

## ONE: INTRODUCTION



Going back in time and piecing together the highs and lows of fatherhood was not too difficult. Every event had been mentally catalogued and internally indexed by place, emotion, sound, smell, and countless other attributes.

The smell of dust could trigger a replay of a three-legged race at a Year 2 sports day that my son and his friend, Rio, had effortlessly won. I can still feel the discomfort of getting excited for him while aiding a helpless mother console one of his less agile friends.

How fast time has flown! Nineteen years packed with unforgettable firsts and lasts. I had narrowed down fatherhood to three primary roles: provider, protector, and teacher. But it turned out there were many more hats to wear.

I was a permanent presence in his corner of life's boxing ring. Much as I would have liked to fight for him and even shield him, only he could engage in the battle for his life. Experience enabled me to provide timely and honest feedback, some of which he

took on board. But at times it took a knockdown for him to see sense.

I was also the relay race forerunner who passed the baton on to release him to run his own race. Most of our disagreements turned out to be centred on the timing of the passing of the baton. He thought he was ready to run even before he could walk.

### **Truth Buffets**

My son grew up in the age of truth buffets, a time when the majority only consumed what was palatable to their tastes. Every other person had become adept at directing the spotlight on snippets of the truth while keeping the rest in the dark. So, half-truths usually eclipsed the whole truth.

Facts played second fiddle to what the influential either endorsed or wanted to believe. Information pyramids could be overturned to publish insights drawn from data yet to be gathered.

Before elections, truth was what the electorate expected, and immediately afterwards it changed to what the elected wanted the electorate to believe.

Historical commentary couldn't be taken for granted. The colonial era was at times depicted as a crusade of mercy, while Africa was generally portrayed as a place where time stood still to watch the rest of the world progress.

Conflicting conclusions could be drawn from the same facts. For instance, there were different schools of thought on why a disproportionately high number of black boys in England and Wales were (and still are) in prison.

The dilemma was where and when to start setting the record

straight. We were already playing catch-up to a misinformation machinery that had had quite a head start.

Although only he could tell his own story with any credibility, there was no shortage of volunteers eager to teach him who he was. But he soon learned that even the animal kingdom narrated its own story.

### **Law of the jungle**

Africa's wildlife programmes intrigued him from the very first time we watched one together. He found the animal kingdom transparent, with no hidden agendas, except in long grass or darkness when predators were on the prowl. It introduced him to the law of the jungle – survival of the fittest.

Every type of animal is uniquely equipped to perfect the art of survival. Living to see another day is only one part of the story. The complete picture includes the flourishing of every kind, with every member playing a significant part.

He noticed the jungle was in constant flux and renewal, forever pruning itself of vulnerabilities. So, lagging behind its pace of change rarely went unpunished.

Boundaries, physical and virtual, overlapped, with every type of animal observing its own. Power was the currency of choice to settle territorial disputes.

He came to understand that, contrary to history, the law of the jungle established the world order and the food chain hierarchy. And Africa was one of the many hunting grounds that had been secured by military might.

While animal conservation and wildlife programme makers adopted a policy of non-interference, the same courtesy was not

extended to the custodians of the continent's wildlife, who were forced to follow in the footsteps of Europe in terms of culture, language, and religion. It was tantamount to training the highly social African wild dogs to adopt the solitary lifestyle of foxes.

He concluded that the world order wasn't as it should be largely because Africa had been diverted off its natural course.

### **Sieving facts**

We instilled in him the notion that he was not obliged to take anything at face value and urged him to constantly sieve details for truth. There was no room for indifference.

A one-dimensional view of anything can distort the truth. The onus was, therefore, on him to look for all the angles.

David Livingstone's exploration of Africa was a good case in point. History has hardly mentioned the African hospitality without which Livingstone wouldn't have been able to venture into the unknown. He was welcomed as a guest and given guides to significant sites such as the Mosi-oa-Tunya, which he renamed the Victoria Falls.

Also understated was the people's ability to quickly learn foreign languages. But this unsung skill opened channels of communication, facilitated negotiations and enabled Livingstone to teach.

He thought that this explained why most of Africa is multilingual. Most people are fluent in at least two African languages and one European language. This compelled him to question what is ordinarily taken on face value.

Open days at school and college revealed that my son was actively engaged in his classes. At a parents' evening at college, a teacher's initial remarks were "Your son is different from most

students. He won't accept anything that hasn't been explained to his satisfaction. I prepare lessons with him in mind. He is one of my favourite students."

Though it didn't always translate into improved grades, we were pleased with his preparedness to probe.