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Tebello Nyokong's Letter to her 18-year-old Self

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Dr. Nyokong's is the director of the Nanotechnology Innovation Center at Rhodes University, South Africa and the first South African scientist to win the L'Oréal-UNESCO award for women in science. Her research focus on the development of molecules similar to the ones used to dye blue jeans, which can be used as chemical sensors to detect disease-related molecules and organisms, as an alternative to chemotherapy for the treatment of cancer and for environmental clean-up. [Don't miss the video at the end where she talks about her path and research].

Dear Tebello,

I know you think you are poor. You have to wear second hand clothes and often walked barefoot to school in winter when you were young. The other learners laugh at you since you are not as well off as they are. But you get the top marks in mathematics and science. You see, being poor in material things does not make your brain also poor. What matters is that you are focused, disciplined and respectful.

Remember you grew up herding sheep and had to fend for yourself from the boys in the fields? That you had to go to school on alternate days and you had to do many other jobs which boys had to do such as working in the construction company, which involved mixing cement, laying bricks, etc? All this hard work was good for you. It gave you discipline and taught you never to shy away from hard work. It gave you the strong belief in yourself and capabilities. And you you learned all you had to do while maintaining your pride and dignity.

What about your family? Will they understand why you need to go to University? Let me tell you, they will not. They would like you to work and support your brother and sister so they can complete their schooling.

Also Tebello, remember that even though you are good in mathematics and general science, you decided not to do these two subjects when you entered high school? Do you know why? Let me tell you. You listened to your peers. Be wary of peers. You have always been an independent thinker. You never went along with the crowd. Why start now?



Eventually, with two years of high school left, you realize that arts is not for you. So you are now doing Physics, Biology and Chemistry and an advanced mathematics course. You are worried that you cannot do all the courses in two years. But you will, since you are excited about being a scientist. Do you doubt you can make it? Do you think you have what it takes to be a scientist? Let me tell you this: you do have what it takes. **You like nature, this may have come from your shepherd days. You like to ask deep questions about your environment and you like to fix things around the house. You like to see plants grow, you love to listen to birds and identify them. You do not realize that this is what science is about. Being a scientist means being in touch with your environment, having an inquisitive mind and asking questions about how things work.**

You like challenges, you like to do the impossible. All the hard work you did when you were younger was preparing you for the discipline needed for doing in TWO years what others did in THREE years. Yes, you will have to work very hard to catch up with the others, but then I know you would never shy away.

You will thinking of going to University, later. Your peers will be there again, telling you that you will never get married if you are too educated. They will say men do not like educated women. Are you going to listen to them again after your experience in high school? I know you, you learn your lessons very quickly. You will ignore peers this time. In fact you will encourage some of your peers to go to University with you.

What about your family? Will they understand why you need to go to University? Let me tell you, they will not. They would like you to work and support your brother and sister so they can complete their schooling. You know this is fair since you were supported. The family believes you have enough education. All they wanted was for you to be more educated than they were. Now you are going too far, they are now worried about when you will get married and have children. So what are you going to do? You cannot disrespect your family. But I know you, you will find a way out. You want to remain challenged by science. So you will decide to work for a year to support your family and to see your younger sister complete her high school. And you will be even more determined to go to University. The reason is you will not enjoy

your job. It will not be challenging enough for you! You believe education will equip you to have a more fulfilling career. But you have been told endlessly that women do not need a career, they just have to marry well. But you are different. You have an independent mind. You believe you can be a wife and a mother and still be a bread winner and contribute to society. And you will.

With great hope,

Your future self

Dr. Tebello Nyonkong was born in Lesotho, South Africa. She received her bachelor's degree from the National University of Lesotho, and MSc in chemistry, and PhD from the University of Western Ontario. Read more about her research, accomplishments and ideas on promoting women in science on the L'Oreal-UNESCO Women in Science [here](#) or [here](#).



FULL
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http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=L21UD9a-cbM

