

Chancellor

I am a writer, yet today when I need them most, I find myself without the words that can adequately express how I feel about the honor that you have bestowed on me today. I am recipient of ten honorary doctorates from top universities in Europe, America, Africa and New Zealand, indeed my own university of California, Irvine, has bestowed on me the University medal, the highest accolade it can give to anybody. I am grateful for all them. But this honor, from KCA, is extra-special. It is honor from home. Not the least of what adds to the grandeur of the moment is the fact that I have received this in the company of my wife, Njeeri, and my children. I wish the entire Thiong'o family were present, but I feel their spirits, the living and those that have passed on. You see, I come from a big family, four mothers, one father, and several siblings. They worked on land, mostly, but in the evening we would gather in any of our mother's houses, but mostly at Wangari's, the senior mother, and tell stories. Those that have read my memoir, *Dreams in a Time of War*, will know how I value those evening sessions; they were formative in my early education and my awareness of the world.

At the center of my world was my mother, Wanjikū wa Thiong'o, both as part of the large family of several mothers and siblings, but also as head of a single parent family, when she and my father separated. The present occasion takes me back to her, sixty nine years ago, in my village in Limuru. I was nine, a calico cloth, my only wear, hanging from the right shoulder, when she looked at me and asked me if I would like to go to school. I could hardly believe my ears, for as I have expressed in my books, *Weep not Child* and *Dreams in a Time of war*, I could not then understand how she could have

read my secret desires. Not the least of my joys was the prospect of wearing shirt and shorts for the first time in my life. The dream of education was clearly hers before it became mine, but I embraced it fully. For years she supervised my home work, asking questions, gently but relentlessly, till she had a sense of how I had done. I poured out everything to her attentive ears. It took sometime for me to realize that she could not read or write, she always acted as if she could, and she always seemed spot on, when it came to advice and guidance.

I remember the moment when I came home and announced that I had scored one hundred percent, and she asked me; is that the best you could have done? I was not sure about the hundred percent thing myself, whether indeed it meant the best, but this would always be the question: is that the best? Whatever the score, she wanted to know if I had put in my best.

She thus ingrained me the notion of the best, the notion of giving my all in all, for, that was what she really wanted to know. Not so much the grade, but whether or not I had given it my best shot. She seemed to value the effort even more than the actual result.

Her love of the best was matched only her hatred of arrogance, what she called Mwĩĩyo. Ndikwenda mwĩĩyo or Twara mwĩĩyo waku na kũu nja! I don't need your arrogance, or Take your arrogance out of my house, was an admonition I had heard deliver to me and my brothers and sisters. She believed arrogance invited bad spirits. So humility in achievement was very important to her.

But she also believed in the notion of the way. Before I set out to school, she would always say, Kinyĩra Njĩra Gatagafĩ, like saying, take the middle way, but take care.

Like the Chinese Taoism, her notion of the way, *njĩra*, was both physical and moral, the idea of a moral path. For her, *njĩra*, the way, was that which avoided extremes.

This moral path, the right way, did not always mean following the easiest or the most popular path. She chastised me for doing things, especially those she thought wrong, but would become sharper in her words, if I gave the excuse that other children in my company had done it. She loathed lies. So whenever I was involved in an incident, she wanted to know all the facts of the situation, before she took any action. Quite frankly it was easier to tell all than endure her steely voice, or sigh of deep disappointment, if I had played loose and fast with the facts. For that reason, if I did the right thing, even though the only voice, she never said, why didn't you do like the others? She always stood by me.

These ideals would help years later, when, at Makerere, a second year undergraduate student, I told fellow students I was writing a book. You write a novel? How many professors here have written novels? You can understand their skepticism. In 1962, when I began to write, Kenya was still a colony, and no African person in Kenya, or East Africa for that matter, had published a novel. So some students, jeered instead of cheering.

My mother was not surprised. She just wanted to know if it would be the best. I don't know about the best, but the manuscript of the novel, was good enough to have won the first place in the East African Novel Writing Competition and for it to have found a publisher who issued it under the title, *The River Between*. It was second of my novels, the other being *Weep Not Child*. In my memoir, *Birth of a Dream weaver: a memoir of a writers awakening*. A I tell how I entered Makerere in 1959, a colonial subject, and left in

1964, a citizen. Between subject and citizen, I had written two novels, three plays, six short stories, and over 60 pieces of journalism, and still graduated top of my class.

Others may have been wowed by this. But not my mother. She just wanted to know if that was the best I could have done.

I believe that the ideals of the best, honesty, humility, public service, the right path, ideals embodied in my peasant mother, fit with those this University. In his 1869 book, *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold, a great educator, wrote of culture and education as “being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically”

The best that has been thought and said in the world! That should be an ideal for KCA and all our universities.

Kenya must demand the best from each of us and from our Universities. Kenya must be at the forefront in new discoveries in the arts, technology, innovations. We have a glorious history to be proud. At a time when the Britain ruled over half the world, Kenya was the first to take arms against the might of the British Empire or any other European empire. Kenyan people, not the colonial sate, set up Gĩthũngũri Teacher Training College, the Fisrt College of higher education in Kenya. The colonial settler state was so disturbed by the great act of self-reliance, that in 1952, they stopped the college, and turned the building into a prison where they hung soldiers of the Kenya land and Freedom Army. A symbol of excellence and pride was turned into a shrine of shame and humiliation.

Today we are called upon to once again erect shrines of pride and glory. We are called upon do what may seem impossible. Take up intellectual arms to make Kenya lead the world in the arts, science, and technology. We can do it, if we do not let greed and the ideology of very person for themselves corrupt our ideals. This University, all our Universities, must embody the ideals of the best, we cannot play the game of seconds.

And because my mother Wanjiku wa Thiong'o embodied the ideal of the best, it is in her name, and the names of all Kenyan mother out there, that I gratefully accept this award.

But I also want to take the example of my mother, and her impact on my life, to talk to my fellow graduates today. This morning, at the reception of Safari Park, I met Judge Fatuma Sichale, a member of the High Court. She introduced her self and then started talking to me, not on what she does as a member of the bench, nothing about judicial or legal philosophy, but on her children. She has given them all African names. This is of course what it should be, and I applauded her judgement as a parent. But then she said: but professor, it is all because of you, the public lectures, you gave at the University of Nairobi way back in th1 1970s. She was a student at the time. She heard me talk about names, identity. In particular, she heard me talk how the English word black;

Black market

Black sheep

Black spot

Black heart

Black devil

Black list

Black Mail

You know what

White lies.

That lecture impacted her, she wanted to tell me, and her giving her children African names, had origins in that lecture.

Yesterday Professor Olubayi Olubayi told us about his grandmother, Echuma Ko Polo, who knew all about her environment and made things from what was around her. She made medicines from plants, soap from plants, butter and yogurt from milk, and seed selections. She used friction with sticks to make fire. She did not need matches. This impressed the young child and ignited his interest in science. He would go to get his PHD in microbiology.

Our actions matter. Our ideas matter, our examples matter. Don't say, you are not a leader. Don't confuse leadership with Bureaucracy. What you do can be that candlelight that lights the way. I can only borrow words from the Guyanese poet: Martin Carter, in his famous poem, looking at your hands:

*I have learnt  
from books dear friend  
of men dreaming and living  
and hungering in a room without a light  
who could not die since death was far too poor  
who did not sleep to dream, but dreamed to change  
the world.  
And so  
if you see me  
looking at your hands  
listening when you speak  
marching in your ranks  
you must know  
I do not sleep to dream, but dream to change/the world.*

