

# The Power of Stories

“Stories can move us deeply and reveal the real difficulties and contradictions of being human in a way that textbooks and lectures simply cannot.”

“What is it about stories?” asked Xoab looking at Elder Mathenge. “Why do they work so well to capture our attention?”

Elder Mathenge was sitting there with his eyes closed, and Xoab was afraid he might be asleep, which might be a bit embarrassing. But slowly, Elder Mathenge lifted his head and smiled. He was impressed by the questions Xoab was asking. “Xoab, earlier, you told us a bit of your story of how you came to be who you are. In many ways, you are your story. You have a past story and a present story of your life now, but also a future story of what you want to become. If I want to know you, I must know your story. If you want to know yourself, you must also know your own story, not just of your own life but the stories of those who came before you, your origins, and the stories of your ancestors. Hounsi, you are a great storyteller. What do you think?”

## “Nuggets of sorrow... hidden fish of shame”

Hounsi, who had been quiet until now, was holding her walking stick on the ground. She drew a circle with it in the sand and looked around at the group of friends. This was her favourite kind of question. “We love stories because they can take us to another place in a moment, just like that!” She snapped her fingers. “In the blink of an eye, I can see myself chasing a thief through a marketplace in Accra or imagine myself walking down a sunset beach in Cape Town chatting with Nelson Mandela. Then I can be fighting a fierce lion in Zambia or listening to the soulful song of a man who has lost his love in Zanzibar. Stories can move us deeply and reveal the real difficulties and contradictions of being human in a way that textbooks and lectures simply cannot. I learned this from one of my favourite writers, Arundhati Roy, a famous storyteller from India. One of the lines I love from her about stories is that they can ‘reveal the nugget of sorrow that happiness contains. The hidden fish of shame in a sea of glory.’”

“Whoa!” Xoab exclaimed, rubbing his head. “That is something to remember! But how do they do that? Something about stories grabs me that I wish I could explain.”

“Some things we can understand, things we know deep in our bones, but we cannot explain them in mere words. Just as there is a mystery in the power of all creation, so there is a mystery in the power of stories of life, and we must let that mystery be without too much explanation.”



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## A story is a valley we enter together

“But consider this, Xoab. If you tell me a good story, I will not listen to it as if it was the news on the radio. If you tell me a good story, I enter the story in my imagination, like through a curtain into that other world, as if I am there. Soon, I identify with the main characters, walking alongside them or even in their shoes, experiencing what they experience and feeling what they feel. I become enlivened and animated with the experience that a good story ignites in me. We always say we learn best from experience. When we listen to good stories of others we re-experience them, by imagining that we are there! Their experience becomes our experience to learn from. A story is a valley we enter together.”

### The wisdom in stories

“No one likes to be always lectured to, neither children nor adults and so stories are a way to offer knowledge in a very real way, even in an entertaining way. Why should we be bored by lectures when stories are there? Lectures can only touch the head, while stories touch the head, the heart and the feet! Elder Mathenge said earlier that ‘you are your story.’ It makes sense that stories have such power because we are stories.”

Murithi had a thought to share too. “It is important to learn to tell a good story, Xoab. A story can bring knowledge, but a good story brings wisdom you’ll never forget!”

“Oh, I wish I had written all this down,” exclaimed Kerya.

“Yes, me too,” Xoab agreed. “I know I will forget it!”

They all laughed. “Don’t worry, my young friends,” said Murithi with a chuckle, “you won’t lose it because it will go into your forgettery and mingle with all the other things you think you’ve forgotten. One day, when you have absorbed it fully, it will come out of you, naturally, improved even, as your own knowledge.”

Xoab and Kerya looked at each other. A *forgettery*! That’s a new word, like a hidden memory of things you think you have forgotten but haven’t! And they joined the laughter, though it made sense to them in a strange way.

