

A few years ago, around the time I stepped down from the Amherst board, I stepped back onto Nigerian soil for the first time in almost four decades. Before I had taken ten steps from the jet bridge, an airport official demanded undue payments from many of the foreign passengers coming off my flight. Once outside the airport, it was raining and muddy and I was caught in a scrum of humanity, pushing and pulling. Wanting to sell me all manner of objects. Wanting to drive me to my hotel. Wanting. Wanting. Wanting. Rather than pull back, I plunged into the crowd. A big smile on my face and feeling at home.

Whether at the airport, or in Lagos or Abuja, I saw myself wherever I went. In the young boy selling wares by the side of the road. In the soldier, a cigarette hanging from his mouth and an automatic weapon resting on his knee. And in the infant strapped to his mother's back as she walked through a market with goods piled high upon her head.

I was born in Nigeria, Ibadan to be more specific. The son of a single mother, a domestic servant with little formal education. With my mother's blessing, I left Nigeria before I was five years old, the beneficiary of chance. The beneficiary of an encounter with a middle-class American family who believed they could help me access a decent education. They did not have a lot of money. They simply had a deep faith in the power of education. Remember, this was not 2014. This was the 1960s when America was being torn apart by race wars. You could not have come up with a more improbable story. A white Jewish family, in the midst of the Biafra War, in a country being pulled between Islam in the North and Christianity in the South. It took guts and love and a belief in the power of education.

Let me be clear. There is nothing exceptional about me—other than being exceptionally lucky. The men and women who approached me at the airport, the young boys selling wares by the side of the road, the infant strapped to his mother's back. Their capacity, their potential is no different.

My story is one of love, belief, and a healthy dose of luck. I want to share a second story. That of my Nigerian mother. A story of incredible values and hard work. After

working for the Americans, the family that embraced me, my mother remained in Nigeria ultimately working for the family of a mid-level United Nations diplomat. That relationship brought her to U.N. headquarters in New York and eventually to London with the diplomat's wife when the diplomat and his wife were divorced. That diplomat was Kofi Anan. While I was a student here at Amherst, my mother was an office cleaner in London. 20 years later, when I was board chairman, my mother still was an office cleaner in London. No matter how much money I sent her, she simply gave it away. To the new immigrant from Nigeria. To her church. To the family with greater needs than hers.

My Nigerian mother died in a car accident in London in 2008. Hundreds of people attended her funeral service. Every seat in her church was taken. She died without wealth, property, or official title. Her only jobs in life had been as a domestic servant and office cleaner. Yet she filled a church in a faraway land that had become her home. Her death left a large hole in her community. Through her humility, hard work and generosity, my mother became the conscience of her community.

Whether you are a parent, an administrator, or a soon-to-be graduate, the fact that you are on this campus tells me that you have already won the lottery in life. What now will you do with this luck? Amherst, your professors and your fellow students, have helped you hone your critical intellectual skills. But that is not life. Life begins when you meet those skills with guts. The guts to pursue what you love, or think you might love. When you push yourself to find that point of balance between the logic of the classroom, the personal and community values that matter to you, and the risk of trying to achieve the impossible.

My children's great grandfathers, who lived during my lifetime, were in turn, a German soldier in Hitler's army, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, and a Yoruba laborer. These three great grandfathers likely would have tried to kill each other if you placed them in the same room. Yet a young American couple, relying on equal measures of guts and education, obliterated a thousand years of accepted social wisdom.

My Nigerian mother gave away her eldest son so that he might have a better life. I cannot imagine giving away any of my three children. Yet in her quiet act of conscience, she recognized that for the world to advance, each of us must be willing to take risks, to balance on the boundaries of our limited human condition.

As you go forward from this idyllic setting and these four transformative years, it may be tempting to lay back in the featherbed of middle or upper class life that is made possible by an Amherst education. However, I would argue that, if you are to realize your dreams, to achieve your potential, you will need to risk losing everything you thought you learned here. Education in its truest sense is about relentlessly developing the critical skills to question every assumption you've been told up to that moment. Plus the guts to let what you learn take you away from people and structures that have defined your life.

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To my family, I thank you. Without your guts and love and belief in education, my life would be quite different.

To my wife, Tina, and our three children, Ayo, Remi, and Aila, you have trusted me beyond reason and loved me no matter how idiotic I've been. I cannot thank you enough.

To Amherst, I thank you for this great honor and for accepting me, thirty five years ago and again as a trustee, into this amazing community.