

Binyavanga at TEDx: Conversations with Baba

Dear Baba, we've been needing to talk.

We haven't really had a chance to talk since you died, three years ago, and I thought today would be a good day.

Of course you may be aware that mom ... we had a conversation in January with mom - about me and about stuff in general.

In April 2001, Baba, I had just come back from Cuba for spring break. I'd gone of course to misbehave and I had a lot of fun. In fact, it was difficult getting out because I didn't know in Cuba you couldn't use an American credit card. I had to rush back on that Sunday to get back to teach on Monday - and on Monday, my head felt weird.

I thought, ah, too much rum. My body wasn't moving properly, things were awkward.

Monday, Tuesday - taught class - Wednesday Thursday...On Friday it felt like there was water moving all over my head and I took myself to the hospital. They took an MRI and they told me I had had nine small strokes - this was April.

And they said they have to put a pipe through here [gestures to hip area] because that vein was 70% full and it would go inside and reach here [gestures to left side of his head] and then it would burst open and there's a 5% chance that I would bleed and things would happen - of course, you know.

Remember most conversations were happening on the phone and I was away for 14 days. We really didn't get to talk.

Later, months later, Auntie Muthoni came to visit and said to me, "Oh, you know your father called me in tears and said *please save my son,*"

Now, you know, Baba, we really never have these sorts of conversations:

"I love you."

“I love you.”

“Fine”

I ended up in hospital again because of having panic attacks when I was trying to get home after coming out from the operation with the stroke.

It was terrible - those three days.

You sent me an email while I was in hospital thinking, and it was true, that I was too afraid to come home and said *please come home* and I came home.

I didn't see you and I came to Nairobi and I was so freaked out, Baba, you know. I don't know why. It was impossible at the time to interact with people. So, I went into hiding in Nairobi. I went into hiding because...at first I thought it was the shock from the operation - it turned out it was some kind of medication that I had had (and I didn't know about). At this point, you did not know and I did not have time to see you.

So eventually, I decided to go to Ghana with my lover.

We were going to do a conference in Nigeria and I was going to just go and chill out and think about nothing. I decided on the last day to come see you in Nakuru. We booked a hotel and came to see you that night.

My partner had malaria and we were seated in the evening and I was trying to explain to you what was going on in the hospital, and as we were talking you stood up and tears came to your eyes. You rushed out of the house because you really couldn't hear or didn't want to hear what had been going on with your son.

You came back 20 minutes later, we said goodbye, and in the morning, I took a plane to Ghana.

We played and had fun for three weeks and I came back and on July 7, which was the anniversary of mom's death. I woke up in Nairobi, in a rented apartment, with my lover.



Read series: Binyavanga Wainaina

Clem, your partner, called and she said, “Your father is not feeling well.”

At first we thought it was indigestion (we know he is stubborn). She had queued, standing parked at a testing place because he didn’t want to see a doctor. He wanted to go do medical tests.

So I said to her, “You know he’s very stubborn. So what I suggest you do is, if he hasn’t eaten well, take him straight to the hospital and put him on a drip. Don’t ask. Don’t argue. Just turn the car around ... I don’t even want to talk to him. Let me reverse.”

When we sat in your living room three weeks before, you had said to me something. You said, “Kenneth, you know I’ve prepared a room for the two of you.”

And I remember very clearly my head saying, “What? This is unusual and clearly you’re opening a file.”

You know, Baba, you never asked me *where is your girlfriend*.

And I can’t say there was any consistency in the love you gave. You never said there was anything wrong when I was dressing up in girls’ clothes with Shiru and getting into strange kinds of trouble - it seemed to least bother you. Or me twirling like Michael Jackson.

There were clearly concerns on your face but it didn’t affect the love you gave me.

So when you said that, I thought to myself this is the time to bring it up with you.

Surely, this is the time for me to say, that I need to hear from you, to be freed to love, and that I am 40-something years old and I need that freedom. And I need to hear from you that it’s okay.

But I didn't because I wanted to go to Ghana.

So, Clem takes you off, to Rift Valley General Hospital. They put you on the drip.

And then she called me at midnight and says, "Something is wrong" ... *something is wrong*. And then matron calls and then we're in the car in the middle of the night rushing to Nakuru.

My brother is trying to get a plane to ship him out, something has clearly happened.

And then I am in Nakuru, late night. And we are sitting.

That hospital has only a small heater to keep you warm and your eyes look like glue. They don't look like eyes at all. But your hands, arms are warm and they're strong. When I touch - grab - your hands, your hands seem strong.

That's the anniversary of mom's death.

So I've asked myself: Did you decide? Was it you saying it's time to be with mom again, 11 years later? Why that day?

Because even if the doctors declared you dead, five days later, it was that day that everything - a stroke, like mine, but bigger, destroyed your brain and you were effectively dead.

So there must be something to that, right?

But at the same time, I also feel...this cost of parents, that they themselves gave themselves to their own children...what damage was I doing to you... those 14 days in hospital, possibly dying...and how much was this thing that we both carry - this genetic thing called stroke - activated by the stress I put you through in the hospital?

We've been needing to talk about that.

Errr...we also need to talk about the fact that I have taken to wearing skirts and clearly this must bring you some measure of consternation.

Of course because I didn't have a chance to really talk to you about it, I decided to bring it up to the whole bloody planet.

I went to Nigeria and those people in Nigeria, the people I've known - the writers, welcomed me. Not only did they just welcome me, they insisted I come. Not only did they insist I come - of course you know that many of them cleared the way for it to be possible for me to be there - in Nigeria; where you could die or be arrested, and killed for being the kind of guy who wears skirts like I do. And had a lovely time.

I went to Senegal for four months. They shut down an exhibition on homosexuality there - the Emami people went making all sorts of noises about it. Me I swam and enjoyed myself.

You know, in a way, me I want to become an adventurer.

Me I was the son who was shy in your house. I was not, eeh, the brave one. I wasn't the brave one. Shiru was brave. James was brave. Chiki was brave. I really wasn't the brave one. But I feel like now, my season is beginning.

In this continent called mine, and I am an African, I want no space to not welcome me.

There was a moment in April, after I came out, where I was supposed to go to Italy. And it seemed as if you could hear these swirling noises of people. And it wasn't so much that there were any threats - there were no direct threats, Baba, because I felt that enough people who disagreed with what I am, agreed that you could not doubt my sense of honour and the work that I have done for many years to change this continent. And therefore, even the people of the church, up to the cardinal, were unable to confront me directly.

Because I believe, Baba, this continent is ready to agree to disagree and at the same time to tolerate.

I must tell you a story Baba.

So, I just come out, right?

Here I am being this public homosexual. And the news is going crazy; everywhere there's this noise.

So I get this phone call from the Nation Media Group (who are the most important media group)

“Oh, is it Binyavanga?”

“Yes.”

“You know, there’s this program we do about role models and the boarding school you went to, Mang’u High School - the oldest secondary school in the country and one of the most prestigious ones. They say they want you to come on Saturday to film this show we do, to be role models for school children.”

So I’m like, and Baba you can’t believe, “Are you crazy? Don’t you know that I’ve just come out as a public homosexual? This is Kenya! Are you mad?”

He’s like, “No, I’ve just spoken to the literature teacher. The school says they want you there on Sunday, they are shooting it live and they say that you are the most important alumni after President [Mwai] Kibaki. So you have to come.”

So I say, okay, I’m going to Mang’u.

We reach there and the head boy takes me around the school. We see the dorms and they’re telling me everything. Mr Kiwanuka, who used to teach chemistry, (which I flunked) is still there. I left that school in 1987 and that man is still there! He hasn’t even changed.

And the guy tells me, “Oh, Binyavanga, you know we’ve been seeing you on BBC, we’re very proud.”

So I’m trying to ask him, “What have you been seeing on BBC?”

He doesn’t say anything!

We sit in the hall, they are ready to shoot. The whole school is there. No one looks weird or anything.

And then we see a man in the uniform of a priest running - it looks like he’s running from 500m - from administration block. He’s running followed by another man in a suit.

They come there to the front where I’m sitting and the man (he’s the school chaplain) says “I’m very sorry, the cardinal called. We can’t do this. You know we are very close to the church. We can’t do this. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” In front of the whole school.

And I said to myself, Africa has changed. Or maybe it's never needed to. That those people who came from that time of colonisation to split us apart until our splitting apart comes from within our own hearts, that inside the space of that Mang'u high school, there was no such feeling. Until the brokers, until those fake moral hypocritical brokers of our freedom to be diverse, we, the oldest and the most diverse continent there has been, we, where humanity came from, we, the moral reservoir of human diversity, human age, human dignity ...right?

Who are these appointed brokers, Baba?

Who are they?

Because wherever they sit you see Boko Harams tearing us apart. You see political things tearing us apart.

The simple acceptance of our right to be and to be diverse is the biggest and strongest thing to defend. Nothing will release our energy in this age of moving forward than that, Baba

Baba you taught me honour.

You are the one who said, "I'm the CEO of a company - you see those ones, they can't come for your birthday party."

I'm like: "Why can't they come for a birthday party?"

"Because their father is a thief. That car you see them driving around in, they are thieves. And thieves will not be in my house."

You brought us up in a nest of security; hidden away from a similar kind of elite - who we were jealous of because they had things. They went to England. They went on holiday to these glamorous places.

You could have and you did not.

You did not die rich. Your old 505 Peugeot was still there.

You created an industry. You built houses for workers. You retired and saw the pyrethrum board collapse, under mismanagement.

But you set a bar.

My bar is not like yours - I don't do understated and tweed, but it's the same sense of honour that you taught me, Baba.

So I'm here today to tell you that I would like us all to be adventurers for this continent. By adventuring for this continent, what for me I feel cannot be stood for is that there's any place that one cannot go. And there's nothing that one cannot imagine. And that we need to step out of the simple spaces of dogma that are fed by brokers - almost all of whom profiteer and gain political capital from rendering us apart and separate.

There's nothing that is a priority about being a homosexual and an African. But there's everything that every African has to defend; every kind of diversity that we carry as an African, even when you do not understand it.

For me what has come to be is to arrive at this place where I am living in plain light.

I am not living in a dark continent.

I will stand free - the way I need to be as a moral being on the continent and nobody will stop me from going where I will. If you decide to, I will go through you or you will stop me. We cannot think of our continent as a hostile place. Too many of us have learnt to fear it.

And I feel that if you trust it, engage with it and be involved with it in the conversations of building as adventurers, that this continent will start to sing to us again.

That's all I have to say.

This is a transcription of a talk given by Binyavanga Wainaina at a TEDxEuston event in 2015. You can watch the video [here](#).