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The Sangoma's Gift:
Building Inclusion Through Honor, Respect, and Generosity of Spirit

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On a visit to South Africa, I met a man named Oswell who gave me much to ponder about honor, respect, and generosity of spirit in building inclusion. The occasion that brought us together was a three-day meeting that explored themes of forgiveness and reconciliation between black, brown, and white communities in the new South Africa.

Oswell is a Sangoma, or traditional healer, of the Xhosa people. He arrived on the first morning of the seminar with his host, an Afrikaaner named Stephen. I was asked to meet them at the door and unofficially make them welcome. It was my first meeting with a Sangoma, and I was nervous, unsure of how to greet him.

Oswell is a tall, powerfully built man in his mid-fifties. On that day he wore a gray tweed sports jacket over a T-shirt and slacks and a traditional fur hat. The Sangoma made a soft clapping motion in greeting. Instinctively, I clapped back.

As the fortunate beneficiary of a short coaching session on traditional protocol, I had been directed to ask where the Sangoma wished to be seated in the circle of participants. Oswell indicated a seat on the east side of the room, in the direction associated with the ancestors by the Xhosa people. I inquired how he wished to have his presence acknowledged in the collective. Oswell indi-

cated that this was a question he wished to consider and that I needed to do nothing at the time.

The first day of the meeting proceeded, seemingly without incident. Oswell the Sangoma sat in his seat in the east, keenly observing the dialogue process as it unfolded, a silent participant. By day's end, however, it appeared that all was not well with the Sangoma. As he departed, Oswell confided that the traditional protocol that would have allowed him to fully participate in the collective had not been observed.

I was alarmed at this news. What protocol was he talking about? Had I not asked him what could be done to acknowledge his presence?

Oswell explained that traditional protocol required that a Sangoma be publicly acknowledged as a sign of respect and that the responsibility for acknowledgment rested with Stephen, his host. Because this had not happened, the Sangoma had been made "invisible" and without a place in the group. He had been dishonored, and the disrespect had left him feeling "unwell." Oswell told me that he would need to speak with Stephen about the matter before he returned to the meeting on the following day.

The next morning the Sangoma was back. We clapped our morning greetings to each other as he took his place in the east, opposite Stephen. At the first opportunity, Stephen rose and addressed the collective. He formally apologized to Oswell for his breach of traditional protocol and acknowledged that his act of dishonor and disrespect had left his guest "invisible" the previous day.

He explained that he had meant Oswell no harm. But in his own defense Stephen admitted that he had not possessed the knowledge of how to introduce or include a Xhosa Sangoma in a meeting. He thanked the Sangoma for allowing him to rectify the discourtesy, acknowledged him for his diplomacy and skill at bringing the matter to his attention, and apologized once more for his lack of awareness.

Then Oswell rose. He confirmed that he had been sickened by the lack of recognition and acknowledgment that had caused him to have no place in the collective. Oswell said this incident had reminded him that the traditional ways of honor and respect were rapidly disappearing. This was especially evident, he said, because the people had forgotten the importance and place of the ancestors. That the ancestors were no longer acknowledged and

honored was at the root of the problem, the root cause of sickness in society. Soon, he reckoned, the Sangomas would have no place in their own culture. Then what would happen to the people?

It was easy to see from the Sangoma's point of view how the decline of honor and respect could erode a whole culture. Oswell acknowledged Stephen for correcting the breach of protocol. This would allow him, he assured the collective, a proper place to fully participate. Now he was feeling well again and looked forward to the day ahead.

The incident of the sick Sangoma caught most of us by surprise. I could see Oswell's point of view. But I could also see Stephen's and empathized with his plight as the host.

It was not that Stephen held an intention to be disrespectful of Oswell. Rather, it seemed to be a case of "disharmonic convergence"—one of those seemingly innocuous encounters between cultures that, despite good intentions, become crash sites for honor and respect.

Stephen believed that he had been a good host by inviting his friend Oswell to the meeting. He was confident that extending an invitation, providing transportation, and acting in a courteous manner were acts of good hosting. By most Western standards, Stephen was an exemplary host. By indigenous standards, he missed the boat.

The Withering of Involvement

The story of Oswell and Stephen is unfortunately widespread, played out daily in countless ways. In dialogue sessions I have witnessed hundreds of people talk about the pain and embarrassment that comes from the dishonor and disrespect they have felt. These experiences commonly fall into two broad categories of lack of appreciation: "Not Being Seen" and "Not Being Heard." When we are unseen or unheard, the message is clear: We are less worthy.

That a human being is intrinsically better, more gifted, or more worthy is an abhorrent concept to most people. This is especially true in the West, where we argue that equality is the basis of our social contract. But our behavior routinely lags behind our espoused beliefs, and this is often so with issues of diversity. Our competitive society is reductionist—people are either winners or losers. This is, as Oswell might say, a root cause of the continued decline of honor and respect between people.

We have all been on the receiving end of disrespect, and we have all dished it out. Those very same dialogue participants who shared their pain and alienation of not being seen or heard also uncovered countless examples of when they were guilty of unconscious, careless, and unskilled behavior that undermined the dignity of others. A different kind of pain went with that realization.

And yet, central to most cultures of the world is a tradition of hospitality with well-defined protocol—time-honored values, norms, skills, and behaviors assigned to the role of host and the role of guest. To violate these codes would bring dishonor to the individual, family, community, even the nation. Transgressions of honor, respect, and hospitality have often been rectified on the battlefield.

With hostilities and conflicts accelerating within and between families, organizations, communities, and nations, it would seem prudent to recover our traditional protocols and practices of hospitality. How and why did we lose them? Perhaps in the stories that we stopped telling, the songs that we no longer sing, the community rituals that have lost their meaning or have been forgotten altogether. We have, as Oswell suggests, forgotten the ancestors.