



Awakened WOMAN

~ LESSONS ~

3 | Reclaiming Your Voice

Lesson 3 Part 3

Transcript

Early in my life, financial poverty and a difficult early marriage silenced me. Yet, despite my own silencing and failure to reclaim my voice early on, I recognized the power of storytelling. You see, I come from a long line of storytellers, we all do. As our ancestors believed in the power of storytelling, they knew storytelling could heal and help us reclaim stronger voices for ourselves and for our families and our communities. Let me share a bit about my heritage of storytellers so that you might remember, seek out or even imagine your own path to storytelling.

Seated, cross-legged and barefoot around an open fire, I heard stories that had been passed from one generation to the next. Stories of heroic women who raised their families despite adversities. Stories of their strengths and skills in healing, but also stories of enduring a world ruled by men. Most painfully, stories about how their dreams were slowly silenced before their own eyes. At times sad, but cumulatively, these were stories of women using their voices to narrate and to redefine their lives. Women refusing to be victims and declaring themselves part of the solution. Like these women, my grandmother was not only a storyteller, she was a healer, a traditional midwife, the village psychologist. Women like my grandmother served as the library of our memories, including generations to come.

These women housed the stories about heroic women who raised their families despite adversities. Stories of their strength and healing and yes, stories of enduring a world ruled by others. One story of my grandmother remains vivid in my memory. After a long day away from home, my grandmother arrived late

in the evening, after dinner had been served. And she found the village women sitting around an open fire. Limping slowly toward the open fire, my grandmother looked tired and resigned. We knew, something terrible must have happened because her walk was familiar. Either my grandmother lost a baby during delivery or the mother or both.

Then why did we hear the mourning call? The grieving call. We whispered amongst ourselves. My grandmother heaved her weight down and she joined the circle of women. We waited to hear news of the delivery. The silence was palpable. My grandmother sighed twice before someone offered her water. "Aiwa, ndipei mukombe wechingoto kana pane chakasara, nditonhedze pfungwa." "No. No. Please, give me the leftover beer, to cool off my soul." No one dared ask what had happened. This story was hers to tell when she was ready to tell it. My mother hurriedly went inside the hut and brought the beer in a mukombe or gourd. Taking one big gulp, my grandmother wiped her mouth and then settled into her body.

We could see my grandmother was visibly shaken and worse, as she was growing old, her eyes started to fail her and her hands would shake uncontrollably. Now all eyes were on my grandmother, but in turn, my grandmother's eyes were set on the red embers of the fire, her body now completely still.

"I have lost the twins," she declared. "This should not have happened. The mom labored long and hard, but both babies were stillborn. There was nothing I could do except to perform the burial ritual."

Even though my grandmother was tired, she walked everybody in that circle through the birth process, like the master preparing his students. She described how she had prepared the herbs to ease the birthing of the woman's pain, how she massaged her belly to aid in the afterbirth and how she consoled the family at the birth of not only one, but two profound losses, and when my grandmother finished speaking, she paused and then she spread her hands out for all to see. She folded them back. "These hands, these hands, these hands have delivered so many babies in my life and no birth has affected me like that of the two babies." The women's eyes scanned my grandmother's wrists and fingers taking in every wrinkle on her well-worn hands that had touched so much life and death.

With a hint of laughter, my grandmother continues. "In these eyes, I've seen so many vaginas. Vaginas. That's no wonder why I am blind, but my mind is sharp." In that moment, her frailty and pain was shared with a healing laughter.

We in the circle laughed and when my grandmother joined in, she laughed so hard, exposing her one remaining tooth, allowing us to see the beauty of her vulnerability and hear her wisdom beyond age and poverty.

In this moment and in this life, my grandmother became the author of her life. She's not an illiterate, subordinate, oppressed, weak, old woman, but instead, an experienced and compassionate healer, a humanitarian, a leader. That is how we remembered my grandmother.

My sister, at this point are you starting to see the importance of reclaiming our voices in the story we tell? Do you see how my grandmother showed us how a story should be told? The world would have told a very different version of my grandmother's story if she had not told it to us herself: to outsiders and foreigners who did not understand her way of life and her deep hunger, she was often seen as little more than a poor, illiterate woman, an uninformed "bush" healer, victim of a patriarchal social system.

This is not the whole truth about my grandmother. It is a partial truth. In this storytelling, my grandmother takes her power. She spoke in the language of women's liberation because in this storytelling, not only did she walk the listeners through the fullness of midwifery experiences, she also claimed her wisdom. She claimed her intelligence and asserted her value. I call upon this story from my grandmother and women before you to inspire you to become the heroine of your own story. Can you, my sister, like my grandmother, see the implications of not reclaiming and owning your story? How through storytelling and owning her voice, we are able to look beyond the narrative that others have come to define my grandmother.

At this point, it may be helpful to access the application activity that can be found on the lesson's main page and complete Steps Two and Three. In these steps, you are invited to consider three to four labels that you know the world has used to define you and then to consider instead how you want to define yourself.

And here is how it might look if my grandmother had completed Step Two. The first word or label is what others may have used to define my grandmother. And the portion after instead is how my grandmother defined herself through the stories she told. Others would have said "illiterate" instead of "intelligent, wise, and smart." "Uninformed bush healer" instead of "an experienced and compassionate healer who believed and lived experiences and lived evidence." "Poor" instead of "a humanitarian and a compassionate leader." Others would have said "old" instead of "enchantingly wise and spiritually rich."

Step Three, in the Application Activity, I'll walk you through how to generate your own defining statement. Once you have this statement, put it where you can see it. Continue to reflect upon that statement. Edit as you like. You're also invited to use it during the guided and inspirational audio recording for this lesson. I share my grandmother's story to arouse a deep hunger in you, a desire to carry forward the work of the storyteller of this great woman, but it's not just my ancestors that invite you to step into your story. Across generations, yours and mine have told stories to not only survive, but to flourish, to find each other, to claim the truth of their lives, to share their heritage in joy, to know themselves through the mirror of their listeners, to imagine themselves differently, and also to give themselves a different narrative than how others define them.

My sister, can you see how by telling your story, you follow in the footsteps of your ancestors, how you become your own historian? In the next part of this lesson, we'll continue with teachings that highlight the value of reclaiming our voices through storytelling and more importantly, gaining the tools for how you, too, can reclaim your voice.