



What I Learned In Africa, by Henning Mankell

I ended up in Africa because the plane ticket there was cheapest. I came and I stayed. For nearly 25 years I've lived off and on in Mozambique. Time has passed, and I'm no longer young; in fact, I'm approaching old age. But my motive for living this straddled existence, with one foot in African sand and the other in European snow, in the melancholy region of Norrland in Sweden where I grew up, has to do with wanting to see clearly, to understand.

The simplest way to explain what I've learned from my life in Africa is through a parable about why human beings have two ears but only one tongue. Why is this? Probably so that we have to listen twice as much as we speak.

In Africa listening is a guiding principle. It's a principle that's been lost in the constant chatter of the Western world, where no one seems to have the time or even the desire to listen to anyone else. From my own experience, I've noticed how much faster I have to answer a question during a TV interview than I did 10, maybe even 5, years ago. It's as if we have completely lost the ability to listen. We talk and talk, and we end up frightened by silence, the refuge of those who are at a loss for an answer. [...]

A number of years ago I sat down on a stone bench outside the Teatro Avenida in Maputo, Mozambique, where I work as an artistic consultant. It was a hot day, and we were taking a break from rehearsals so we fled outside, hoping that a cool breeze would drift past. The theater's air-conditioning system had long since stopped functioning. It must have been over 100 degrees inside while we were working.

Two old African men were sitting on that bench, but there was room for me, too. In Africa people share more than just water in a brotherly or sisterly fashion. Even when it comes to shade, people are generous.

I heard the two men talking about a third old man who had recently died. One of them said, "I was visiting him at his home. He started to tell me an amazing story about something that had happened to him when he was young. But it was a long story. Night came, and we decided that I should come back the next day to hear the rest. But when I arrived, he was dead."

The man fell silent. I decided not to leave that bench until I heard how the other man would respond to what he'd heard. I had an

instinctive feeling that it would prove to be important.

Finally he, too, spoke.

"That's not a good way to die â€” before youâ€™ve told the end of your story."

It struck me as I listened to those two men that a truer nomination for our species than Homo sapiens might be Homo narrans, the storytelling person. What differentiates us from animals is the fact that we can listen to other peopleâ€™s dreams, fears, joys, sorrows, desires and defeats â€” and they in turn can listen to ours.

--Henning Mankell, translated from Swedish by Tiina Nunnally

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