes were constantly scanning for the African Big Five. And snakes.

In case you don't know, the African Big Five animals are the lion, the elephant, the buffalo, the leopard, and the rhinoceros. On our hike through the African bush, we had close encounters with the buffalo and the rhinoceros, and very close encounters with the lion and the elephant. We did not encounter the leopard. Nor, in my case, the tortoise (of any type).

Maybe I missed seeing the tortoise because the tortoise is so well camouflaged. (Actually, its shell is well camouflaged. I have a feeling that a naked tortoise would stand out.) Or maybe I did not see a well-camouflaged tortoise because I did not Rock (see Part 1). Or maybe the tortoise which I might have seen had already disappeared into its shell because we hikers, trampling so unskillfully, were Danger. (What would I have given for a shell, camouflaged or not, to hide in when that lioness charged!)

Nonsense at work: the stuff of legend

When it comes to shells and danger, the tortoise is unlike the Trojan Horse. The Trojan Horse does not hide inside its shell when it senses danger. It hides the danger inside its shell. The shell is the Danger.

Many of us know about the Trojan Horse. We either learned about it in school or lapped up the romantic treatment the movie industry has given it. The Trojan Horse is famous or infamous, depending on whether you were inside or outside that Horse, or inside or outside the city of Troy.

Since the time of Troy, the Trojan Horse has taken on a new meaning. (After all, we moderns are far too sophisticated to fall for such an obvious ruse.) Today a Trojan Horse refers to a sham that seduces you into allowing an enemy to enter a supposed safe place. (Oh, right. It does sound the same as the old Trojan Horse trick. Which is why, I suppose, malicious computer code is known as Trojans.)

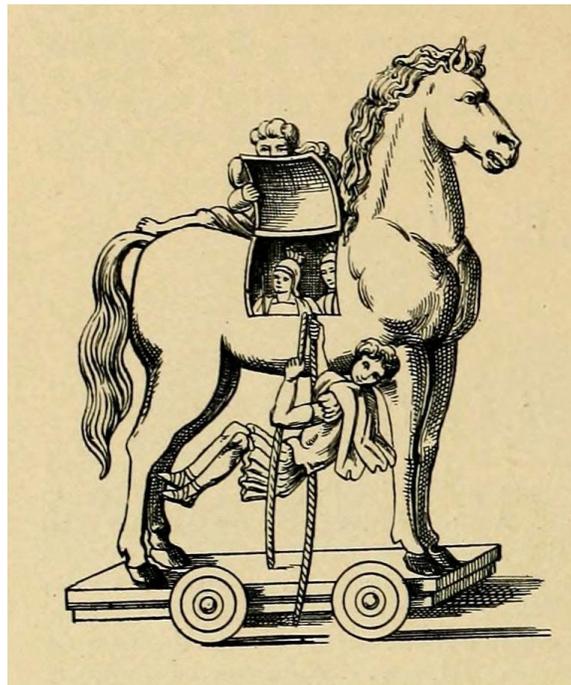
However, there is a critical aspect to the legend that is rarely told today. I blame shoddy summarizing. Let me recount elements of the legend so that I can highlight the critical bit lost in summarization. It is this lost bit which created the nonsense at work at Troy and still creates nonsense at work today.

According to the legend, the Greeks were having a hard time capturing the city of Troy. It was taking way too long, and they were missing their families and the Olympic Games. Some bright spark suggested that they build a huge wooden horse, large enough to hold several men inside its belly. They should proclaim the horse to be a sacrifice to Athena (goddess of wisdom, handicraft, warfare, and a bunch of other stuff). Then they should march to the beach, hop into their boats and sail away. (If they were not so desperate to go home, I doubt if anyone other than the Bright Spark would have thought a big wooden horse to be a workable weapon of mass destruction.)

The big wooden horse was duly constructed, and a dedication added proclaiming it a sacrifice to Athena. A few suicidal warriors were asked to step inside its belly, its belly was sealed and the horse dragged to the gates of Troy. Then the giggling Greeks marched back to the beach, vaulted into their vessels and sailed away.

What would you do if a huge wooden horse was unexpectedly parked outside your gates? What would you do about that horse if you saw the delivery truck disappear down the road? That's exactly what the curious citizens of Troy did — they opened the gates and went outside the walls of the city to admire the grand-looking wooden Horse. They liked it and the dedication to the goddess Athene (as they called Athena) appealed to them. So they dragged the Horse into their walled city and locked the gates.

That night they probably had a big party to celebrate the fact that the Greeks had finally realized that they were gatecrashers (even though the Greeks had not managed to crash the gates). They (the citizens of Troy, not the Greeks) probably danced around the big Horse, scaring the suicidal warriors inside who could not see what the noise was all about. Then they (the citizens of Troy, not the suicidal warriors) went to bed, exhausted but elated.



The Trojan Horse as depicted in the “Vergilius Vaticanus” around 400 A.D.

Later that night the suicidal warriors sneaked out of the Horse's belly and opened the gates of Troy to their fellow Greeks who were waiting outside. You did not expect the Greeks, who had no GPS to help them navigate in the dark, to return in the night? Neither did the Trojans. Many of them paid the ultimate price for their cavalier attitude to wooden horses and wily Greeks.

That is about as much of the legend many of us were taught in our youth or care to remember as adults. However, there is more to the legend that makes it even more interesting. There was one senior person in the hierarchy of Troy who was vocal in his suspicion of that Horse. His name was Laocoon. He tried very hard to persuade the senior Trojans to inspect, not just admire, the Horse outside the city and to leave it outside the walls. He was ignored. (How do we know that he was ignored? Read the previous two paragraphs again.)

Nonsense at work: the stuff of reality

I have worked with many management teams. On two continents. For close on 40 years. I like to think that I have had an insight or two. Here is one of my surprising insights: *There is always at least one person on your team who sees a threat where others see an opportunity.*

Yes, I know, it does not sound very surprising. That's because the surprising bit is actually how seldom this one person is willing to speak up. Even more surprising (to me, at least) is how often a person willing to speak up suffers the same fate as Laocoon: no-one wants to heed the warning. Instead, the speaker-upper is labeled a pessimist, as being unreasonable, or worse.

Consider a Trojan horse incident in your own organization or team. With hindsight, is it not clear that one of the following five situations must have existed at the time?

- (a) No-one spotted the threat.
- (b) Someone did suspect something, but kept quiet.
- (c) Someone did suspect and did speak out, but was not heard.
- (d) Someone did suspect, did speak out and was heard, but was ignored (as being a discredited source?).
- (e) Someone did suspect, did speak out, was heard, and was fired.

And there lies the problem. No organization or team can hope to be effective if any of the above five points apply to it. Obviously, it is rather difficult to do something if no-one spotted the threat. But a key aspect of leadership is to make sure that every voice is heard and heeded. If not, be ready to welcome a Trojan horse into your organization.

The risk in speaking up: then and now

According to another version of the legend, Laocoon was a Trojan priest. What happened to him after he failed to convince the leadership of Troy to leave the wooden horse outside the gates? Two great sea serpents crushed him and his two sons to death as a penalty for speaking up. In other words, he was fired.

The threat of being crushed by two sea serpents for speaking up is no longer a valid fear. However, there is another century-old fear that still has clout today. How did the kings of old react to bad news? The bearer of the bad news lost his head. Broad hints like these of what we can expect from those in power have conditioned us to pass on good news rather than bad; to tell the king what we think he wants to hear; to leave the bad news to someone else; to let a colleague be the one to lose her job. No wonder we prefer to see a gift to the gods even though the gift is That Horse.

The moral of the The Lioness, the Elephant and the Trojan Horse

Is there a moral to The Lioness, the Elephant and the Trojan Horse? I think so:

If you suspect an opportunity is a threat in disguise (*Trojan Horse*) and you choose to forget (*Elephant*) the nonsense that happened the last time you did not face your fear (*Lioness*) of naming nonsense for what it is, you will create new nonsense (*Dung*) instead of capitalizing (*Dung Beetle*) on the sense you see so clearly in the nonsense (*Rock, don't nod*).