The Graceful Walk

If the sand on the road to Ijesha can be used to teach a child to walk, it can be used to teach us all to walk gracefully.
—Yoruba Proverb

I grew up in a culture rife with proverbs. Proverbs, as the famed Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe said, are the palm oil with which words are eaten. This refers, no doubt, to the ways in which proverbs and their reliance on pun, wit, and referential thinking create a play with and within language. Proverbs, while seen as part of a play within language in West African culture, are simultaneously the mark that distinguishes a full-grown adult from a child. To speak well, as the Igbo say, is to have a good character because it means you are always thinking. In West Africa, good character and all its attendant values are seen as a product of proper and purposeful living, which is considered to have its root in thinking. In fact the Yoruba word for human is Eniyan, the thinking ones. The idea that a proper command of speech, and therefore of language, is essential to one’s character is an interesting one.

I heard so many proverbs growing up that I started to sound like a Zen compendium when I spoke. Nigerian proverbs range from the profound (is it the stone at the bottom of the river that shapes the river’s flow or the river’s flow that shapes the stone at the bottom of the river?) to the practical (never challenge a gorilla to a wrestling match) to the comforting (patience can cook a stone) to the absurd (a flowing river is not a lake) to the obvious (a man who is lying on the ground need fear no fall). There is even a proverb for proverbs—trying to find a proverb to sum up all of life is like trying to tie a knot in water. Proverbs are remarkable because they are themselves elisions, elisions of stories that reveal a complex way of life, a cosmological concept, a human foible, and so forth. In the way that Aesop’s fables functioned in early Greek culture, proverbs provide insight into the moral complexity of Nigerian culture. In Afikpo, my town of origin, there is a proverb that is simply a sound—“saaaa!” It refers to the sound a hot needle makes

Chris Abani presented this keynote address at the 36th Nimrod Awards Presentation on October 24th, 2014. Copyright Chris Abani, 2015.
when dropped into sand point-first, sinking with ease, an elegance
that is stunning and awe-inspiring. So when someone makes a pro-
found point in an otherwise quotidian conversation someone may
counter with “saaaa!” Or when a child is frustrated and resorts to
anger to express itself, a parent may make the sound—at once a
warning about an impending spanking, a reminder to find a more
suitable approach to the problem, and also, in a strange way, a
very comforting sound. This is part of the power of these seem-
ingly simple expressions—that they are Zen koans (forcing us to
rethink the way we approach the world), mnemonic devices (for
people to remember complex histories, cosmologies, and concepts),
a way of code-switching that facilitates multiple levels of conver-
sation simultaneously (one’s ability to understand what is being
said is conditional on knowing all the contexts and referents of the
proverb—not unlike *Sesame Street*), a way to be elegant in speech
and thought, a way to give graceful exits from arguments, a way to
teach young people to think inferentially.

This inferential aspect of proverbial thinking is crucial to the
development of individual creativity and even, one can argue, the
performance of a kind of improvisation within language, culture,
identity, and thought that have been assigned by the larger cul-
ture. The concept of the individual in Afikpo thought is slightly
more complex than in, say, Western thought. In Afikpo individuals
negotiate spaces for themselves not in conflict with the needs of the
communal, but rather in symbiosis, such that the individual needs
can never overwhelm the communal good and, likewise, the pres-
sure of the communal will cannot overwhelm the individual drive.
This is a kind of communal individuality in which the personhood
of everyone is a reflection of the collective will and the collective
will itself a reflection of the individual.

With this kind of delicate navigation, language becomes very
important as a way to negotiate things gracefully, to say the very
least. This reminds me of the thought that struck me when I moved
to the United States—that when people say they want a commu-
nity they mean they want people who think like them, agree with
them, and with whom there is very little apparent conflict. I am
more used to communities that are as fraught with daily negotia-
tions as one might find in modern Jerusalem between an Arab
Jew, a Jew, a Christian, and perhaps even an atheist, who are
neighbors and friends.
Language in these circumstances becomes the only way to hold complex and contradictory thoughts and emotions without any violence resulting and with all parties able to move forward in total function—ideally. The kind of linguistic thinking and repartee needed in such situations is possible only with inferential ways of speaking and negotiating. And proverbs fit that bill.

In America we are so used to direct thinking and speaking that we often reduce language to its most transactional levels, stripping it of symbolism and a constant dialectic juggling. But this has made it difficult for us to wrestle with concepts and thoughts and even prevailing cultural norms and the problems of communal living such as race, gender, disability, and other forms of difference. Entire cultures, black and white, are reduced to comedic stereotypes so we can consume quickly and never have to think why or what, or to question our own received narratives.

So the question for me as a writer is how to keep these levels of language alive, to play, to improvise, but to do so with full understanding about the simultaneous power and impotence of words. To use language to create narratives that push the envelope for our moral limitations yet remain ethical and retain integrity. This is my struggle—I am a believer in words, in story. They shape the world, they shape things, bring presence into focus, give it form, give us a way to negotiate the space between the body and the world. They also give us a way to connect to each other, a way to build a common, shared imagination, a way to flex the muscle of empathy, the immersion of ourselves in a fragile and vulnerable humanity.

The South Africans say it is Ubuntu, the idea that we not only learn how to be human from each other, but that we are hardwired to be this way. If being human is based on mimicry, on others reflecting back to us what is good, then we can say that our humanity is not separate from action. This suggests that it is through action that we come to know ourselves. The hardest journey we have to make is a conceptual one, one that ensures that the action that we generate is affirmative. It is a struggle and the path is not littered with Hallmark Card sentiments, but rather with the difficult negotiations of our fears and failures and limitations. And so in approaching this conversation today, I am hoping that I can raise questions rather than present answers, offer ways to accept
vulnerability rather than soothe fears. Please indulge me as I attempt to bring words to what there are often no words for.

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In Afikpo, when young children are learning to walk, they are brought to very sandy places. Here they can practice safely, knowing the sand will cushion their falls. But also their parents know that the very instability of sand forces the children to develop quickly the small muscle responses needed for balance, needed for function, needed for walking. This practice also very quickly bonds children to the earth, the ground beneath their feet in both symbolic and actual ways—it creates a sense of ownership, of place, of belonging, and thus of responsibility.

In the first three to five days after a child is born, the infant’s feet never touch the ground. Children are born traditionally with their mothers in a kneeling position so that they make contact head first with the ground, gently of course. This first prostration, oforibale, to the earth is their first introduction to their mothers—the earth and their biological mother who fetches them up. Then between three to five days later, the child is brought out of the house into the world, a diviner is summoned, and he spreads iyero-sun, the powder from the camwood tree that resembles sand, on the divining tray, and the child’s left foot is placed firmly into it. This is the entaye, the child’s first footprint on the world. Only after this can the infant be named.

Then follows over time the walking with sand.

Since walking is inevitable, a thing that must be done, it should be done well. In other words, this functionality should never be devoid of grace, of elegance, of the need to question the action, to refine it, to elevate it. In this way, there is nothing without grace in our lives. This is the basis of all African art and craft.

In Afikpo, pottery was a mainstay of the culture. The pots were fired in open-air kilns called obubu, simply “the roasting” or “the firing.” Over time, an area of firing would be abandoned to give the earth time to recover. The old site, full of clay and pottery shards, would take years to lose its heat-capturing capacity. Between the ages of eight and twelve, children would be taken to these old kilns, strips of road now, armed with small cups of water, at the height of the noonday heat when the sand was scorching.
They would be made to walk as slowly as they could, with as few squeals of pain as possible, and with the judicious use of the small amount of water. And over time, it was believed, one learned to walk gracefully and elegantly, always with composure and beauty, through even the most difficult moments of life. Hence the proverb at the beginning of the talk.

Fresh from London, a returnee after the Biafran civil war, I practiced this with as much drama as my scared and sensitive heart could muster. I would slowly strip my socks, then my sandals, looking as forlorn as possible, more sad than any dead man walking, hoping to inspire a reprieve. No such luck. These were my early lessons in craft, in creativity, in the composure both internally and externally that would later serve my art.

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In Yoruba we say \textit{Iwalewa} is beauty and it means the beauty of truth or even the beauty of existence. The word \textit{Iwa} is best translated to mean existence, an eternal state, outside of time, and is connected to an old idea that holds that immortality is the perfect existence. It suggests that all temporality has ramification in an eternal cycle of existence—at an individual level, at a communal and lineage level, at a cultural level, and, in many ways, at a planetary level. Everyone’s \textit{Iwa} is always part of the Igba \textit{Iwa}, and the perfect balance of all depends on the singular balance of each.

\textit{Ewa}, in Yoruba, is a word that means beauty. It refers to an essential conformity to an inner trait. Hence driftwood is beautiful because it conforms to its inner trait; it bends with its \textit{a\textasciitilde{c}}. So beauty is a state of existence. \textit{Iwalewa} is to exist in and as beauty. Since \textit{Iwa} refers to the eternal constant of a person or thing or even sometimes a place, to create beauty (or even to perceive it) is to capture (or see) the essential nature of the thing. Beauty in West African thought lies in recognizing and respecting the uniqueness of all things and all people. To do this, it is said in Yoruba, one must cultivate patience, \textit{suuru}. Patience is the shape respect takes.
This is a necessary practice because it is important for West Africans that we understand the essential beauty of whatever confronts us before revealing ourselves or acting. So to be beautiful is to be able to comprehend the essential beauty of everyone and everything around us—and we in turn become beautiful. To see beauty is to be beauty; therefore, it is about coming into an understanding of one’s own essential nature. The practice of this involves Ifarabale (calmness), Imoju-imora (perception and sensitivity), tito (gentleness), oju inu (insight), and oju ona (originality). To be an artist in Yoruba culture is to possess a cool and patient character (iwa tutu, ati suruu).

Look at the faces of Nok terracotta sculpture and see the composure of being-ness—serenity, calmness, and equanimity. Even warriors on horseback gaze into infinity with a patient calmness. So to make art, it seems, requires character—not character in the moral sense, but in the sense of composure, the sense that what is being done deserves the highest attention and the deepest insights possible.

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All of this implies a great responsibility that walks with creativity, a certain set of ethics. But the ethics of literature are not just for writers; they are also for readers. A work of art, whatever it is, requires a triangulation between the maker, the work, and an audience (even an audience of one) in order to become complete. No painting is truly understood, not even by the painter, until someone looks upon it and has a reaction. In that way, we can say by extension that no work is complete until this happens because, in order to exist, a thing needs not only intent and vision (artist) or material embodiment (the art) but also witness and confirmation (positive or negative) (the receiver). So we can argue that a book, that literature truly comes into existence when someone reads it. Reading is not a passive act; it is an intervention in itself. How we read becomes an indicator of the level and quality of literature in a particular society; it is also a litmus test for the emotional intelligence and health of any society. Any society that does not embrace the full spectrum of the emotional arc in its literature is not a healthy culture, nor are its readers fully human.
The ethical charge then is to confront our lives daily via the vehicle of literature and art and creativity, not to soften the blows of our complex world, not to look away from difficulty, but rather to transform it all into the act of empathy. To witness another person’s grief without looking away, without the need to protect ourselves from it, is how we become deeper and more beautiful beings, and also, in equal measure, to embrace the silly, the satirical, the funny, the sentimental, and the romantic too. It all needs balance; all intricate needs walk over hot sand—grace, elegance, and the occasional trot and squeal of pain.

We, as readers, must approach the world and the narratives it holds with a humble acceptance and the knowledge that, while we may not agree with each other’s point of view, we will learn to live in communities where difference and disagreement become the very fractious fabric of harmony.

We must also give up reading about others as though we are forensic anthropologists attempting to find the cause of everyone else’s pathology—this drive is primarily responsible for our deficiencies and lack of growth as a culture. Ethical reading forces ethical writing and we soon find that the work we make becomes the beautiful balance. This is the power of a creative culture, of creativity: the symbiotic relationship between the dreamer and the builder, the maker and the recipient. If we must read, then we should do so gracefully.

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I was born in December 1966 in Afikpo. My father would claim later that my mother’s protracted labor (72 hours) was the catalyst for the Biafran/Nigerian Civil War that began that month, that year. A small and rather obscure fishing town at the end of a dusty road going nowhere, Afikpo became important in that war because that dusty road ended in the third largest river in the country and offered the perfect secondary access point to the Igbo homelands, allowing the Nigerian troops to pinch the Biafrans between the hills of Nsukka in the north and that river, the Cross River, in the south.

My mother was making lunch when my uncle came running to the house. He breathlessly told her that the Nigerian Army
had landed at Ndibe beach three miles from our house and were marching into town. He didn’t think it would be a good idea if she were there when they arrived. My father was out, so my mother gathered my three elder brothers, Mark (8), Charles (6), and Greg (4), me (barely a week old), and as much stuff as she could carry or make the boys carry: important documents, passports, water, some crackers, me, a lantern, and an umbrella. My father found us on the road to the neighboring town of Edda and the Catholic mission there. As we drove the rest of the way, our car threading the needle of road packed with refugees, that car marked a short-lived privilege.

We parted ways with my father that December, in 1966, in Edda, at the Catholic mission compound where we had gone to take refuge. My father joined the newly-minted Biafran Army and stayed to fight, while we left with a ragtag party of refugees that included some missionaries. Our destination was the small western Igbo town of Uli, where the Biafran Army had turned a highway into a landing strip for the Biafran Air Force and the planes flying in with relief and aid. We would meet up with my father once more, in 1967, when he found us at a refugee camp in Mbaise. He returned to the war a week later, leaving my mother pregnant with my sister, Stella.

The journey from Edda in 1966 to Uli airstrip in 1968, where we boarded a plane first for the island of São Tomé, then to Lisbon and then to London, took two years instead of the three to four hours it should have. The dangerous trip was made more so because my mother, with four young children and one on the way, was a white Englishwoman. Two months before we got on that plane out of the country, my mother gave birth to my sister in a hospital that was being evacuated during a bomb raid.

While the rest of the patients were moved to a safer location in a primary school a couple of miles away, my mother had to stay behind in the hospital, locked in labor, as bombs rained down from the Nigerian Air Force MiG planes, attended only by the Irish nun who was the midwife, Sister Twommey, and a terrified eighteen-year-old nurse whom my mother remembered as Angela.

Sister Twommey sat with my mother, drinking Earl Grey tea and eating cookies, getting up to wheel my mother’s bed from ward to ward, ahead of the bombs; it was a bizarre game of musical
beds. My sister screamed into the world thirty minutes before the hospital was completely destroyed.

Even this is sometimes the grace of walking, or surfing a bed from ward to ward.

Before she died seven years ago, my mother told me that the thing about difficult times, about loss, is that we forget the joys too, we forget that even in the falling, we are flying.

May you walk gracefully, may the sands of the road be kind to you, and may you learn not only balance but also the art of flying while you fall. May you live a creative and elegant life.

Steve Lautermilch, photograph