

Building Ways and Dreams: Remembering Prof. David Rubadiri

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Abstract

This article focuses on the legacy that Prof. David Rubadiri left behind through his poetry and through his passion for mentoring young artistic minds. Through various recollections of my interactions with the late professor, I reflect on Rubadiri's positive influence on my academic and literary journeys. The article reads the impact that Rubadiri's life had on my life through the evocation of powerful quotations from other writers, which aptly sum up Rubadiri's legacy as a writer, freedom fighter, humanitarian and mentor who touched many people's lives in profound ways. Through the article, I show the humility, selflessness, generosity, kindness, passion and intellectual curiosity that characterised Rubadiri's life.

Keywords: Rubadiri, mentorship, generosity, teacher, intellectual

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“An idle mind is the devil’s workshop” or so the famous adage goes. I had been looking forward to idle days after what I considered a gruelling three months of preparing and then writing the 2001 Malawi School Certificate of Education examinations at Marymount Secondary School, exams that would determine the trajectory of my life. As many would agree with me (at least I hope), the idea of rolling in bed way after sleep has deserted you is way more appealing than accepting the reality that life “ku world” (a colloquial term in Malawi for life after completing secondary school education) is like a desert in the coldest day in winter and a scorching day in summer. I never bargained for long conversations with boredom. When the wait is long, seeds of doubt about yourself, about your future, begin to sprout in your mind: “Did I answer that question correctly?”, “I shouldn’t have waited until last minute to revise my history notes!”, “I shouldn’t have dozed

off in Mr. G.J.M. Banda's Physical Science class!", "I shouldn't have entertained the thought of bunking Mr. Mateyu's Geography class!", "Was my French accent convincing enough in French orals?" This litany of thoughts greeted me every morning as I lay in bed after everyone had left for work. At night too, the litany haunted me as I forced myself to sleep long after everyone else had knocked off. And the most paralyzing of all would be a resounding statement that would catch me off-guard in the middle of the day, in between moments of trying to keep busy: "You will not make it to college." I was afraid I would be a disappointment to my family.

My older sister was already a shining star at Chancellor College, University of Malawi, and my parents were extremely proud of her. They held the same expectations for me. But unlike my sister who had always maintained A+ grades in secondary school, my performance in Form Three had dwindled from being an A+ student to simply being an above average student. I had convinced myself that Form Three was a long way from Form Four and that I had "suffered" preparing for and writing Junior Certificate examinations. After all, Form Three had been christened by others before us as *pamtsetse*, meaning "slope" where one was supposed to relax and enjoy the effortless glide. So, I decided to read *pamtsetse* as a metaphor for the imaginary joy-ride that I was going to take through flights of fantasy that I would create on paper. I had always enjoyed reading and composition in my English classes and I figured this would be an ideal time for me to take a journey into a world farway from Marymount Secondary School. Travel I did to distant places and I took passengers along with me. In no time my notebooks were filled with stories about romance, tragedy and hope that captivated my teenage, fantasy-crazed readership that were my fellow classmates. We could all escape, even if it was just for a moment, into a world that was different from the routine of being woken up by a loud bell at 5 a.m, bathing cold water in the freezing Mzuzu weather, cleaning at your station, eating *mgaiwa* porridge and assembling at the hall before marching to class at 7.30 a.m. My classmates cheered me on and that gave me the confidence to write on. I imagined myself as a "novelist" and that perhaps I could make a living out of my writing! So day in and out, I wrote. If I

wasn't writing during evening "prep", I was building up characters in my head. I wrote while my friends studied and when they asked me when my next "novel" was coming out, I would tell them "soon". The "novels" would come back to me after weeks, tattered, but I was happy that I was making people happy with my stories. I heard that even people in other classes, Form Fours especially, had begun reading my "novels". I was happy until my grades for that term came out and I got a disappointed letter from my parents wondering what had happened to my performance. It was a wake-up call for me and I decided to temporarily bury the writer and her characters even though time and again, I would have short writing stints.

"For a while" is a phrase whose length can't be measured. At least by the person who's waiting."

— Haruki Murakami, *South of the Border, West of the Sun*

It was memories of these joy-rides that haunted me as I waited. I felt guilty having wasted time doing things that in my mind I concluded would not get me to college and would not get me a degree. I had messed up and I would be a laughing stock for everyone. I began to imagine that even my parents doubted that I would make it to college considering that I had wasted precious time playing around in the formative years of preparing for MSCE. I waited, eager and afraid of the results. Fear was having a field day on my idle mind, paralysing it and incapacitating it from taking any more joy-rides. "You need to find something to do. Otherwise, *uziliwona tsiku kutalika* (the day will seem long to you)!" My mother would tell me this one day and my father, the next. "But what can I do?" I would ask myself everyday. "I can't bring myself to write anymore and reading is not fun anymore." You see, that's what fear and doubt does to a human being. It makes things you once did with a lot of ease appear to be an uphill task. As I contemplated on what to do to keep my mind active, my mother said to me one day at lunch, "I have told my boss that you are also a writer and he says he would like to read your work one day. He is a famous poet especially in Uganda." I had heard about my mother's new boss who had come back to Malawi after many years of being in exile. "He is such

a nice man,” my mother would say about him. “He is like a father to me.” After that conversation, I wondered how the conversation about me being a “writer” had cropped up. But I would soon learn about the generosity of spirit that my mother’s boss, Prof. James David Rubadiri, possessed.

“I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them.”

- Chinua Achebe “The Novelist as a Teacher”

Apparently, the fact that I was interested in writing would come up on several occasions in conversations between my mother and her boss before I even had the opportunity to meet him. Prof. Rubadiri was not like any other boss. He took interest in his Personal Assistant’s life and that of her children. My mother told him that I was waiting for the MSCE results and that I was wallowing in boredom. He sent a word through her, “Sa, Prof. Rubadiri says he is very confident that you will pass your exams. He says he has faith in you.” “But he doesn’t know me.” I thought. “How can he say he has faith in me?” The doubt in me chose to dismiss his words. After all, he didn’t know me. He would continue to ask my mother about his “writer friend” and how she was doing while waiting and he would always tell my mother to tell me that he had faith in me and that I shouldn’t worry. “Tell my writer friend that I am waiting for her work.” I have always wondered why he, a well established writer and scholar, chose to affirm a scared fifteen-year old girl, who had once fancied herself as a writer. I later learnt that he believed in the potency of the word and its ability to change peoples lives and the world, that he believed in the pursuit of knowledge and the power of knowledge.

“Give these books to my writer friend to keep her busy!” Like any established writer and keen scholar, Prof. Rubadiri had a vast library and did not hesitate to lend out his books. He asked my mother to give me what he called African classics from which to start from. Other than Mariama Ba’s *Scarlet Song* and a few other African short stories which I had read in secondary school, I had not read much of African literature and frankly, I thought it was boring because of the influence of colonial curriculum that I had been subjected to. I devoured the two classics, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o *The River Between*, like there was no tomorrow. I had been liberated! My perspective begun to change as I read autobiographies and biographies of prominent figures that Prof. Rubadiri thought I had to read about. He donated and shared more of his books from his fellow writers and the more I read, the less bored I got and the more confidence and affirmation I got as African girl and as an aspiring writer. I had discovered a world which I never knew existed.

“Every secret of a writer’s soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind, is written large in his works.”

— Virginia Woolf

Before she retired, we had always jokingly teased my mother about how she used to take her job too seriously. She had (wo)manned the Vice Chancellor’s office for many years and she took pride in her job. As someone belonging to an “old guard of PAs” as she fondly referred to herself, as her children, we knew not to mess around in her office whenever we passed by. We would sit on the brown seats in her office just like anyone else and we would be told not to disturb her because she was working. One day, I was coming from shopping in town and had passed by my mother’s office to hitch a ride with her at lunch hour. I was sitting quietly at a corner flipping through a newsletter I had seen several times when the door to the Vice Chancellor’s office flung open. Towering in the doorway, his eyes were focused on the document he was reading before he turned to address my mother who was

seated behind a mahogany desk, waiting to hear what he wanted to say. I watched him from the corner of my eye, deep brown skin, grey hair, as he conversed with my mother. He turned to go back into his office but stopped in his tracks when he saw me. "Hello." The smile reached his eyes as he greeted me. I was intimidated to see him in flesh. "Sir, this is my daughter Asante." I heard my mother say. I stood up as he extended a hand to shake mine. "Ah, my writer friend! Very good to meet you!" His hand shake was firm but gentle and shook my unsure hand as if he had known me for years. I marvelled at the warmth of his words as he asked how the waiting was going and how my writing was going. I told him I hadn't written anything recently. He told me he was looking forward to reading my work. He went back to his office leaving me amazed at the sincerity of his words. He was genuinely interested in reading my work even though I was just a young girl unsure of herself and her place in the world. Even though he was an established writer who was well published and way older, he saw me as a peer. I was surprised when, some days later, he sent me an anthology which contained some of his poems and he asked me to give him my honest thoughts about his poetry. I had not decided then that I would study literature or that I would be a literary scholar but Prof. Rubadiri gave me the first taste of what it means to be a literary critic. I gave him what I thought were my honest thoughts about his poems and I asked him questions about his poems, why he used certain words and if he would write the poems any differently years later. His writing was flawless. As Abasi Kiyimba remarks of Prof. Rubadiri's poetry, "[he] makes you wonder why you did not write these experiences yourself before he did, because he captures them so simply, succinctly, and yet so powerfully" (qtd in Rubadiri 7). He indulged my young, curious mind by writing back that my comments about his poems were insightful and that my questions had made him think about his poems differently. I had gained confidence through his sincere interest to read my work and I was eager to hear what he thought about my work. I was eager to learn from him. Through his affirmations, I began to believe in myself and in my abilities. I began to see myself as a writer again. I sent him my short stories and I am sure that there weren't as well polished as the numerous stories he had written and read but he saw the potential in my writing and generously commented and complimented them. I vividly remember one comment he made on

one of my short stories which has stuck with me all these years and which I have tried to pass on to my creative writing class. In that particular short story Prof. Rubadiri had noticed that I had gotten tired toward the end of the story and therefore was in such a hurry to resolve and end the story. It was true! I was indeed exhausted having written numerous pages that I thought would eventually be turned into a novella. When I couldn't sustain my energy anymore I abruptly cut the course of the lives of my characters. I thought my readers wouldn't notice but being an experienced reader and writer himself who paid attention to detail, he gently pointed that out to me. He advised me to always see my story and characters through until the end, not to get tired. Although this was made in the context of the short story, I have always felt Prof. Rubadiri was talking about more than seeing a story through to the end. I think that was his poetic way of telling me that success in life was about sticking it out until the end, not giving up mid-way or just as you are about to finish. This wisdom and generosity at a time in my life when I really needed affirmation boosted my confidence and I began to envision my life beyond the confines of the fear that had characterised my life for the past few months.

To be heroic may mean nothing more than this then, to stand in the face of the status quo, in the face of an easy collapse into the madness of an increasingly chaotic world and represent another way.

- Mike Alsford

Informally, before I even knew I was going to sit in literature classes for four years at Chancellor College, he began to take me through literary studies through the novels, collections of poetry that he would share. He also shared with me old, black and white video cassettes of him teaching a class at Soche Hill College as part of a series of lectures on African literature and asked me to make summaries of what had been learnt. From Prof. Rubadiri's classes at Soche, I first learnt of Wole Soyinka's "Telephone Conversation" which I would re-encounter in my first year in the Introduction to Literature class. I first heard of the term *negritude* from Prof. Rubadiri's black and white video cassettes and when I learnt about negritude poetry

in my second year Introduction to African Literature class, I could easily relate to what I had already learnt two years earlier. I also learnt that he was Malawi's first Permanent Representative to the United Nations through the videos he lent me. Every new thing I learnt in these videos, I would do further research on. I thrived on getting more knowledge and learning new things. The more I researched, the more I learnt about him, the more I learnt about his *humility and humanity*. I learnt that he and his wife Gertrude, fondly known as G, had been in the struggle for liberation against colonialism and had been detained during the 1959 state of emergency. Like other Malawian heroes such as Orton and Vera Chirwa, their names had been obliterated from the national script of the liberation struggle by Kamuzu Banda's autocratic regime. I learnt that he had resigned from his position as the UN Representative out of sympathy and solidarity with the six ministers that had been fired by Banda during the 1964 cabinet crisis. I wondered why he never talked about it, why he never wrote about it. *My mother once asked him to write about his life one day and he responded that he had nothing special to write about his life.*

“Who wants to become a writer? And why? Because it's the answer to everything. ... It's the streaming reason for living. To note, to pin down, to build up, to create, to be astonished at nothing, to cherish the oddities, to let nothing go down the drain, to make something, to make a great flower out of life, even if it's a cactus.”
—Enid Bagnold

English was an obvious choice of study for me when I got selected to pursue a Bachelor of Arts Humanities degree. Prof. Rubadiri still followed my progress through my mother, asking how I was doing and if I was enjoying studying literature. I would still borrow books from him and he was always open to sharing his books to those that were interested. When his first ever anthology, *An African Thunderstorm and Other Poems* came out in 2004, he gave my sister and I an autographed copy of the collection. His poems had been published in many anthologies but his work had never been published in one single anthology. I was in second year then and

I had begun harbouring ambitions of becoming a journalist. I asked him if I could interview him on his life as a poet especially since his anthology had been published. He gladly obliged and he asked me to send him the questions. As Vice Chancellor, he was a very busy man but he was generous enough to spare some time out of his busy schedule to engage with me and he ended the interview with “Thank you most sincerely for dialoguing with me so deeply and meaningfully.” Perhaps, I should have been the one thanking him for initiating a dialogue with a teenager who was unsure of herself and her abilities. I should have thanked him for believing in me, sharing himself through his writing and inspirational life, for mentoring me and encouraging me to embrace the freedom that comes with imagining possibilities.

My family still kept in touch with him when he retired in 2005 and went to settle in Mzuzu. My mother and sister visited him at his home a couple of times in his post-retirement. Unfortunately, I did not get the chance to see him in Mzuzu. I remember one time I went to visit my sister who was living in Mzuzu at the time but unfortunately, circumstances beyond my control could not allow us to see him and G. My sister kept us updated about his well-being though as she would visit them at their house in Kaning’ina and they would frequently meet at St. Mark’s Anglican Church. Even though my communication with him faded when he retired from University of Malawi, the impact he has had on my life as a writer, a literary scholar and as a human being endures on. There are life-lessons that I drew from him and that, I hope, I am paying forward to the younger generation of aspiring writers and scholars that I meet in class every day. The news of his passing on September 15, 2018 saddened me. The legend was gone. I am, however, able to take comfort in the legacy he left behind which is told by a multitude of people like me whose lives he touched through his writing, mentoring, teaching, listening, (grand)fathering and by simply being him. Prof. Rubadiriri left me a challenge in his autograph in *An African Thunderstorm and Other Poems*: “You encouraged this small effort. Now I need yours to print!” I am yet to rise up to that challenge.

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