



The Power of Stories: Inspiration to Ethical Behaviour

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Abstract

If we want to honour Obiora's work and the inspiration he has offered and continues to provide we cannot get past his stories. He often uses stories to exemplify ethical behaviour and the impact of unethical behaviour. Reading and retelling stories are effective teaching tools for ethical behaviour. At the same time stories can foster intercultural communication as they promote dialogue and reflection on one's own culture. They inspire understanding and embracing diversity. This article is an invitation to rediscover the power of stories in teaching ethical behaviour.

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1. An African story – Big problems have small beginnings

Let us consider the following tale:



‘Find My Stolen Turkey’.

‘Many years ago, a Bedouin chief discovered one day that his favourite turkey had been stolen. He called his sons together and told them: “Boys, we are in great danger now. My turkey has been stolen - find my turkey.” His boys just laughed and said, “Father, what do you need that turkey for?” And they ignored him.

‘A few weeks later the Bedouin chief’s camel was stolen. His sons went to him and said: “Father, our camel has been stolen. What should we do?” And the chief answered: “Find me my turkey”. ‘A few weeks later the chief’s horse was stolen, and again his sons asked what they should do. “Find my turkey” the chief said. ‘Finally, a few weeks later his daughter was abducted, at which point he gathered his sons and told them: “It’s all because of the turkey! When they saw that they could take my turkey, we lost everything.” (Obiora F. Ike, 2020, p. 234ff.¹)

Obiora rounds the story up as follows:

‘Find My Stolen Turkey’ is a wise invitation to start early in our ethics teaching and practice. It starts from the family, community, school, and religious places, all the way to higher education, governance, technology and businesses.²

¹ Obiora F. Ike. (2020). *Applied Ethics to Issues of Development, Culture, Religion and Education*. Geneva: Globethics.net, 234-5.

² Obiora F. Ike, 2020, op. cit., 234ff.

In another context, he uses the same story to illustrate behaviour:

“ ‘Find My Turkey’ is an invitation to turn the tide of unethical practices spreading like a cancer in virtually all countries, systems and cultures. When we allow the first and smaller vices to proceed, the larger ones follow. And sometimes, it might be too late to stop it. (Obiora Ike & Chidiebere Onyia, 2017)³

Do you remember your favourite story of your childhood? Was it about a princess in a castle and beautiful horses? Or clever and not so clever animals, or ghosts? Or did the poor but good protagonist save the world from a bad witch or other riff-raff?

Did you enjoy listen to stories?

Many traditional stories from all over the world have one plot in common: A poor girl or boy (sometimes the last of many children or an orphan) struggles through life, sacrifices a lot but does not sell her/his soul despite all temptations and finally finds happiness, gets married, sometimes also rich and nearly always lives happy ever after.

When asking children from two countries (Nigeria and Germany) to provide me with their favourite tales⁴, the morals of the stories were similar:

- Do good against all odds (make the right decision);
- Do not give up hope;
- Reward for ethical behaviour will come sooner or later and will usually be bigger than anticipated;
- All unethical behaviour will be brought to light and punished appropriately one day.

³ Obiora Ike & Chidiebere Onyia (Eds.). (2017). *Ethics in Higher Education, Religions and Traditions in Nigeria*. Geneva: Globethics.net, 8.

⁴ Meggy Kantert (Hrsg.) (2020). *Märchen aus Deutschland - Tales from Nigeria*, Norderstedt: BoD, www.bod.de.

The Heath brothers⁵ facilitated research on why stories can help to make the right decisions and found Gary Klein, a cognitive psychologist, who wrote a book⁶ about just that:

“ Stories are told because they contain wisdom. And they are retold because they are effective teaching tools. They show how context can mislead people to make the wrong decision. Stories illustrate causal relationships that people hadn't recognized before and highlight unexpected resourceful ways in which people have solved problems. (Klein, 1999, 206)⁷

Applying that to the story of the stolen turkey, we can see how easily people were misled to make the wrong decision, moreover recognise an illustration of unfortunate causal relationships.

And stories can do so much more. They entertain, inform and promulgate cultural traditions and values. They can build narrative bridges between countries and foster intercultural dialogue.

When working on the German and Nigerian tales I asked Professor Christian Anieke⁸ about other benefits of stories (from other countries):

“ It is quite interesting how stories [...] can teach children that goodness has got its rewards. Children have to learn that evil has to be avoided and goodness pursued since a good life brings a lot of benefits to human beings. Besides, stories are good for children as they imprint in the landscape of their minds

⁵ Chip Heath is Professor at the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University and Dan Heath is Senior Fellow at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, he has an MBA from Harvard Business School.

⁶ Gary Klein. (1999). *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions*, 206.

⁷ Chip Heath & Dan Heath. (2010). *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. London: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 205.

⁸ Rev. Prof. Christian Anieke, Vice Chancellor of Godfrey Okoye University and Professor of English Language and Studies.

ideas of virtues or vices so that that can become useful members of the human family.

Furthermore, the narrative bridge built by [...] children from Nigeria and Germany through their tales may inspire those interested in intercultural dialogue to find stories in different countries that can foster dialogue and bring young people to see a reflection of their own world in the stories from other places. It is really important that humanity identifies the stories that reveal our common origin as humans. These tales will continue to be an inspiration for children, teachers and those involved in the project of intercultural dialogue. Reading them will be quite refreshing and inspiring. (Anieke in Kantert, 2020, 12)⁹

But what makes stories motivating and inspiring?

The Heath brothers concluded on three successful plot types¹⁰ out of the four types Aristotle classified¹¹:

“ The challenge plot, like in *David and Goliath*. The underdog beating the giant warrior with a self-made slingshot. Does this inspire confidence to overcome obstacles? That good wins over evil and even small people can act big?

Secondly, the connection plot, e.g. *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Good Samaritan*. Both are about relationships with other people and building a bridge between race or religion, ethnic or class. Do they inspire understanding diversity and

⁹ “Introduction by Rev. Prof. Christian Anieke”, in: Meggy Kantert, *Märchen aus Deutschland*, 2020, op. cit., 12.

¹⁰ Chip Heath & Dan Heath, *Made to Stick*, 2010, op. it., 226ff.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Poetics* (350 BC). I, 10, classifies plot (*mythos*) into four types: simple (*haplos*): simple tragic, simple fortunate, and complex (*peplegmenos*): complex tragic and complex fortunate.

overcoming prejudices? Do we learn that ethical behaviour is not limited to people from our own “tribe”?

The third type is the creativity plot: e.g. the guy who invented the microwave after pondering on some melting chocolate in his pocket¹² (And if you have a growth mind-set, you just read the full story in the footnote). Creativity plots inspire us to think out of the box, to try new things and to connect unusual ideas to develop new strategies. (Chip Heath & Dan Heath, 2010, 226ff)

Let us take a closer look at *The Lord of the Rings*¹³ where we will find all three types of plots in one inspiring and motivating story:

- The challenge of the smallest of all inhabitants of Middle Earth to beat the biggest evil ever;
- The connection between the most unlikely fellowship, bridging race, ethnic and class;
- Finally, the creativity the little protagonist develops during his adventure, not to speak of his best friend’s resourcefulness, without whom Frodo never would have succeeded in successfully fighting the evil.

To change behaviour by the use of stories when teaching ethics we can draw on powerful cultural history but also from real life stories. We need to find stories fostering one or more types of plots, like the following, just another story I heard from Obiora. Let us discover the poetic charms of the caterpillar from a Masai tale.

¹² Percy Spencer wondered why the chocolate bar in his pocket melted. He was curious to see if it had something to do with the magnetrons he was building for radar sets at Raytheon. To investigate, he and his colleagues tried heating other foods. Today we have the microwave.

¹³ J. R. R. Tolkien. (1968). *The Lord of the Rings*, Australia: George Allen and Unwin.

2. The caterpillar and the wild animals

“ Once upon a time a caterpillar entered a hare’s house when the owner was absent¹⁴. On his return the hare noticed the marks on the ground, and cried out: “Who is in my house?” The caterpillar replied in a loud voice: “I am the warrior son of the long one, whose anklets have become unfastened in the fight in the Kurtiale country. I crush the rhinoceros to the earth, and make cow’s dung of the elephant! I am invincible!”

The hare went away saying: “What can a small animal like myself do with a person who tramples an elephant underfoot like cow’s dung?” On the road he met the jackal, and asked him to return with him and talk with the big man who had taken possession of his house. The jackal agreed, and when they reached the place, he barked loudly, and said: “Who is in the house of my friend the hare?”

The caterpillar replied: “I am the warrior son of the long one, whose anklets have become unfastened in the fight in the Kurtiale country. I crush the rhinoceros to the earth, and make cow’s dung of the elephant! I am invincible!” On hearing this the jackal said: “I can do nothing against such man,” and left.

The hare then fetched the leopard, whom he begged to go and talk with the person in his house. The leopard, on reaching the spot, grunted out: “Who is in the house of my friend the hare?” The caterpillar replied in the same manner as he had done to the jackal, and the leopard said: “If he crushes the elephant and rhinoceros, he will do the same to me.”

¹⁴ Hollis, Alfred C. (2003). *Masai Myths, Tales and Riddles*. Mineola: Dover Publications Inc.; Abridged Edition, 21-22.

They went away again, and the hare sought out the rhinoceros. The latter, on arriving at the hare's house, asked who was inside, but when he heard the caterpillar's reply he said: "What, he can crush me to the earth! I had better go away then."

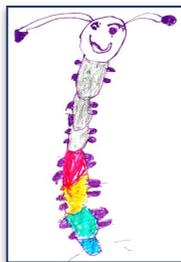
The hare next tried the elephant, and asked him to come to his assistance, but on hearing what the caterpillar had to say, the elephant remarked that he had no wish to be trampled underfoot like cow's dung, and departed.

A frog was passing at the time, and the hare asked him if he could make the man who had conquered all the animals leave his house. The frog went to the door and asked who was inside. He received the same reply as had been given to the others, but instead of leaving, he went nearer, and said: "I, who am strong and a leaper, have come. My buttocks are like the post, and God has made me vile."

When the caterpillar heard this, he trembled, and as he saw the frog coming nearer, he said: "I am only the caterpillar."

The animals who had collected near seized him, and dragged him out.

As a practical thought experiment, let us look at the caterpillar of Chimdiebube, a six-year-old Nigerian child who portrayed the small animal after hearing this story. We could further ponder on how the plot would end in our story and respective culture; what would the animals do with the little troublemaker?



(Chimdiebube's drawing)

When asking this question after telling the story, I usually get the following options from both children and adults:

- They will punish the caterpillar
- They will exile it
- They will kill it

Did you find your own culture’s response?

Here comes the original hilarious and motivating finale:

And they all laughed at the trouble he had given.

Reviewing *The Caterpillar and the Wild Animals* shows us why Obiora chose this story. It contains all three plot types: The most unlikely animal became the hero (challenge), the most unlikely animals work together (connection), and there is no doubt that the little frog gave the most unlikely and resourceful response to the challenge (creativity). Obiora put *The Caterpillar and the Wild Animals* in place of a foreword to open up the interested reader’s mind to understanding Africa today. It is his invitation to join “the ongoing global dialogue between cultures and traditions”. He seeks “to promote a universal civilization based on mutual respect, justice, love and world peace”¹⁵ with his book and begins with a story.

I invite the inclined reader to reflect on whether this story facilitates global dialogue between cultures and traditions for us or indeed promotes respect for other cultures, which can be a first step towards justice, love and world peace.

Imagine the last scene again: *And they all laughed at the trouble he had given.* A peaceful, happy gathering of different species who usually fight or consume each other. Does this promote hope, inspire not to give up so easily, and that taking trouble with humour can be a good thing?

¹⁵ Ike, Obiora F. & Ndidi N. Nnoli-Edozien. (2001). *Understanding Africa. Traditional Legal Reasoning Jurisprudence & Justice in Igboland*. Enugu: CIDJAP Publications, 3.

Stories have to be entertaining and instructive to be inspiring enough to motivate to act according to the learning. They need to draw us into the protagonist's world, to make us emphasize and to identify with him or her. Studies show that mental stimulation by a story can be a key to motivate behaviour. Research has suggested that this "mental rehearsal" can help to anticipate appropriate responses to future situations¹⁶.

According to Heath, stories have double power: they provide stimulation on *how to act* and inspiration in terms of *motivation to act*. They claim, "that the right stories make people act"¹⁷.

If we want to use the power of stories in teaching ethical behaviour, we have to choose the right ones. We can employ animal characters. Or teach with humour. We can choose challenging, connecting and/or creative plots to illustrate ethical behaviour and motivate our students to act accordingly. We can inspire them not to take wrong decisions and prepare them to tackle challenges in difficult, unethical situations. We can promote hope and tolerance. We can nurture intercultural dialogue and finally change lives.

Join Obiora and rediscover the power of stories in teaching ethical behaviour.

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4. Short biography

Meggy Kantert holds a MAS degree in coaching and organisation development from the University of Zurich. She currently works as Director in the Directorate for International Linkages at Godfrey Okoye University, managing the CoPS project for ICMPD in Enugu, Nigeria. Kantert is a teacher at heart and has been teaching and coaching people of various ages in a variety of institutions and countries since 30 years. She strongly believes education is key to peace and received recognition of Caritas Foundation, Cologne in 2014 for her international Children and Students Sponsorship and Education Empowerment programme as well as the Peace Champion Award of the Annual Youth Peace Conference in Enugu, Nigeria. She regards herself a world citizen and whenever not travelling resides in her home country Germany. She owns Kantert Consulting an international coaching and consultancy firm and loves reading stories from all over the world.

