



# A Letter To Stella Nyanzi: The Revolution Lives in You

By Kedolwa Waziri



My sister Nyanzi,

We grew up on folktales and stories that spoke on the value of truth, of clarity, of assertiveness. We read about scheming animals always having to face the consequences of their actions, while those characters that upheld the truth were the examples that we were meant to emulate. Yet, somehow, these stories were supposed to remain suspended in our minds, perhaps as pieces of entertainment. No one wanted a truth teller, especially not a primary school going child. I have gone through most of my life being called rude, difficult, entitled or spoilt, by aunties, by cousins, by teachers, and by neighbors who cautioned their children against associating with me. Most of my life, I thought there was something wrong with how God made me.

Why did my teachers punish me for speaking truth? Why did I go home, my body tender from a caning because I asked the teacher to explain the logic behind making students kneel on gravel? Why did my cousins whisper behind my back, saying that my opinions were rude, that my parents had spoilt me, and that I was too entitled? I questioned a lot, yet I did not see any other way to live. I knew the truth to be good, even when it seemed a heavy weight on my heart. Each one of us owes ourselves the truth. The truth is our duty. It is my duty, a duty that you have taken on and stood by, even when the very ground is threatening to betray you.

I am writing this after returning to Kenya from a visit to Uganda less than 24 hours ago. I thought about you a lot during my stay there. I thought about all the Ugandans who have lived their lives silencing themselves, their truth, their pain, their desires, their ability to want to imagine freedom because of fear, fear not born of themselves, but of tyranny, from the ways in which their society has dealt with 'rude' individuals. I saw children going to school, with heavy bags and tender spirits. I thought of all the stories, the theory, the language they are being taught about morality and truth, knowing that they are probably being short-changed. I thought about how they are being taught that truth depends on who holds the power to instill fear.

Are the children being told that truth is silence? Are they being told that truth is folding the pain in their hearts into smiles? Are they being told that truth is accepting state and religious terrorism? Are the children carrying fear in their heavy bags? Are they rushing home to be cautioned against following in the footsteps of Dr. Stella Nyanzi? I thought about your multiple arrests, and how that has been weaponized to further silence, to further disregard, and to further trample on the possibility of individual and collective expression. What do the children think when they see you on television? What do they say about you in their private conversations?

It is no secret that we live in a world that rewards complacency. The systems we live under: economic, social, and political, are so fragile and fickle that they have made us scared of ourselves. Of course, all this is deliberate, to maintain control. We live under the giant lie that we get to choose. We choose which schools our children go to, what we will purchase, how we will spend our time, how we will interact with authority, what and how we teach our children, yet all this exists under tyranny. We have been robbed of our humanity, of our ability to make decisions guided by what aligns with truth, with courage, with kindness. That is why, Stella, the children are being taught politeness, one that will rob them of their ability to speak up in the face of injustice when they are told that they cannot love who they want to love, when they are told that they don't belong, when they are told that their lives are not precious, when they are lied to over and over, when they are made to wait for their rights, when they are killed, when they are hurt, when their education is used to oppress them, and when their lives become small residues of what freedom might have looked like, when they are reduced to small 'maybes' and 'could have beens.'

That is why many people may be blind to the importance of your protest, which is in effect, a protest to your protest. Is this the tragedy of having a heart constantly pursuing freedom?

When I first read about you, I felt so affirmed that I cried. When I saw you speaking, how you spoke, what you spoke about, I remember feeling small eruptions of heavy joy inside me amidst the pain of seeing how the state responded to you. I prayed for the courage to want, so intently and so intentionally, the kind of truth abiding freedom that oozed from your heart. I prayed that I am brave enough to bare it all in the face of millions of odds stacked against me. I prayed that I may never steer away from a life tied to imagining, wanting and working towards freedom, towards a life unbound by fear. They have used your truth to call you obscene, to call you indecent, to call you lascivious, and to say that you are profane. They say you hold no remorse, but why should you? They call you untamed, rude, vulgar, and reckless; they call you intolerable. In the churches, they are saying that you are sinning against god. In truth, all they are trying to say is that you are free. Unbound. Your spirit can never be contained. They do not have the language for any of this because they speak the language of fear. The voice of truth makes them afraid. Your life is testimony that freedom is possible. Unbounded freedom. Freedom that is safe from tyranny, freedom that tugs on the heart and forces you to run towards the what is right, what is eternal, and what is true.

So let me live a vulgar disrespectful life. Let me be seriously and gloriously profane. Let me be intolerable. Let the people say that no man will marry me. Especially that. Let me be disagreeable. Let me be a sinner. Unapologetically. Let me be ungovernable. Let me be untamed. Let me be

unremorseful. Let me be untethered. Let my life insult them. Let me be offensive. Let my freedom live as critical evidence that truth exists, that it always sits sharp and intentional, between my joy and my pain. I am shameless. I am unafraid. I am a manifestation of defiance. Let my life be shaped by defiance and resistance. I want to steadily and surely offend anything that stands in the way of freedom, of liberation, of love, of justice, of truth, of humanity. Let me be rude, let me be all these things, if all they are trying to say is that I am free, unbound. Let my life be grandly disruptive. That's what I want. Let us all be grandly disruptive, in our small ways, in standing up in our small pockets of possibility. May we be the embodiment of radical rudeness.

Manners always end up on the shelves, next to civility, collecting dust and making the silence louder. This is why the despots love them. This is why we are told to use 'respectable civil channels,' when that in itself is an injustice: to be told we will be heard by the very tools which ensure we remain unheard. You live in a country under dictatorship, under tyranny, under evil rule. So do I, so do so many people on this continent. They have arrested our freedoms, kept them locked up. They lie, they steal, and they laugh at us for wanting to live. They deny us belonging, they want to take away everything, our voices, the voices of the children, even before they break.

Stella, they want us to beg them. They want us to lick their feet, grateful for the smelly crumbs. They want us to crawl on our bellies, waiting for permission to sit on our buttocks, then to kneel before them, and then finally, maybe, to stand, when they will it, how they will it, for their benefit. I refuse. Let these tyrants sweat in terror at the mention of your name, let them tremble at the sound of your song, your poetry, your protest, your truth, your prayer, your defiance. Let all the despots shake and fear at the sound of our collective lament. Let peace be least of their experiences. Let them tremble. May they tremble.

I refuse politeness. I dedicate my life to unlearning respectability, because at the end of it all, divine freedom is fearless. It is not neat and pretty and dainty. It is rude, it is vulgar, it is naked, it is wild, it is unashamed, it is raw, it is profane, it is indecent. It is loud. It is demanding and disrespectful. It is you. You are divinely free, and they cannot take that away from you. The entire revolution has already happened inside you, and we get to experience that, from your life, your words, your work, hoping that we can meet you, where you are, in whatever capacity we can. You have taught me that when we are silent, we are more at risk of pain, of suffering, of living lives suspended on insubstantial strings of fear, always waiting on where our next small redemption will come from. You have taught me that the process of truth is rewarding, not in the ways in which the world rewards, but the ways in which the spirit rewards. The process is indeed the shortcut. It is the homage to freedom, to the channels between us and liberation.

So I am writing this to you, and to my 15 year old self, to my 10 year old self, and to the black children who will live after us. I am writing this to myself, before I accepted that I am brazen, before I accepted that nothing is wrong with me, that maybe everyone who called me rude for speaking the truth was just afraid and cowardly, because this world thrives on the fear of people. I am writing this to my sisters, to my mothers, to everyone who has housed silence and shame in their hearts. I am writing this to you, hoping that you can rest in the knowledge that there are so many of us who are holding your spirit, your soul, your heart, your dreams, in our spirits, in our souls, in our hearts, in our dreams, during this time and always. We stand in solidarity with you, with your defiance, and with your dreams of freedom. Your life has affirmed us in so many ways, and knowing that you live an absolutely unapologetic life has sustained the bulk of my ability to imagine freedom. I hope like you, I can show up as my highest, truest self, always. May your words continue to be the fuel that will sustain the fire that will consume all these tyrants, all these despots, all these oppressors, all these dictators.

Thank you for refusing shame, for refusing fear, for embracing love, for embracing the call of truth

and freedom. Thank you for always showing up as your full self, thank you for making it possible to for so many of us to imagine other ways of living, of being. Thank you for your poetry, for remaining tender, for remaining you.

In love and solidarity,

Kedolwa

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