

## Timeless Stream of Astonishment

Mum was a riddle, an enigma, if you like. She was a mystery. Her person was almost more than what I regarded a human being, a woman in the matrix of my village, to be. Because she eluded me. She amazed me and she plunged my small mind into endless wonder over her simple, but powerful abstract being. She was full of wit, wisdom and whimsicality. Her tongue was a river of some of the most astonishing and wonderful sayings and songs I ever heard. Then I did not know about the soul, but if I knew like I do now, I would have wondered at my mother's soul, and ended up christening it the spring-source of all the beautiful, dreamy and higher things that one can imagine. If I were a romantic, I would have called her the head-flower of our entire village; because my mother was beautiful too.

If living was fire, which other parents in the village seemed to imitate in grooming their children, with fire, Mum was like the cooling water of an artless pool – she did not use the fiery aspect of language or the fire of the lash to groom a child. When an unjust and criminal behaviour were your fire, my mother had the water with which to cool you down into your best being.

She was something of a myth, my mother. At times, it was with myth that she watered me into growing up with a hungry fascination to discover the stuff with which she was made.

Mum was elusive. As a result, trying to understand her was as though you were trying to fetch water with a sift. Or trying to look into the heart of light – she dazzled you. Her mystery might have been a light. It was with the mystery of the source of her timely wit, watertight wisdom and sun-brilliant insight that I was fascinated.

I do not know if Mum drilled me with myth, proverbs, stories, the enigmatic, and the riddling seasoning deliberately, knowing of the power and purpose of her intentions, or without knowing of the power of the kind of schooling she rendered upon my life. No, I do not know. But I know, that the calabash of education off which she fed me, knew the bowl of the magic of tempering a child beyond the membrane of things, deep to the depth of the nucleus.

Mum told me that she almost went to school. Almost because she left school on the first day that she went. She told me that she had forgotten her slate and chalk at home, and was instructed by her teacher to go back and fetch them.

When she got home, she found that her mother had just finished cooking sorghum porridge and sour milk; her favourite. And so she was served the delicacy in a wooden bowl, and she sat down on a reed mat with her mother to enjoy it. And just like that, after eating the porridge and the milk, and after eating roasted pumpkin seeds and drinking water from a calabash, my mother never went back to school again; her mother did not ask her about it in a way that showed she wanted her to go back to school.

I guess my grandmother knew and understood only the kind of education that her people employed for the grooming and enlightening of their children. So Mum stayed at home to help her mother with farming, fetching water and wood for fire, cooking and with other domestic enterprises.

But from where did my mother get her wisdom, and the thoroughly thought lessons and acumen with which she impressed upon me the perceptions, the curiosities and the ever-expanding imaginative inclination which her language, her ways and her works, and even her gaze and her silence inspired in me? I do not know. All I did, and still do even today, is wonder at the source of my mother's wit, wisdom and whimsical capacity to astonish me. There was, always, something powerfully simple about Mum. I wondered at her powerful simplicity too.

Was my mother a coded message sent to me by the stars or the great beyond to temper me to think deeply and see clearly, though with calm temperament and simple mode of vision? I wonder, always, when I remember my mother's unconventional ways of using language and teaching a child. Her capacity to sit quietly, just listening to what I knew not.

Here is a sample of my mother's wisdom, which she used one day when I laughed at a boy in our village who was wearing a torn trouser and his ash-like buttocks peeked out at us, as though through a tattered curtain. I had just finished laughing at the boy and rolling on the ground, and I pointed at him for everyone to see and laugh with me when Mum called me. I also farted on the boy's head. Everyone laughed, and I felt so good. Then, Mum called me into the house while I wiped the tears of laughter, and she said to me:

'Son, may the great elephant fill its trunk before it throws its size into the small puddle. Even then, may the great elephant be death-sure that tomorrow it will be immune to thirst. For as long as the sky is still married to the hue blue, and the clouds still do not walk the ground, and thunder still drives the unseen horses with the electric lash of its rage, the puddle is favoured by evolution; therefore, the puddle may one day become a pond, or a river, or better yet, an ocean.' said Mum, after seeing me fart on the head of the boy with a gaping trouser, so that my friends could laugh at him, and see me as amusing – as great.

My mother would always respond to my crude ways with enigmatic speeches like the sample I had just made you taste.

Whenever I treated other children badly because they were inferior or came from a place of lack, or because I thought I was stronger than them, Mum would call me into the house, regard me sternly, and gently tell me a story or say a proverb, or she would challenge me to remember a lesson which she would have taught me some time ago concerning my behaviour by asking me a riddle. On the whole, I did not get the gist of her statements or proverbial rebuke. Naturally, I always expected her to scold or to whip me.

My mother was always inclined to spewing coded messages, as if her tongue were the mother or river of proverbs, or her spirit was the whisperer of enigmatic phrases, which she engraved on my small mind.

Mum's language or words of correction were always obscure to me – coded. Nevertheless, because of the manner with which she said the words, I got the larger idea of her words by the tone and the sage look that she trained at me.

As for the sample of her proverbial reprimand – the great elephant and the puddle – I got the gist of it many years later. Decoding it, I got that the future belongs to no one; even those who are great in a present moment, have no inkling about tomorrow's angle.

Mum is a timeless stream of astonishment, from which I drank myths that opened up roads of enchantment for me. I never afforded inertia, as a result of Mum's stores and stores of oral delights that peopled my spirit. For every future I enter, Mum's lessons, like gold in the stones of time, are found, decoded for me by the relevance of the time, the situation. When they are echoed, and I am called into their attention by a moment's mood or an hour's need for clarity and understanding. Then I remember, I must be the best human being for others. Doing exactly that has brought me a cooling stream of joy and people's affection and aid and respect – because I gave these things.

There is one outstanding statement I remember her saying to me was when I told her that I do not see a future for me, she said: Son, just know that when you do not see the future, you are one of the lucky ones.'

'But Mum,' I replied quickly, because I thought I knew what I was talking about and she did not.

'How am I lucky when all my friends, all my peers, and my teachers speak of their lives and their greatness as that which resides in the future, awaiting their arrival? And they seem to have a smell of it, and know where they are going while I do not at all?' I asked.

What Mum said in reply, calmly, blew my mind away. I do not think I have recovered from the blow yet.

'Son that is because you must be in your future. You just need to see that and begin acting in accordance with its presence.' Said Mum, blowing me away.

I could feel the fabric of my perception altered after what Mum said.

'I must begin with the cooking now, please go prepare the fire for me.' Mum said while I was chewing on what she said, which blew my mind. It was as if she had not just spoken like a sage.

Mum is now gone from the world of the living, but always, when I find her wisdom in the air or in a moment, or in a mood, it is as if someone is pulling down at my jaw, because it drops in uplifting astonishment.

Sometimes I weep tears delicious to the soul without knowing why. I guess it is a teary libation I pour for Mum – the timeless stream of astonishment.

**The story of my late mother, Nthabiseng Doreen Mumsy Masoga**