



Unlearning Fear: The Mystery of Creativity

By Chief Nyamweya



Counter-intelligence analyst Gregory Treverton once described two kinds of problems: puzzles and mysteries.

Puzzles are problems that have definite answers, such as: What is the capital city of Kenya? or How many kiosks in Nairobi sell unga? It might be difficult to pin down an exact number, but the answer can be estimated provided you define what a kiosk is. Puzzles can vary in complexity, but they all share the fact that they have *definite answers*. Crossword puzzles may be frustrating, but the solver at least has the satisfaction of knowing that the correct answer for the blank boxes exists. This is also the exact kind of problem most of our institutions are optimised to solve.

A mystery, on the other hand, is a problem with no definite answer because the answer depends on a *future* interaction of an unknown number of factors. For example, will there be kiosks in Nairobi in three years? If yes, how many? Who is going to supply them unga then? The answers are contingent on architecture, policy, or economics, and if you are an aspiring unga trader, they are also contingent on your choices today. This is an unsolvable problem because it contains too much information. To treat this mystery the same way as a puzzle would be akin to trying to thread a needle with water.

Our journey toward urbanisation has been one of using our puzzle-solving abilities to expand our *sphere of certainty* within an infinitely dark ocean of uncertainties. Our sphere of certainty up until

now has included statements such as: “If I go to school and study hard, I will get a nice job and be able to afford to buy unga not only for myself, but for my family as well.” “The *unga* I buy from the kiosk is healthy.” “There is a hospital to go to in case the unga I ate is not healthy.”

As the answers to these questions become more unclear for many Kenyans in our unstable economy, we are beginning to question the puzzle bias of our education system and seeking to unlearn the current education model and replace it with a creative education model better suited to framing the mysteries of our time.

Unlearning the puzzle bias

The puzzle bias of our education system is reflected in the fortress-like security at the gates of the offices of the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC). Tragically, as youth unemployment figures steadily rise, the message that has arrived late is that the armed infantry units at the gates of KNEC may be guarding an empty house.

Perfect examination scores are increasingly less correlated to career success. Adaptive intelligence that comes from creative education is becoming a much more reliable predictor of success. This is something that should be shared with exam candidates, many of whom have committed suicide because they perceived exam failure to be the end of their world.

We are in the process of entering an electronically mediated world in which all puzzle problems are being delegated to computer programmes that are more intelligent than our best performing human actuaries. Universities are quickly ceding their role as centres of knowledge creation and distribution to decentralised and distributed networks of creative ecosystems powered by technology. Those universities that survive and thrive will be those that are effective platforms for a creative student body. The shift required is analogous to the shift from “monoculture” farming of pupils that privileges puzzle-solving to a “permaculture” approach to education in which creative ecosystems allow students to creatively collaborate with their peers in solving mysteries in unique ways.

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My most recent book, *Art of Unlearning*, uses the radically powerful medium of comics to literally draw a *map* of how to get out of our puzzle-minded school fortresses and into creative ecosystems. Unlearning, we inevitably discover, requires profound humility, as recovering addicts already understand.

The map begins from the foundation that all infants are born without a culture - naked, hungry and intensely curious. The principal role of parents is to take this uncultured, naked, hungry and intensely curious being and persuade it, cajole it, and terrorise it until one way or another it is convinced that the way we do things in this tribe is the natural way ordained by God. Anything that you feel like doing that doesn't fit into tribal customs is considered to be a bad idea. Adults who are thoroughly conditioned in a culture may be genuinely horrified to discover that their children were not born with their taboos already installed. This horror is intensifying so much that the youth and elders might be considered to be inhabiting increasingly separate islands of reality that speak different languages.

An authoritarian framework is the worst possible way to engage with such a dynamic information

environment. It has been my observed experience that the self-appointed cultural managers, such as Kenya Film Classification Board (KFCB) and many county culture ministries, have absolutely no idea what is happening in the information ecosystem that lies beyond their own Twitter feeds. Their perspective is limited to one of traditional rent-seeking from artists in whose creations they have made no investment. The role of investment has been largely abandoned to foreign cultural agencies and embassies.

As the rate of information exchange in our society accelerates, all tribes are beginning to communicate electronically, bringing the conflicts in our agendas to resolution. So, for example, the musician King Kaka is now a much more powerful bridge-builder than the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) ever was.

Now that Kenyans are literally going beyond the limits of marathon times and limited leaders with limited visions, a new locus of understanding must be framed that can address our most pressing challenges: ecological destruction, food insecurity, ending political dynasties, and most of all, educating our children for an exponential world.

Who will frame our mysteries?

The choice to deliver this message in the form of a comic book (or graphic novel to be precise) was crucial. Because if one is going to opine on a vision for creative education in Kenya, one must demonstrate creative experience. We demand no less of our dentists or doctors and we should demand no less of our educators.

Illustration and visual storytelling are a domain in which I have had the most experience over the past ten years and they are well suited to taking difficult conversations out of the academy and onto the street. We must end our unconstitutional limits on creative expression such as Cap 222 (*Films and Stage Plays Act*). This idea of openness to new information will be unfamiliar and uncomfortable to our conservative culture, but so is all growth.

My best explanation of this point comes without words in an illustration titled "Education Factory". In it you see in one moment gleeful children entering an education factory on one end only to emerge into a wasteland on the other end, stupefied and drained of creativity. *Art of Unlearning* contains dozens of such moments of understanding that I believe are critical in a society that has been so violently divided by the differences in our tongues and in words. This moment of understanding is a moment that requires no permission from a "higher authority". It is a moment that cannot come too soon. Comics are in my view the ultimate mystery-framing tool. Let's get started!

Unlearning fear

Play is nature's antidote to the debilitating fear of change. All mammals spend their early life playing constantly to learn their limits. My ten-month-old son is so dangerously unafraid that I cannot take my eyes off him lest he plunge head first from the bed to the floor. At this crucial stage, the extent to which children are allowed to explore their limits imprints a lifelong attitude toward new experiences.

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If as children our guardians allowed us to explore our limits safely, we will likely adopt this posture for the rest of our lives, with all the risks and rewards that this entails. But if, on the other hand – as is too often the case in our Kenyan context – the response to exploration is violence, shaming and exorcism prayers, you are likely to avoid the memory of violence by avoiding conflict or eye contact with strangers and shying away from new experiences.

Our history of extreme political violence and repression remains unacknowledged to this very day by the political dynasties that have ruled this country. They cannot be expected to hold themselves or any initiative they table accountable.

Violence was the foundation of the colonial economy and remains the foundation of our economy to this day. Creative natives were a natural threat to an architecture of exploitation and so they have been made the human refuse of our education system. With the internet, this human refuse (please excuse the slur) of creative natives is set to inherit the world and now is the time to pay attention to what they have to teach us.

What we call artists are people who consistently respond to their encounters with novelty in beautiful ways, such as sculpture, painting, literature and song. They teach us that fear is physical and its transcendence is also physical in the form of the creative human expression. This is why art is so essential to the work of healing from trauma. Art represents the proudest monument of our humanhood and is the first potentiality to be sacrificed at the altar of violence. It is very difficult to recite poetry with a gun pointed at your head.

The metaphorical gun that is currently pointed at the heads of artists in Kenya today is much more economic than it is political. The Kenyan artist fears starvation, anonymity and suicide more than she does Ezekiel Mutua's censorship crusade that is targeted only at the most visibly successful of Kenyan films, such as Wanuri Kahiu's *Rafiki*. Kenyans have correctly challenged the idea that one unelected bureaucrat's colonial prejudices should not be allowed to deny mature audiences an opportunity to evaluate works of art for themselves.

Not coincidentally, human survival on this planet, now more than ever before, depends upon our courage to share our creative ideas, as so many of my favourite writers, such as Dr. Wandia Njoya and Dr. David Ndii frequently do in this publication. When we exercise courage and challenge idiocy and cowardice, we have the compounding effect of liberating the courage of fellow human beings, which is expressed creatively in works such as King Kaka's [Wajinga Nyinyi](#). When we shake off fear, we discover to our amazement that the so-called emperor is wearing no clothes and that his power was always contingent upon our complicity. This is the lesson of our history that is activated by creative education.

Losing your fear is also good business and not merely a political stance. Walk down any average supermarket aisle and notice how many different brands are competing to sell the same product. Uniqueness is the best differentiator. Similarly, creative education allows young people to seek out unique opportunities to thrive in a jobless and degree-saturated economy. This is an insoluble dilemma for a dynastic oligarchy such as ours whose existence depends on the unquestioning obedience and tribal subservience of its citizenry – while at the same time needing a tax base to finance its exorbitant salaries.

Corporal punishment and other fear-based persuasion of children must become a thing of the past. We must discard antiquated notions such as “spare the rod and spoil the child” and with them the idea that all our conduct needs to be governed by a self-appointed priesthood. We cannot continue to studiously trace movements of biblical tribes while we remain ignorant about the migration history of our own ancestors here in East Africa.

The time has come to unburden our minds and bodies from fear and fear-mongering institutions. I believe that democratising creative education for all Kenyan children is the first and most critical step in this direction. Using “creativity and innovation” as a buzzword on the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) website is simply not enough.

Unlearning comparison

From the day a student enrolls in the Kenyan education system, he or she is subjected to examinations. Examination scores are then compared against those of other students in a zero-sum competition organised by KNEC. This zero-sum competitive mindset continues into later life in our workplaces and in traffic jams. It also sits at odds with our natural human tendency to solve problems collaboratively so that the collective can benefit from as many different viewpoints as possible.

We all benefit from culinary, cultural and cosmological diversity. This is why monotheism’s history of violence is so much more bloody than that of polytheistic cultures that tolerated a diversity of cosmologies.

Whatever one’s particular religion, it should be clear that the internet is a platform that is much more stimulating of unique ideas than any medium before it. In an attention-deficient media landscape with numerous options for viewers, the only way to hold sustained attention is by being significantly different.

Luckily, one does not have to try too hard to be different because we already are. Nature does not create duplicates. One simply has to unlearn the habit of comparison that obscures our unique and innate aspirations. We must unlearn the shaming of those we call *wajuaji* or arrogant for straying away from tribal orthodoxy. The approval of the herd is thin soup compared to the thick gravy that is self-discovery. In Kenya, this means unlearning the habit of borrowing beauty standards, borrowing political frameworks, borrowing religions and borrowing Chinese loans without the consent of the people. Conformity is for sheep, and sheep are led to slaughter — a consistent lesson of Kenya’s experiment in democracy for those old enough to remember. Let us try instead to foster and export our uniqueness.

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In unlearning comparison by embracing uniqueness, one of my most impactful teachers has been the late martial artist Bruce Lee. Bruce was a unique figure with no peers because he was a rare combination of fighter, actor and philosopher. Bruce’s example urges us to seek out precisely those behaviours that set us apart and to develop them.

In my case, graduating with an LLB degree a year after our devastating post-election violence in 2008 was my nudge in the direction of a more unique career. With uninspiring job prospects all round and glaring evidence that my profession was impotent to prevent catastrophe, I began to explore alternatives that would have in previous times been considered unthinkable. Ergo, my current profession of drawing comics and animations. I found my voice in comics and the expression of all the latent abilities that were deemed economically useless.

It is my hope that the sacrifices of my generation in the early blossoming of digital content in Kenya will lead to thriving creative ecosystems. As Muthoni Drummer Queen so eloquently stated in her

[TED Talk](#), creativity builds nations. Nation-building can never be done by rent-seeking governments and certainly not by rent-seeking governments as deficient in legitimacy as Kenya's political dynasties that are desperately trying to remain relevant today. Creative education is a tide that will lift all boats by applying digital technologies to demonetise, dematerialise and democratise knowledge sharing. Creative education challenges our feudal economic structure by placing a value on intellectual property.

In the age of exponential technologies, it has become impossible for even the most highly trained "white collar workers", such as dermatologists, to rest on their laurels. There are no safe jobs. A deep learning algorithm has the power to recognise millions of skin diseases in a second, whereas the human dermatologist will require multiple lifetimes to approach that number.

The risk of obsolescence becomes more acute the more puzzle-oriented a profession gets. The extent to which Kenyan youth will be able to complement the rise of data science is directly dependent on the investment that we are willing to make in innovation and creativity today. If my experiences as an artist living in Kenya are anything to go by, this investment is only being made by individual parents and foreign cultural agencies, such as the Goethe Institute and the Alliance Francaise in Nairobi.

Unlearning belief systems

The most important three words for someone to become creative are "I don't know". Concealing ignorance with inherited assumptions and prejudices that are outside your experience is not an effective strategy for becoming creative. If you are going to do something original, "I don't know" is the optimal stance to begin from. Those who do things that have never been done before were by definition unqualified to do them the moment before they did. Are we confident enough as a continent to question the Middle Eastern religions that dominate Africa?

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Original thinkers never believe fully in anyone else's BS (belief systems), least of all their own. Their only confidence is in their own capacity for keen investigation with the help of books such as *Art of Unlearning* to frame life's mysteries creatively. Any belief system we have right now is provisional before it is revised and updated to incorporate new events and perspectives. Only this way can we imagine Africa differently than its colonisers and missionaries did. This, incidentally, is the natural functioning of the human brain and the way children's minds work before they are distorted by intimidation from the education system.

Unlearning belief systems is as difficult as a right-hander learning to write with his left hand. Human perception was not evolved to see the truth, but rather to see only that which was optimal for survival. But what is optimal for our survival has changed while we were sleeping.

I do not know the shape of the society we are going to forge, but *I do know* that I am compelled by a passion for freehand movement to face this mystery creatively.

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