Of Seal Skins and Cow Tail Switches

Storytelling and Critical Thinking

Charles Temple

The author takes the reader to Albania and Tanzania to illustrate the power of storytelling as a curriculum for social change. In the discussions that ensued from storytelling, the author provides a powerful example of how stories act as a sort of social glue that binds people together and can lead to social transformation.

Beginning the fall of 1997, I took a two-year buyout from my teaching job at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in upstate New York to work for George Soros's Open Society Institute. Soros, a Hungarian refugee who studied philosophy at the London School of Economics and later made one of the world's large fortunes as an aggressive investor, had set up offices around eastern Europe to help transition public institutions away from Soviet-era practices into something more open. The local Soros Foundations supported vigorous journalism, advocated for human rights, offered resources to young artists, and sought to help teachers move away from educating the "New Soviet Man and Woman" toward a more open and creative model of an educated person. Critical thinking lay at the heart of that model, or so believed Mr. Soros's assistant for education projects, Liz Lorant. Liz chose a fledgling teacher training project that four of us began in Transylvania (western Romania) in 1996 and "took it to scale": creating a network program that

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opened in the summer of 1997 in nine countries and soon spread to twenty, then twenty-four, and over the next two decades to forty countries on five continents.[1] Storytelling was and still is instrumental to the success of the project.

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Before a December dawn I shoved my bag and banjo into the back of the Ferihegy Airport shuttle and joined the huddle of businessmen and women inside the toasty van. Fumes from breakfasts of pickled herring and onions laced the air as the van meandered around Budapest from hotel to hotel. When the driver shifted into high gear and joined the traffic toward the airport, the morning coffee kicked in and the businessmen and women began to talk.

"And where are you going?"

"To Warsaw. To sell vacuum cleaners."

"And you?"

"To Istanbul, to sell air conditioners."

"And you?" My turn. "To Tirana."

"Mein Gott!" shouted a fellow from the back. "And what do you intend to sell *there*?!"

Tirana, the capital of Albania. Albania, the poorest country in Europe—the new version of Europe we were all coming to know after the fall of the Berlin wall. Tirana was not on the maps of many traveling salesmen.

"Critical thinking," I replied. "And we're giving it away!"

The taxi ride into Tirana was full of surprises. We passed gun turrets—dozens of them—squat-domed, menacing mushrooms sprouting from the bare hills, their sinister slits hiding or not hiding someone drawing a rifle bead on you. Seven hundred and fifty thousand of the turrets guard the roads around the country—enough concrete to build another Tirana. Then came the incongruous mansions scattered across the fields with no streets connecting them. They were windfalls to farmers and shepherds from the massive pyramid scheme that swept the country a few years before. Next came a burned-out factory and the blackened hulk of a rusting locomotive—both torched by angry citizens in the uprising that followed the pyramid's inevitable collapse. At a crossroads, a policeman wearing an executioner's hood waved us through. The driver explained that in this land of blood feuds, a traffic citation could invite members of the recipient's family to visit revenge on the policeman's family.[2]

The conference room was long and narrow, and the participants—men

crowded at one end and women at the other—showed a combination of expectancy and skepticism, if arms folded across chests meant the same thing in this part of the world as in mine.[3] I loosened people up with some lively riffs on my banjo, explained why I was there, and prepared to tell them a story.

Just then Klieg lights came on and a cameraman from an educational television station began filming. I blinked and launched into my version of "The Seal Skin," a selkie story adapted from many sources.[4]

> The seven-year-old son of an aging fishing couple living on the north coast of Scotland was poking around on the shore in the dusky daylight of midsummer night. [We'll call him Ivan, because that is the equivalent of "Jack" in many parts of eastern Europe]. Ivan heard what may have been singing, and looking down the coast, saw what might be smoke coming from a cave.
>
> He didn't do any exploring that time—the story doesn't explain why. Perhaps his young legs were too short to carry him across the boulders that lay between him and the cave.
>
> Exactly seven years later, Ivan was down on the coast at midnight on Midsummer night. He heard the singing and saw the smoke . . .
>
> Again, Ivan didn't explore. The story doesn't explain why—perhaps his parents called him inside.
>
> By the third time, seven years later, Ivan was twenty-one and living alone in the cottage by the sea, having taken over his late father's trade. His mother had moved away to live with relatives. At midnight Midsummer night, Ivan walked down to the shore. He heard the singing and saw the smoke, and this time he made his way down the beach to the mouth of the cave. There he found a stack of beautiful seal furs. Peeking carefully inside the cave, he saw a circle of beautiful young people holding hands around a fire and singing a lovely melody with unearthly words.
>
> Ivan slipped the sleekest fur from the pile and made his way back to the cottage, where he locked the seal skin in a trunk and hid it under the bed. He tied the key to a leather thong and hung it around his neck. In the morning, he took a blanket and returned to the cave, and there he found a young woman naked and shivering. He wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and led her home to his cottage. She stayed a day, a week, a month, a year, and longer.
>
> In time they had a son, and soon after, a daughter. Ivan was a happy man, but of the woman you couldn't be sure. She was sometimes found staring sadly

> out to sea, especially at those times when a pod of seals swam by with their bright, sad eyes. Ivan never told his wife what was in the trunk, or why he kept the key around his neck . . .
>
> Christmas Eve came, and the family went off to church, except for the wife, who complained of an illness. Ivan left his key hanging on the bedstead. When he and children returned, they found the door swung wide, the trunk open, and the house empty.
>
> After that, a beautiful seal with big sad eyes sometimes swam along close offshore when the children walked along the beach. And a beautiful seal with big sad eyes, perhaps the same one, sometimes appeared to steer fish into Ivan's net. Maybe the seal was his wife. All we know for sure is that the woman was never seen on this earth again.

I told the story using voice, gestures, facial expressions, and dramatic pauses as best I could, but Viktor's monotonic translation could have been a report about hog futures. No matter. When the story was done the cameraman came forward and shook my hand up and down. "That was amazing!" he said via Viktor. "I felt you telling the story. It went straight to the heart!"

In the discussion that followed, the participants confessed to feeling uneasy about the tale—they had expected a happier ending. "But how did you feel about what happened in the story? Was it good or bad?" I asked.

They formed groups of four.[5] Because it was hard to move around in the narrow room, the men were in men groups and the women in women groups. I put this question to them: "Was this a bad thing that happened? Would it have been better if Ivan had not taken the seal skin?" I asked the groups to list three reasons that would support a "yes" answer to that question, and three more reasons to support a "no" answer. Once they had listed reasons on each side of the question they were to debate the issue in their groups and come to a consensus answer. I circulated among the groups, going first to the women. They were chatting away, and I saw growing lists of reasons on both sides of the page.

But there was now silence at the men's end of the room. I asked the men if they listed all the reasons they could? Yes, they had. But though their lists all had several reasons supporting the conclusion that it was better for Ivan to have taken the seal skin, they had none in the opposite column.

"Why not?"

"Because there *are* no reasons why he shouldn't have taken the seal skin!"

The groups discussed the question further, then reached agreements around answers and reasons to support their conclusions. As they shared their position statements, the women had agreed Ivan was wrong and should never have taken the seal skin. What Ivan did was tantamount to kidnapping. He held the woman against her will, since he never offered her the choice of having the seal skin that could have returned her to her former life. The men said the opposite. It is man's right, man's destiny, to control nature! A man must take what he wants and needs! A debate between the two sides changed no one's mind, although the women did concede that at least Ivan's wife got to experience life as a human being. And that the two children were given life. How they were conceived had nothing to do with them. "You don't get to choose your parents, or the reasons they became your parents in the first place."

That workshop went on for a week, and gradually more reasons appeared in both columns, even among the men. And after three more weeklong workshops spread over the year, people had become facile at supporting arguments with reasons and more willing to change their positions if they were persuaded by good arguments from other points of view.

We shared many stories, but often returned to "Ivan and the Seal Skin." In another discussion, the participants were asked this question:

> The boundary between the land and the sea plays a big role in this story, doesn't it? Have you had boundaries like that in your own life? What are they?

At first nobody responded. I offered an example. Three years before I had lost my wife of twenty-six years to a sudden heart attack. What the boundary in the story made me think of was the painful separation brought about by the barrier of death. Frances's soul lives on, I was convinced. But, I could not reach her. I raised my complaint to God: "Don't we even get email?"

After that example, they opened up.

> I loved a boy from a different tribe. Our parents would never allow us to marry. I carry the sadness still.
>
> I came from a traditional village. My family raised money to send me to high school and then to university. Now I am a grown up and successful professional person. But when I return home, I am no longer treated as a member of my village.

Some tears flowed, as the seal skin story reminded them of painful boundaries in their lives. And of our need to console each other in our times of sadness.

The participants were often troubled that there was more than one defensible answer to a question. In their past experience as students and teachers in an authoritarian country, such things had not happened. I suggested that their different life experiences led to different perspectives and different interpretations of the same events. Women's experiences could lead them to draw different conclusions about a story from those that men drew. The same is true of people from different ethnic groups, or different social strata. These differences occur not just in stories but in making sense of the events of everyday life, too. Stories offer case studies that can draw out our beliefs and interpretations, while safely removed from real-life consequences. The skills of reasoning and the habit of open-mindedness that are developed in good discussions can carry over into our lives: into our marriages, our life in the workplace, our choices as citizens and as voters.

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Fast forward ten years. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected president of Liberia, and she called her old friend George Soros and asked for help with Liberia's education system. After fourteen years of civil war, the schools were in terrible disarray. Buildings destroyed, teachers scattered hither and yon as rebels forced people from their villages, and a generation of young people with interrupted educations or no schooling at all. Mr. Soros asked Liz Lorant to send help, and soon our team was on the road again.

The auditorium at Stella Maris Polytechnic Institute was sweltering. The windows, blown out in the war, had been boarded over in plywood. The humidity was total, and the rain thundered on the roof like a freight train. Sister Mary Laurene Brown had invited thirty teachers to our workshop, and when they did not RSVP, she invited thirty more. Now here were all sixty, the ladies dressed in colorful cloths from head to toe, the men with pants rolled up and carrying their shoes because of the flooded roads. People mopped sweat with towels. My partners, Alan Crawford and Wendy Saul, just looked hot, but I occasionally had to shout, "Hold that thought!" and pop behind the standing blackboard, peel off a dripping shirt, and slip on a dry one from my backpack.

Storytelling, readings, discussions, and critical thinking were the stuff of the weeklong workshop, again a series of four sessions spread across the year. During the second one, Michael Weah, whom we had come to know ran the We Care

Library for children in downtown Monrovia along with Yvonne Capehart Weah, approached. "You all are doing this all wrong, Cholly."

"How is that?"

"We come to workshops to catch up on sleep. But this one is too interesting!"

By the end of the year, Yvonne and Michael were in charge of Critical Thinking—Liberia, staffed by a strong team of twenty trainers selected from the sixty. With support from the Soros-sponsored Open Society Initiative of West Africa they ran workshops for every primary school teacher in Monrovia (where half the country's population live). They ran workshops for high school teachers and university professors. They ran workshops across the border in Sierra Leone.

One day I was leading a discussion for thirty teachers at the We Care Library in the heart of Monrovia. I told a *dilemma tale*, because such tales are commonly told in Liberia. Dilemma tales are meant to spark long problem-solving discussions. The story I told was a version of "Where Is Father?"[6] My Liberian audience did not know it. The tale goes like this:

> Ogaloussa was a hunter from Kundi, a village perched on a hill above the Cavally River in Liberia. Each day while others fished, farmed, and tended animals, Ogaloussa headed into the bush with his weapons to kill game for his neighbors. Sometimes he went deep into the bush and didn't come out for days at a time.
>
> On the evening when the story begins, his family of a wife and three sons was sitting around a dinner of fish and fufu. Ogaloussa was not there. The next night he was not with them either. Nor the next night. After three nights they wondered aloud about him. But after ten nights they spoke of him less and less.
>
> Now it happened his wife was pregnant, and in time she gave birth to another son. She named him Puli. When Puli was old enough to speak, his first words were, "Where is my father?"
>
> Oh! The other sons rose at once and started off to search for Ogaloussa. They wandered half a day through the bush until they came to a clearing. There they found scattered bones and rusting weapons. After a moment of silence, one son said, "I have magic to put these bones in order." So he reassembled Ogaloussa's bones.
>
> Another son said, "I have magic to put flesh on these bones." And so he did.
>
> The third son said, "I have magic to breathe life into our father's corpse." So he did.
>
> Ogaloussa sat up. He looked around. He gathered his weapons and together

with his sons walked through the bush back to their village. When he returned, his wife shaved his head, for that is what is done when one returns from the dead. She made him a place to rest in a hut behind their cottage. After three days, Ogaloussa emerged from the hut and commanded that a feast be prepared. A cow was slaughtered, the villagers were called, and everyone ate and drank far into the night. Ogaloussa cut the tail from the cow and made a switch from it, woven with beautiful leather and cowry shells. It was a fine thing. He swished it this way and that, and it made his points emphatically. Everyone is the village quietly coveted that cow tail switch.

After one year, Ogaloussa held another feast. Again, his family along with the villagers ate and drank. When the fire was glowing coals and the talk had died down, Ogaloussa stood and spoke.

"One year ago I went into the bush to hunt game. I had gone some distance when a leopard leaped on me and broke my neck. I lay dead while animals devoured my flesh and scattered my bones. Then my sons came and found me. One assembled my bones. Another restored my flesh. The third breathed life into my body. I am grateful and will give my cow tails switch as a reward. But I have only one cow tail switch and my sons are many. Now I must decide to whom to give my cow tail switch."

There was silence around the campfire as all pondered the question, who was most deserving of the cow tail switch?

At this point in the story, I stopped and asked the audience to ponder the question. Then they wrote down, in order, the sons they thought were most deserving. I asked all who believed the son who assembled the bones deserved the reward to go into a corner together. All for the son who applied the flesh were to go to another corner, and all for the son who breathed in life to go to another. The fourth corner was for those who thought someone else was most deserving. All of the Liberian participants divided themselves more or less evenly among the first three corners. One person walked over and stood in the fourth corner—an American visitor to the library.[7] The people in each corner spoke among themselves and agreed on a statement of their position to share with others. Then they would be instructed to use their arguments to persuade others to come over to their corners.

The spokespeople from the first three corners made eloquent arguments. When it was the American's turn, she said, "It had to be Puli. Because the others

would not have gone to search for their father if Puli had not remembered him." Some people were persuaded by arguments to move from one corner to another. But no one was persuaded to join the American. When the arguments were finished, I reminded them there was more to the story.

> Ogaloussa approached his family. He gave the cow tail switch to the baby, Puli.
>
> The villagers were shocked at first, but then they remembered the proverb, "Consider no man truly dead until he is forgotten."

A howl went up from the participants, followed by laughter. Now that they heard the ending, they understood the reasoning behind it. But the reasoning did not come naturally to them. A few years later in Sierra Leone, I told the same story and used the same discussion strategy—with the same result. No one thought of the baby. This time I asked the participants why they did not, and one responded, "With us, importance comes with age." I have done the exercise many times with audiences in the United States. Here, you must assign people numbers that correspond to different corners; otherwise, everyone will go to the "other" corner and argue for the baby. Reasoning is powerful, but so is the pull of culture.

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For an hour the driver of the Land Cruiser followed a goat track across the flat, dry expanse of the Kongwa District in central Tanzania, the landscape broken by the odd baobab tree, gray and elephantine. When at last we reached the school, the story I told the assembled teachers was this:

> GIRL IN A DRUM[8]
>
> In the village of Taire, all the families were happy. All the families but one. In that family lived Mother and Father, and their daughters Nami, Sina, and Tabu. Nami and Sina worked hard every day. They did what Mother and Father asked of them.
>
> But Tabu? Huh! That girl was a problem! She just sat and watched the others work. She wouldn't lift a finger to help. Not that girl.
>
> Nami swept the dirt around the compound. Sina gathered the clothes and carried them to the river to wash. But Tabu? She never did any work. Sometimes she even laughed at her sisters.
>
> When nobody was looking, Tabu would sneak out into the bush and play.

She pulled petals off flowers. She filled up the holes of ground mice. She stripped the bark off trees.

Mother and Father told Tabu to be good. "Do your work like your sisters," they said. "Don't go off by yourself into the bush. It can be dangerous there."

But do you think Tabu listened? Huh!

Her sisters warned her to change her ways. "You should help me sweep the compound," said Nami. "You should help me wash the clothes, and spread them out to dry," said Sina.

"Huh!" said Tabu.

I tell you, that girl would not help.

One day Tabu wandered off into the bush again to play by herself. She went far off this time—way, way, far.

"BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!" What was that sound? A great tall man with a shiny bald head and a thick black beard marched up behind Tabu. He was beating on a HUGE drum.

Tabu wanted to run, but her knees were shaking too hard. That big man snatched up Tabu like a dirty rag and stuffed her into his drum—"Ploof!"

Then he marched on down the trail, beating on that drum—"BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!"

The man visited a village and played his drum. From inside the drum Tabu chanted, "Boom Boom! Can no one help me?

Boom Boom! Can no one hear me say,

Boom Boom! My name is Tabu.

Boom Boom! This man stole me away."

This was a real talking drum! The village people were thrilled. "You are a magical drummer!" they shouted. They gave the drummer fine gifts. They fed him pork and rice and cassava greens.

The drummer marched from village to village. In every place he beat his drum and Tabu chanted:

"Boom Boom! Can no one help me?

Boom Boom! Can no one hear me say,

Boom Boom! My name is Tabu.

Boom Boom! This man stole me away."

In every village the people cheered and gave the drummer gifts. Oh, how that drummer loved the food and the praise! His belly grew round from rice and pork. His head grew big from the praise. But he gave Tabu nothing to eat.

Not a tiny thing. Tabu grew thinner and thinner. And her voice grew softer and softer.

After many days the drummer marched into a new village. That village was Taire! Nami and Sina came out to see the strange drummer. He beat the drum, and Tabu chanted, now in a whisper:

"Boom Boom! Can no one help me?
Boom Boom! Can no one hear me say,
Boom Boom! My name is Tabu.
Boom Boom! This man stole me away."

Even though Tabu's voice was very faint, the sisters knew who was in the drum. They ran and told their parents at once. They all came to hear the drummer. The drummer beat the drum and Tabu chanted:

"Boom Boom! Is that you, Nami?
Boom Boom! Is that you, Sina?
Boom Boom! Is that you, Mother?
Boom Boom! Is that you, Father?"

"That is my daughter's voice. Open the drum!" shouted Father.

At once, the drummer put down the drum and ran away. Tabu climbed out of the drum. She was thin, and her hair stuck to her head. Her family cried and shouted. They all hugged one other.

Since the day she was found, Tabu gladly stays at home. Happily, she helps with the housework. But sometimes she takes a spoon and beats on a pot. And she chants:

"Boom Boom! I love my family.
Boom Boom! I love my village, too.
Boom Boom! I'm glad to stay here.
Boom Boom! To do what I can do."

I explained that we were going to dramatize the story, but just a part of it. A few volunteers would be actors, and the rest of us would be directors. People eagerly came forward to play the roles of the drummer, Tabu, the sisters, the father, the mother, and five villagers. For a critical moment from the story to dramatize, we chose the scene when the father confronted the drummer and Tabu was released from the drum.

Before the characters improvised the scene, though, I explained that characters had to fully understand what was going on for them at that moment in the

story, so they could play their parts convincingly. The characters stepped forward one at a time, and then the audience was asked to tell that character what she or he should be thinking at that moment. What was at stake for that character? What emotions were at play? How was she feeling about the other characters?

After those questions were thoroughly discussed, and then reduced to their essentials, the audience and the characters advised on how each character should act out the scene. To share just the highlights of the discussion:

- The participants said Tabu would be relieved, embarrassed, sorry, grateful for the support of her family, and determined in the future to prove herself to be a good person.
- Her sisters would be glad to see Tabu returned, but perhaps also angry, and a little jealous. After all, everybody was treating Tabu as the special one even though the sisters had quietly done their duty right along while Tabu had been wicked (echoes of "The Prodigal Son" story).
- How about the father? The drummer had better run away quickly or the father will kill him! The father was feeling a sense of relief at having his lost daughter returned, yes, but that feeling was competing with shame that his family had been damaged, and worry that Tabu had forfeited her value as a future wife: what could have happened to her in the bush with a strange man? Would any eligible village suitor want to take her as his wife now?
- The mother would be playing from several motives: welcoming and consoling Tabu, of course, but also having to protect her from her husband's anger and shame, and also keeping face with her neighbors.
- The villagers? Fascinated by the spectacle, happy at Tabu's return, but also feeling a need to hold the family to account. These things should not have happened. Traditional villages are necessarily conservative places because they must count on people to control their own. It might bring bad luck to have a family living among them that attracted such troubles.
- The drummer? Take off!

The exploration of the characters' motives and emotions took half an hour. The acting took five minutes.

If you read back through the few words from the story that inspired this discussion, none of the issues just raised were mentioned. On one level, the story contained prompts that the audience elaborated with their cultural knowledge.

But on a metaphorical level, the story was a jewelry box, tightly closed until the audience, through their discussion and insights, opened it up and explored its implications.

Sharing tales brings to light important issues from the human condition and makes people care. But what can happen *after* the story—the deep thinking, the sharing of ideas, the intense debating of interpretations, and the gradual understanding of our differences in perceiving the events of our lives—can be as powerful as the storytelling itself. Such discussions may help us reach goals that storytelling by itself does not always reach. One final anecdote is offered to illustrate that point.

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A few years ago, on a panel for Human Development Week at the World Bank headquarters in Washington, DC, the speaker before me reported on an experimental high school he had established in Northern Ireland to mix Catholics and Protestants, with the aim of building community among members of groups that had been adversaries through decades of hostility and violence. After the school had been running for five years, he interviewed the students to evaluate the results. He was stunned by what he heard.

"You wasted our time," went one typical response. "We are no closer to understanding each other for having attended this school."

"We sat in classrooms day after day, year after year, and the teachers lectured to us. We were never asked what we thought or invited to listen to anyone else's thoughts. We might as well have been strangers sitting next to each other in a movie theater."

My turn came to present on our work around the world promoting group discussions and critical thinking, work that by then was attracting attention among international development agencies.

Later I met the Northern Irish presenter in the downstairs bar. He gulped his Guinness, shook his head, and said, "We should have had those discussions, eh?"

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children's literature, and also several children's books. He has conducted trainings for teachers on critical thinking, and for writers and illustrators on producing books for children, in dozens of countries on four continents, and is currently working on projects in Sierra Leone and Tajikistan for the World Bank and USAID. He serves on the board of the Storytelling in Higher Education SIG of the National Storytelling Network and is a member of the Tejas Storytelling Association.

NOTES

1. The project described in this article, Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking, is still going strong after twenty years, though the funding sources now differ from country to country. Activities vary from publishing locally written and illustrated books for Roma (Gypsy) children in eastern Europe, training monks to teach critical thinking in Buddhist schools in Burma, distance-learning courses for teachers in isolated schools in Patagonia, teacher training in postconflict Liberia and Sierra Leone, and networking young teacher education faculty in Romania.

   For information, go to www.rwctic.org. Most of our work in Africa is now supported by the Canadian literacy organization, CODE (www.codecan.org). I confess that I am one of few storytellers in our project; most of our trainers read stories aloud rather than tell them. All of us use the same strategies for generating discussions, and we often use the same stories.
2. Paul Theroux described a trip through Albania at the time I am describing. See *The Gates of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1996.
3. A good question, since a head shake meant "yes," and a nod meant "no."
4. See especially Duncan Williamson, *Tales of the Seal People*. Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing Group, 1992.
5. A storyteller's guide to the discussion strategies mentioned in this article and a good many more are available at no cost from the author, at Temple@hws.edu.
6. William Bascom. *African Dilemma Tales*. The Hague: Mouton, 1975. Bascom shares ten versions of "Where Is Father?" In some, the sons retrieve the father; in others, the hunter's several wives do. My version was modified from "The Cow Tail Switch," retold by Harold Courlander and George Herzog. The story appears in truncated form in *African Dilemma Tales*. An elaborated version was published in the 1960s and was recently reissued. See Harold Courlander and George Herzog, *The Cow Tail Switch and Other Stories*. New York: Square Fish, 2008.

7. Sia Barbara Kamara, who as an early childhood education specialist, had been the national director of the Head Start program during Jimmy Carter's administration.
8. A traditional East African tale retold by C. Temple and E. W. Saul.