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Appiah Kubi Kwarteng
kwarteng@andrews.edu

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APPIAH K. KWARTANG

THE SANKOFA BIRD AND REFLECTION

As a minister of the Gospel, I have often reflected on the tension between Paul's counsel in Philippians 3:13, 14 (forgetting those things that are behind, I press toward the mark) and Ellen G. White's (1902) counsel that "we have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history" (p. 196). On the one hand it seems that we should forget the past, while on the other hand we are advised to remember our past and the way the Lord has led us in order to have nothing to fear in our future.

In this article, I will look back to my past while also looking forward into my present and future. Using "Sankofa," the Ghanaian proverbial bird, as a metaphor, I will share several life experiences. Sankofa is expressed in the Akan language as "*se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki.*" Literally translated, it means "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot" ("Meaning of the Symbolism of the Sankofa Bird," n.d.).

The Sankofa Bird and Reflection

The Sankofa bird is a symbolic Ghanaian expression represented by a bird whose head is looking back while holding an egg in her beak, which is her future. Her feet facing forward also symbolize moving into the future.

Sankofa represents the old African adage: "Always remember the past for therein lies the future, if forgotten we are destined to repeat it." The name Sankofa is a combination of two words, *San* and *Kofa*. The word *San* means "go back," and *Kofa* means "get it." Put together, they mean "go back and get it." The Sankofa bird teaches that it is helpful to dig deeper into our history as we seek to move forward. With an understanding of the Sankofa symbol, there is the possibility for individuals and groups to ask important questions about the past, and remember the best of what the past can teach. Doing so empowers individuals to move forward with a good understanding of what is moti-

Appiah Kubi Kwarteng is a native of Ghana, West Africa. He has a M.Div. from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in Leadership from Andrews University. Currently he is pastor of the Philadelphia Ghana Adventist Church.

vating them from their past experiences. “Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone or been stripped of, can be reclaimed, revived, preserved and perpetuated” (“Meaning of the Symbolism of the Sankofa Bird,” n.d.).

As I reflect on my life, I realize that sometimes I want to nurture and build on or maintain the experiences of my past, but that other times I want to change past negative experiences into new behaviors. With this in mind, in this paper I am reflecting on oral communication, importance of the community or group, leadership lessons, and worldview issues.

Oral Communication

The indigenous people of Ghana are classified by historical geographers and cultural anthropologists into five major groups: The Akan, the Ewe, the Mole Dagbane, the Guan, and the Ga-Adangbe (“Ghana Major Ethnic Groups,” n.d.). In this paper, I will be referring to the Akan group, to which I belong.

The Akan people are an ethnic group of West Africa predominantly in Ghana which has Twi as their language. Oral communication has been the medium for the transmission of values from generation to generation, especially among the *Akan*. In my growing up years I was instructed in Twi at home; not until I went to school did I learn the letters of the alphabet.

As the son of a father who was the head of an extended family (*Abusuapanin*), I was provided more learning opportunities than other members of the family. The *Abusuapanin* met from time to time with the leaders of each family unit, and I was included in those meetings by the time I was six years of age. Sometimes the meetings would be held impromptu, in the middle of the night. General meetings were also held from time to time. At these meetings, other children and youth could attend, but they could not ask questions. In this manner, we were taught the history of our family, the distinguishing features, and the relationship of our family to the local community. For example, it was from my mother’s family that the local linguist was chosen. I was therefore taught to articulate and speak clearly.

I experienced how my uncle, who was the linguist of our village, used clear language. He was the mouthpiece of the head of the village, popularly called the chief; he repeated the words of the chief to the people at public gatherings, thus making the chief’s words audible. It was communicated to me orally that my uncle had this important role because the chief of the community was considered infallible. If something was not communicated in the right way in public, the linguist was to be blamed, not the chief, who by virtue of his position was not supposed to err in his public speech. The linguist was held responsible for any mistakes and miscommunication to and from the chief because he spoke aloud to the people through him.

I have earned two units of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) from the CPE training program at the Saint Joseph Regional Medical Center in South Bend, Indiana. It took me two years (over 800 hours) to earn the two units. One of the important lessons I learned related to my oral communication. I once received feedback from a patient that she could not understand me. Later, at a feedback session in a learning group meeting, I realized that I needed to spend more time practicing how to speak slowly and clearly to avoid a repetition of that experience in my life and work. In order to deal with this, I spent about 40 hours in the Department of Speech-Language Pathology at Andrews University, where I sought help from the director to mentor me on my speech. Looking back, I realized that I was a stammerer during my youth, and that I had probably started speaking at a faster rate as a means to overcome the speech condition.

Did my earlier experiences prepare me to accept the need to work on my oral communication? I think so! Even now, as I look forward to leading groups who may speak with a different dialect or accent, I am sensitive to the fact that I might not be understood. I know I have to continue to learn to speak clearly by slowing down. I also need to listen well.

Through the oral tradition of communicating values, I learned that I inherited something special from each parent. From my mother, I inherited *mogya* or blood, and from my father, I inherited *ntoro*, which can be translated as manhood. It is the local translation of the spirit. To the ordinary Akan, during the procreation process, it is believed that the father passes the *ntoro* to the child, to relate to the *mogya* of the mother. So when I was born, I became a member of my father's family with certain religious and moral obligations, but I belonged to my mother's family through and through, and that is where I could derive inheritance. I was nurtured as a social being with close connections with my family. My father connected his children to his family positively. In fact, I felt loved and welcome in my father's family whenever we paid a visit. In spite of that, I never felt a sense of belonging. They were not my family. I was a stranger in their midst, and they were strangers to me. Then it is no wonder that, at the demise of my father, his younger brother led a team of his family to take everything from my father's room, including the bed he used, all because inheritance is by *mogya*.

With this matrilineal system, my mother's only brother (my uncle), locally referred to as *Wofa*, became a very important person to me, because as the male child of his sister I would inherit his property. He has his own children but they do not inherit except with my permission. The children of my uncle belong to the family of their own mother and they will inherit from their mother's brother.

However, the matrilineal inheritance system—communicated to me by the oral tradition—makes me angry whenever I reflect on it. I am determined not to let my wife and children go through any similar experience. I am happy there is a law in Ghana today that gives the choice for the right of inheritance. I have communicated this fact to my children in the Ghanaian way—orally.

Importance of the Group or Community in How People Learn

In my culture, verbal communication is also used to teach proverbs that are considered worthy to be passed on from one generation to another. For example, there is the important proverb that “*Obaako were aduro a egu.*” Literally translated, it means “when a person goes alone to draw medicine from the bark of a tree, it will spill.” The medicine man in my culture depends upon herbs, leaves, and bark of some trees to prepare effective medicines for use by the sick in the community. Sometimes the medicine man must use a machete to carefully extract some ingredients for his medicine from the bark of a tree. If he goes to the bush to do this alone, he is likely to come back with little success. On the other hand, if he goes with an assistant, as he carries out the action on the tree, this assistant will hold a bowl beneath the cut, so that the debris collects faster and more successfully. No medicine man can be efficient and effective without the assistance of others. I have learned this as a part of my training in leadership and team work.

My past and present experiences shape my beliefs and practices about the importance of the group in community. I was the fourth of my parents’ five children. I grew up, however, with siblings who were children of my father’s first wife. In addition, some nephews of my father were living in the same household with us and they were also my “siblings.” I learned to eat from the same bowl with all the males in the house except my father. I was made to believe that food was to be enjoyed only when everyone in sight took part in it. In the evening, during the time for homework, it was common to see the younger seeking help with their lessons from the older males.

During my post-college years, I taught grade five students in an elementary school. Their learning materials were books supplied by the Ghana Education Service. As the teacher, I was required to review each chapter with the students. Students were expected to demonstrate individual understanding by asking questions in class. At the end of the semester, each student would prove the degree of learning that had taken place by passing a test designed by the teacher. Examples of how to solve the problems of each chapter were provided in the books. Students who took class tests and performed poorly were given extra tuition and homework to make up for the loss. This was pure

individualized learning. In some ways I sensed that this learning experience was not very successful, but I had forgotten the group learning that I had growing up.

When I had the opportunity to teach at the high school level, the situation was different. The examinations that tested the ability of students were competitive at the international level. Students were to be prepared to be able to pass the sub-regional examination called the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) at the “ordinary level” or “O” Level. When students were preparing to write examinations in the same subject, they often met together, discussed the subject, sometimes reviewing past questions and trying to provide answers through their discussions. The interesting part of this learning was that it was neither formal nor official, but informal and private. I remember being a part of such groups when I was a student. We called ourselves a study group. The learning we experienced was a unique learning strategy. Looking back, however, I realize it fell short of the five requirements for cooperative learning as proposed by Johnson and Johnson (1994); but it still served a useful purpose. Our learning goal was to make the highest grade in every subject. Our action steps included discussing class notes, looking for extra information from other textbooks, listing the points one after the other, using some mnemonic devices to identify the points, and finally, by rote memorization, making sure we have stored as many points as possible so we could pour them out during the examination.

More recently, I have taught at the college level. It has been my experience that the instructional materials consisted of readings from selected books and other optional reading materials. In teaching on the importance and application of EndNote to graduate students, for example, I prepared the lessons and carried out the responsibility with some assumptions of a level of competency for the application of a software program, only to find that the one hour instruction time allowed was not sufficient for students to grasp the lesson material. I achieved a measure of success with many of them only after I gave them additional hands-on learning and an opportunity to take turns explaining the process to their peers.

I have also worked as a pastor in the Seventh-day Adventist Church for more than 20 years, serving in various capacities and departments. As a conference youth director in Ghana, I was challenged with the use of the *Youth Instructional Manual*, written with American youth as the audience. I adapted the materials to suit the local Ghanaian culture, investing in and incorporating the assistance of the local youth. Looking back, I attribute the success and joy in using those materials to the combination of making connection with the culture and history as well as the group process involved in adapting the materials.

In my ministry I have modified the usual method of learning in church through preaching and teaching by PowerPoint presentation. I have had the opportunity to help members of both Michiana and Chicago Ghanaian churches reflect on the topic of stewardship at an annual three-day retreat. I divided the time at our disposal into sessions of one and a half hours. Under each sub-topic, I gave a short presentation for 30 minutes and then gave group leaders and their groups 45 minutes to discuss the topic. I followed this up by summarizing their reflections in 15 minutes. The feedback at the end was very rewarding. Members reported that they understood the stewardship lessons in a more practical way.

In my readings about teaching and learning, I have discovered that God has inspired His messenger, Ellen G. White (1915), to write the following to guide the church:

At our camp meetings one or two labourers should not be required to do all the preaching and all the teaching in Bible lines. At times greater good can be accomplished by breaking up the large congregation into sections. . . . There will be little groups all over the ground with their Bibles in their hands, and different ones leading out in a free, conversational study of the Scriptures. This was the method that Christ taught His disciples. When the great throngs gathered about the Saviour, He would give instruction to the disciples and to the multitude. Then after the discourse the disciples would mingle with the people and repeat to them what Christ had said. Often the hearers had misapplied Christ's words, and the disciples would tell them what the scriptures said and what Christ had taught that they said. (p. 88)

Reflecting on Johnson and Johnson (1994), I have learned that students have a passion for cooperative learning. In my roles as a teacher, preacher and mentor, I have learned to emphasize less teaching aimed at individual competitiveness and more on cooperative learning for better understanding and assimilation of the material. I believe that the ease with which I use small group discussions in my ministry today is rooted in my family experiences long ago in Africa. I will continue to nourish these habits and values.

Leadership Lessons

As a youth, learning and leadership were intertwined; listening and observing and experimenting took place daily with increasing complexity. My father, by example, helped me to know that the more I learned, the higher the leadership position I could hold in the future. Thus it was that I grew up with the understanding that there was a relationship between learning, position, and leadership.

Leadership is a process that operates among educated and non-educated people in each of society's layers and is part of the collective unconscious. As

a Christian, I have embraced the idea that the leader is one who serves others—like Jesus did. Leadership is about influence and helping to make the world a better place by empowering others to be mentally, spiritually and socially strong.

I learned from leading fellow students of the Pan African Club at Andrews University that members felt a sense of belonging and participated in club activities when they were involved in the planning, organization and implementation of our programs. Whenever they felt otherwise, they grew cold towards the club and club activities. Realizing that this was an organization encompassing students and faculty from the three Divisions (administrative regions) of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa (West-Central, East-Central, and Southern Africa-Indian Ocean), I intentionally involved members in leadership positions with a representation from the sub regions so they could in turn encourage and inspire participation from students from their Divisions. This worked so well that we were able to bring all the leaders of the church in Africa together, not only once but three times, so they could have a dialogue with some Andrews faculty and the African students. This consultation turned into conferences at which issues were not only discussed but presented in scholarly fashion. Each presentation was followed by respondents and break-out sessions, giving each participant the opportunity to give input. Each of the three conferences resulted in concrete, applicable resolutions and recommendations for the advancement of the work of God in Africa. With the support of university faculty members, proceedings from the conferences were published in book form.

I have learned from working with the members of the Philadelphia Ghana Church that members expect their leader to demonstrate care and love for them. Reflecting on this experience and using my knowledge base as a lifelong student of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977), I have experimented actively with how to help bring significant changes to the lives of members. Because I am aware that members need to grow and change in a holistic fashion, the physical, mental, social and spiritual concerns of my members are dear and paramount in my ministry. I want to learn and practice people-centered ministry.

The following is the script of one day in my life; look at it as if you are shadowing a church leader for a day. The day started with visitors arriving from out of state who needed to be welcomed and served breakfast. This is what followed:

1. Arranging for three cars to take everyone to church. This was just a small part of the culmination of weeks of planning.
2. After the need for an English language Sabbath School class was

discovered, planning for this class began.

3. The church was unaccustomed to celebrating the achievement of graduates. PowerPoint presentations were prepared, complete with photographs of each elementary, middle, secondary school, college, and university graduate.
4. A special presentation was made for those who had birthdays.
5. The dedication of a four-week-old baby took place.
6. I made a presentation to draw attention to the need to “think big” and “pray through” our dreams based on the book *The Circle Maker*. The desire is to engage the church as a whole.
7. A planned thanksgiving service took place. One of our church members had been diagnosed with cancer and was not expected to live—but the visits to the hospital, anointing, and numerous prayer sessions were part of the journey that led up to victory and remission for this member.
8. We had a fellowship luncheon.
9. We baptized four young candidates—three of whom were college students.
10. In the evening we had a memorial service for a member’s parent who had passed away in another country.

Leadership is about relationships. Each of the events described above involved planning and the use of strategies and conflict resolution to reach the final day when the events transpired.

Philosophy and Worldview

My thoughts about philosophers centered on individuals who could think about complex issues and try to provide some answers. The literature on the subject matter of philosophy, however, identifies philosophers as people who use their minds to wander around the issue of the reality of the world apart from the stories embedded in myths and legends.

I grew up with a myth explaining the reason God chose to dwell in the sky far away from humans. Our Ghanaian fathers told us that God (whose dwelling place is the sky above us) used to be very close to humans on earth. Due to the human activity of pounding fufu, a Ghanaian dish prepared with a pestle and mortar, God’s space was constantly invaded by humans. So He decided to move very far away from humans. Reflecting on this myth, I find the abstract concepts of philosophy embedded in the literature very helpful.

Bertrand Russell (1962) makes the following existential observations:

Philosophy has for centuries been interested in the problems of human existence, of man’s value orientations, his spiritual world with all its various planes, and also his socio-political and religious positions. It must be noted, however, that philosophy deals with questions that have never formed part of the subject-matter of the separate sciences. Rather, it deals with the science of the initial principles of the existence of the

world, humanity and cognition. Since Philosophers are men and they study about the origin of the universe, it can be said that philosophy is the study of the relationship between man and the universe (p. 13).

It is in the light of this quest for knowledge about myself and the universe that I have developed my philosophy in life by examining my worldview. Anne M. Sullivan made the profound statement that “people seldom see the halting and painful steps by which the most insignificant success is achieved” (Brainy Quote, n.d.). Both of my parents are deceased. My father died in 1981 and my mother hung on with us until the year 2000 when she also died. As I reflect on Sullivan’s statement, my mind goes back to the painful steps both of them went through to assist my siblings and me to make some meaning of life. I did not see those steps, but I can imagine the pain with which they raised two females and three males from kindergarten to high school and then through college. My father demonstrated his Christian faith by giving every child a Christian first name. (I was named Paul, but I changed my name later because of radical beliefs in pan-Africanism.) Waking us up early for family devotions and prayer is something that has stuck with me until today. My mother was the benevolent individual who allowed as many relatives as possible to live with us so they could also be supported to acquire some education. As I grapple with my worldview, I am grateful for the impact my beloved ones had on my view of reality. As much as I respect other worldviews, let me state that I have had significant paradigm shifts in my worldview, and I continue to experience the same even now. I anticipate that I shall experience some more in the future.

As a Christian theist, I accept by faith the biblical assertion that “for everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible . . . everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him” (Col. 1:16, *The Message*). I assert with confidence, therefore, God did whatever was done, including the creation of human beings on the sixth day (Gen. 1:27). Scientists and evolutionists have succeeded in bringing some confusion on the subject of creation by dwelling on what has happened since creation (which to them, started by chance). The inability of science to prove or disprove how things originally got here makes me believe wholeheartedly in the power of the “Eldest” as responsible for how things got here originally. Bertrand Russell, an atheist, said it right: “Unless you assume a God, the question of life’s purpose is meaningless” (quoted in Warren, 2002, p. 17).

With reference to human beings, I perceive each person to be a creation of God in His image, with unique qualities and features second to none, but with limitations. Each person has a culture, space, genetic factor, purpose and experience with which he or she was created.

Who is the nature behind nature? The Bible, in my opinion, gives one answer to such human questions: “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (Ps. 24:1, NKJV). The earth is the Lord’s.

In summary, my leadership has grown and developed as I have learned to “look backward as I move forward.” I continue to reclaim the good in my past—somehow, as I recognize the influence of my past experiences, I am more able to adapt and change my present and future. I don’t know how this happens, but I urge you to pause a moment and try to make some connection with your past experience, knowing that “we have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history” (White, 1902, p. 196).

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