Taiwo Afuape's decision to train as a therapist has its roots in her Nigerian heritage and her passion to challenge oppression

How I became a therapist: Taiwo Afuape

- by
- Taiwo Afuape

My parents are from a Nigerian town called Abẹokuta, 'town under the rock', which lies below the Olumo Rock. The Egba people of Abẹokuta found refuge in crevices and caves of the sacred Olumo Rock during inter-tribal wars and defeated slave traders in the 19th century. The Egbas are one of several groups that make up the Yoruba, one of the three biggest ethnic groups of Nigeria. Many illustrious people came from Abẹokuta.

In 1996 my paternal grandmother Iya Gba died. My father's very close relationship with his mother and elder sister shaped his staunch pro-women position. The day we received the call about her death (she was 92), my father had already left the house early that morning and, uncharacteristically, had not told anyone where he was going. We reflected on his profound intuition. By the time he returned we were all gathered together, like a dune: waiting, shivering, windswept. He was quiet but not surprised. He had been alone to contemplate and say goodbye.

All seven of us travelled from the UK to Nigeria. I remember the funeral, everyone dressed in white, and my father dropping red roses on his mother's grave. I remember him lying in her bed, curled up, pensive and soft, next to my mother, who simply stayed alongside him. I remember a vivid dream in which my then boyfriend was hugging me and light came from his arms and lit up the room.

I also remember how my brother, sisters and I, with a barefoot and fearless guide, climbed to the top of the Rock, 137 metres above sea level. I forgot my height sickness as he encouraged us to jump-step across absences before fear set in. And he, pretending to trip over the edge, insisted that the spirit of Olumo Rock would not allow anyone to fall. We met white haired and majestic chiefs and priestesses who lived in huts on the rock. They did not seem fazed by our funny clothes and accents. They simply whispered greetings and blessings as we went past. As we looked down we could see the whole of Abẹokuta: the silver meandering of the Ogun River and the terracotta and grey shacks built around the rocks.

All this is a mere fraction of the many wonderful and painful stories that make up who I am. They do not just represent but actively shape and replenish me.

Throughout my training I was niggled with doubt about whether I wanted to be a clinical psychologist. Although training at the University of East London helped a great deal, I was not sure whether the profession wanted me and if I wanted it. I was not convinced that it made a difference or was outspoken, radical and outraged enough about oppression. It felt at times to be like psychological psychiatry, attempting to diagnose and cure individuals. My main interest was in liberation/community psychology and narrative approaches, which have at times argued that therapy can be ineffective if it focuses on the individual at the exclusion

of acting on social inequality and structures of oppression.

After training I worked in contexts that involved systems, communities and human rights and realised that conversations were the foundation of everything I did, regardless of the levels of intervention I was engaging in. When I began to trust uncertainty and let go of the need to know, I put faith in creativity, flexibility and responsivity. An unexpected and subtle energy emerged in conversations with clients, colleagues and trainees, which led to challenging institutional traditions about 'boundaries' and self-disclosure and the oppressive circumstances and discourses in the lives of clients.

I became a psychologist/therapist because my heart believed that our stories and how we listen to each other are important. I started to see that collaborative, intimate and responsive conversations do make a difference. They have the potential to generate possibilities where none seemed to exist before.

We are the stories we tell and the stories that are told about us and, ultimately, stories are unfinished. We do people a disservice, and perhaps harm, when we reduce their lives to slogans and treat them as though they do not have complex, rich and moving stories to tell. Working with individuals does not have to mean reverting to individualistic concepts and solutions when we stay open to the social constraints on people's lives *and* their resistance to these.

I continue to be shaped by these conversations and the people I am privileged to meet: looking out for gems and finding them, becoming more committed to equality, creativity and humanity.

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