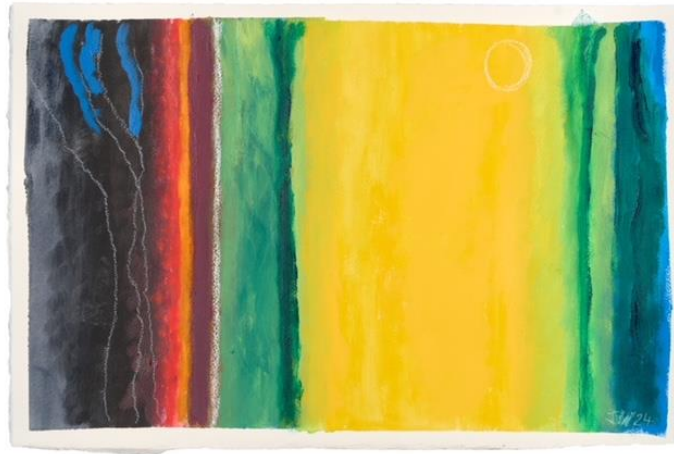


Foundations

The king and the four advisers



Once there was a king whose country was suffering one long winter. He had done everything he could, he believed, to renew his people and to inject new life into the land. Many times every day for many years he had restructured, reformed and reorganised.

He had put in place new initiatives, fresh starts, special measures, key innovative strategies as also key strategic innovations, and an extraordinarily large number of ten-point total-quality-management action plans.

But all to no avail. The country decayed, the people were listless, the king himself was losing faith in his own powers, the winter continued.

Winter in the land, winter in the human spirit.

Then suddenly the king realised the true source of all his problems: he had been badly advised. In seedtime learn, it is said, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy. If in winter there is no enjoyment it must be that there was too little teaching in the autumn. The king had all his advisers thrown into prison and resolved to put to death his four principal advisers, those whose specialist responsibilities were respectively for spirituality, morality, society and culture.

The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction, but the fool sees not the same tree that the wise person sees, nor the same tigers.

The king called the sons and daughters of these four principal advisers and instructed them to kill their parents. The eldest son or daughter in each family, he promised, would be appointed to the principal adviser posts hitherto held by their fathers and mothers, and rendered now vacant. The sons and daughters of the principal advisers took their parents away. In one family they stabbed their parents with knives and daggers and the bodies were thrown into a ravine. In another they strangled and

smothered their parents and the bodies were buried. In a third they clubbed and stoned their parents and the bodies were burnt.

In the fourth instance, the sons and daughters listened to their parents' pleas to be spared. 'One day,' the parents said, 'you will need us. Do not kill us, but hide us instead in a remote village where no one knows us.'

The sons and daughters of this fourth principal adviser agreed. They hid their parents in a remote village.

For a while the king was content with the services provided by the sons and daughters of his erstwhile principal advisers. Nothing, however, actually improved. Winter continued. He decided that he had to rid himself of principal advisers altogether. He set them an impossible task.

'I wish,' he said, 'to build a new National Palace. But it is absolutely essential to put the roof in place before any of the supporting walls and pillars. I want the roof up there in the sky, all on its own. Advise me on how this is to be done. If you cannot, you will die.'

Three of the four principal advisers despaired. But the child of the adviser whose life had been spared went to the remote village where their parents had been hidden, and outlined the absurd task. 'I have to advise on how a roof can be put in place, up in the sky, without any supporting pillars or walls. If I cannot, I shall die.' The old people listened to the problem, and explained what should be done.

A few days later the king assembled his whole court and called the advisers. 'Well,' he said, 'how is to be done?' Three of the advisers had not the slightest idea and they were led away to execution.

The adviser whose parents were still alive, however, and who had been advised by them what to say, stepped forth with confidence. 'It is entirely straightforward, your majesty,' came the reply. 'You yourself, as the land's most important personage, must place the first rafter in the sky. It will then be wholly easy for the rest of the roof to be constructed.'

The king recognised that there was cunning and courage here that he needed to respect; imagination and exuberance here that he needed to tap; a refusal to despair here that could inspire and empower him. The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. The king asked where the idea had come from and the young person told him, confident that he would restore the parent to the post of principal adviser.

And so it happened. The parents were brought back and for many years the king and his country were well advised. A fool, some of the advice ran, sees not the same tree that a wise person sees. Exuberance is beauty. The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. In seedtime learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy.

Was the specialist responsibility of the fourth adviser for spirituality or for morality, for society or for culture?

History still has not recorded this, it's unfinished business. Just at the moment, you know, it doesn't matter.

In seedtime learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy.

Source: Adapted from 'What an Old Man Can See Sitting Down, a Young Man Cannot See Standing Up' in *Not Even God is Ripe Enough: Yoruba stories* by Bakare Ghadamosi and Ulli Beier, Heinemann Educational 1968, with additions from William Blakes's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790.

The painting at the start of this story is by Jenifer Wates and is part of her sequence entitled *The Fire and The Rose*, created in Woodstock, Oxfordshire, 2024.

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