

Stories of old revisited

Nomsa Mdlalose/Nkulumayo is a storyteller. She digs deep into her past to uncover stories that help her to better understand life.

I don't remember why I became a storyteller but I remember growing up as a little girl in Kwa-Mashu township in Durban. I remember running and chasing after the butterflies and the locusts. I remember not wanting the sun to set because I would have to stop playing my favourite game *umagalobha* or u-3 tin (as we called it at that time)

Although I don't remember why I became a storyteller, I remember as a little girl listening to a story of the rooster and the hawk told to us by our friend who heard it from her granny. We might have been tired of hunting the locusts. I also remember my father telling us, his children, stories that we thought were the most boring stories we had ever heard. He said those stories would help us in our education. He believed that education, especially matric was the key, to a good life.

Finding that key, I can tell you now, was the worst frustration of my youthful life. You see I did my matric during the 1986 riots. You can now guess why I could not pass or even write exams for three consecutive years. It was not a big deal to know that one will get the key after 12 years of schooling, but really stressful to suddenly dawn in you that the 12 years will be extended to 13, then 14 and 15 years. Ouch!

I began believing that those

boring stories were actually important. Finally, I have the key. So when I passed my matric I then tried to open doors but the key did not work. I looked around to see if there was any other door that could match the key I had in my hands, nothing worked. If it did work the door would open only half way and that was not helpful to me. Only later I learnt that the key had changed. Matric was no longer the key, but a bachelor degree was.

From there I worked towards achieving a degree, to my surprise after having obtained the latest key, the door locks had moved with the times. The key no longer matched the locks. Like the previous key, it opened half way and quickly closed.

I began to wonder about my father's stories. No wonder we thought his stories were boring, there was no truth in them either. Having parents who struggled to get you through undergrad, there was no way of comprehending a master's degree. End of story and life. Imagine my frustration. It was at that moment that I remembered the story of rooster and the hen.

THE ROOSTER AND THE HEN

These two guys, the rooster and the hawk were great buddies. They spent most of their time together no matter what. Those days hawk



lived up in the sky with his family, and rooster lived down on earth with his family too, his wife hen and children.

Everytime Hawk came to visit his best friend Rooster, he brought his house key with him. On his arrival he would give the key to the hen for safekeeping. The hen would take the key, cotho, cotho, cotho to a corner and safely put the key into a small old calabash that she inherited from her granny. Then Rooster and Hawk would go out looking for food for their families.

The two had such a wonderful

time together. They would talk, laugh, remind each other of their naughtiness when they were still young boys. When they were tired or had enough of hunting they would sit down under the tree, then talked about their manhood.

There was something that was not right with Mr Hawk, he was full of himself. First Hawk was not good at greeting, secondly, thank you was not his favourite word. Although Hen was aware of this she never said anything to her husband or anyone else. The children were also very much aware of it.

One day when the two were out in their daily hunting expedition, two of the children went into the house *ehokweni*, they saw the calabash, they looked inside and saw the key. One of them called out to others, "Come and see, the proud man's key is in here." You see, the children did not like the hawk very much they thought he was too much of himself, "Even when our mother offers him something to eat he does not accept it," they said. "He does not smile to us," commented another one. Let us play with the key and dirty it. "Oh it will be so good to see him angry," they said and laughed.

The first child took the key to hide it somewhere. The others hid their faces so they could not see where the key was hidden. "Come look for the key," he called to his siblings. They came running, *tswi-tswi-tswi*, they looked and looked until one of them found it. The one who found it was her turn to hide the key, so she did. When she finished she called others to come and look for it. The game went on like that, they were all excited, and were laughing and happily accusing one another of cheating. The game continued for a long time until the key got lost. The last one who had hidden it could not find it where he thought he had put it.

The chicklets scratched all over the ground but the key was nowhere to be found. They scratched under the grass, in between the logs of wood, on the dry ground but there was no key. They were now very scared. They had to think of something that would save them, but could not come up with anything clever to say to their mother especially.

At that time they saw their father and his friend, Hawk coming from their daily hunt. "Let us quickly get inside the house, sit quietly and pretend that nothing happened," one child suggested to other. They were all quiet and sweet when their father and Hawk came in. "Hen," called Hawk, "bring my house key. I am so tired I want to go to my house and rest," he said. "Oh, Mr. Hawk I have soup here, can I give you some," asked Hen. "No, I said I want to go to my house, I have plenty of food there, just bring my key," responded Hawk.

Hen then went to take the key at the usual place. She was surprised that the key was not there. She asked the children if they had not seen it but they all said no. Hawk now looked very angry, he was moving up and down the house.

One child decided to confess that they lost the key while playing hide and seek with it. Hawk started cursing and threatening. The whole chicken family went outside to look for the key, they scratched and scratched but all in vain. Hawk flew up back to his family, but not without telling them how much he was going to make their lives a living hell if they did not give him his key by morning the following day.

Rooster, Hen and all the children looked for the key the whole night. As the dawn cracked they saw Hawk hovering about their heads. It was clear that the key had not been found. He uttered no word but

snatched one of the chicklets and flew away.

"Please my friend Hawk, do not do this to me, bring back my child. We will find your key, please," begged Rooster. Hawk was gone, he did not bother to listen. The next day it was the same thing, but this time the children ran to their mother's big wings and hid underneath them. So it is said that, that is why the chickens are always scratching on the ground they are still looking for that key.

LIFE IS SCRATCHING

I remember feeling sorry for the chicken for always scratching on the ground. I wondered if I could help them find the key and relieve them of their misery. I then decided that during my spare time, that is, when I was not chasing the butterflies and playing *umagalobha* or *u-3 tin* I would help the chicken look for the key. I don't remember when I gave up the search. It was probably after I noticed that chickens aren't having any problem. Scratching is their survival, their way of life. It was what made them chickens in the first place.

It was also my sudden realisation about my own key. That life was about scratching, looking and finding, forgetting and remembering. And that stories are there to remind us when we forget, and find us when we are looking. They are there to help us to continue looking. However, unlike chickens, no matter how long it takes to find, we must realise what we have found. LB

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