

# Facing Stories



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## Colofon

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Facing Stories

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In South Africa there are so many stories worth telling and sharing, and story telling is seen as part of the culture for many people. But, as Tiffany Mugo of The Open Society Fellowship argues; “we are not good in archiving”. So it makes sense, we thought, to capture some stories. In this booklet we write about our experience of interviewing young South Africans about how they navigate their lives and learn from struggles and failures.

### Learning about failure

We can probably all tell stories of things we did or planned in our lives that turned out differently from how we expected, but often we don't talk about these meaningful moments. Failure, as much as success, can be a good thing, although we don't easily celebrate failure or mistakes. Rather, we prefer not to talk about it. But it can be valuable to consider how we respond to our failures and mistakes. In the Netherlands and Germany our colleague Suzanne Verdonchot together with several students, started to research the topic of learning from mistakes. We wondered what learning from mistakes in the South African context would look like. How do people perceive mistakes, in what way do they learn from failures, and how do they make sense of them?

## Everybody has a story

This curiosity led to a series of conversations and interviews with different people to capture their story. There are many stories of human icons and legends that have been captured and archived. See for example the beautiful project '21 Icons of South Africa'. However, there are so many other significant people. Everybody else, actually. During her recent stay in South Africa Mara interviewed several people - and made portrait-stories of five young South Africans age 25-35. Successful in the eyes of others, as they run their own businesses, overcame major difficulties or travelled the world dedicated to societal change. Mara spoke to them about meaningful moments in their lives when things went differently than expected – moments of struggle, failure and mistakes. And what they learned.

The result are personal portraits in photo and text. In the next part you will find them. Each story stands alone and can be read separately in any order. Then, Mara shares the insights she took from the five conversations and gives a personal reflection on both the content and process. We conclude with some final thoughts.

And in the course of discussing these stories we are wondering whether to continue this process – maybe by following up with another set of portraits, maybe with some new questions. At least, we feel this is work we would like to follow up...

Mara Spruyt and Mark Turpin

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Stories that tell the story





Lazola Sikhutshwa





**When you are in prison, you're buried underground. You are not alive. You have no voice, you have limited rights, you cannot eat what you want to eat or deal with your sexual feelings, You're living but not alive like you're locked up in a grave. I was 15 years old when I went to Drakenstein prison and spent 10 years inside. I have tattoos of that time that show the name of the gang I joined in jail. They remember me of that time, that phase. I don't hide it, this is who I am. I am not ashamed.**

### **Fight back**

Growing up it was all about proving yourself as a person. To be recognized and respected you needed to show physical force. There was always fear. We used to fight in the streets with our bare hands. When I would run home in such a situation my uncle or family would send me back saying I had to fight back. I was 8 or 9. I have had a lot of bad experiences. I never thought of being like this. I thought I would be dead. I had no hope. I did things I thought were right but they weren't.

### **Navigate without compass**

When I was 12 I turned into a person full of anger. Nobody helped me, I had no skills to navigate my anger and there were family issues. I started taking drugs, crack mostly and I got into crime. Dropping out of primary school 3 times I went to the streets, got arrested several times together with my friends. People around me were dying of fights and crimes. Those who didn't die went to jail. Luckily I went into jail.

### **Waiting for an answer**

For 2 years and 9 months I had a waiting trial. During this time I was sentenced but not convicted and I got to wear my own clothes. I remember the day I heard the final conviction and my mother came to bring me my prisoner's clothes. It was the first time she saw me in this outfit and she cried. It was terrible. I didn't care being sentenced and going behind bars for all these years. It was my mother's crying that made me realize the impact of me being in prison. I sat down thinking; Where had things gone so



wrong in my life? I was 17 by then and I knew it was my task to find the answer to that question.

### **Toilet thinking**

I spent many years thinking about that particular question. I had told myself it's difficult to make a change if you don't know where things started. So I had to take it from there. I started to study and think a lot. When others were smoking I used to sit alone, on the toilet that I would clean first. I would sit there thinking, with the window open so fresh air could come in. I started writing and reading and that's how the answer came. I knew then I had to make something of my life. That I would be ok.

### **One answer brings new challenges**

The second thing I had to fight was lack of confidence. I realized this when I learnt the answer to my question of where things went wrong. Knowing this was not enough to change my life. Building confidence was a new task I was determined to work on. So I read the bible and from that moment I would stand up and read it publicly to my fellow convicts. By doing so I was practicing to speak out and speak in public.

### **Mastering your problem**

Finding answers was my internal dialogue. I am the master of my own problem. There were people supporting me, in prison. I would listen to them and then I would reflect more myself. There's value in talking about your failures. It reminds you where you come from and it can educate others. The people can learn from your mistakes. But I don't always share my story easily, I first analyse the situation.

*“I told myself it's difficult to make a change if you don't know where it started. So I had to take it from there.”*





## Knowing what not to do

Failures can give a lot of information about how to proceed. In your life or work. Thomas Edison said that he tried 4999 times to make a lamp and he got it the 5000th time. He was failing so many times but he didn't think it was failing, he learned 4999 times how not to do it. It tells you about what not to do. I learned what I should not do. Most of the times we do things because of peer pressure. To escape the pressure you need to set your standards and have willpower. You have to develop a backbone. This, I realized in prison. So I don't take drugs and I don't drink. All my friends were in prison, but we all changed. Poverty and crime got us in jail, now these things are motivating and uplifting me.

## No longer add to the problem

My dream is to be a businessman and employ others. I like to feel I accomplish something and be well known for something good. What that is, good? Contributing to developing the community. Our people are in a tight corner, the blacks and colored disadvantaged people. I cannot come out of prison and add to that problem. My mother is proud of me now. There are only a few like us in the township who are doing well, you know.

## From participant to employee

I am the first ex convict that was employed by Young In Prison. Being a former participant of their program I came to help young people in prison myself. When I joined as a participant I didn't expect to be a staff member myself one day. I used to attend the post release program where I learned a lot attending debating workshops and how to present myself. When we got the opportunity to organise and facilitate a

workshop ourselves I did this and it was then one of the facilitators spotted me. His name was Clinton. He told me he saw great talent in my public speaking and engaging with people.

And here I am.

*Lazola Sikhutshwa (1987) works for Young In Prison, an organization working with and for ex convicts in South Africa. He was born and raised in Guguletu, a township in Cape Town where he continues to live.*





Neliswa Fente



**“I am kinda bored”, I said. The man had just asked me how it was going. It was the summer of 2015 at the presidential summit in the US. President Obama had been speaking to us. As young Africans we were being told that that we could do anything and that we were the leaders of the future. We had been inflated. At some point at the summit I was walking around and then there was this man. I was tired of telling the same thing about my business ‘Spring Age’. But our conversation turned out different than expected.**

### **Education is a fortune**

I was still full of the excitement and conviction of all these people telling me how great I was when the man asked me about my background. “I didn’t finish my studies”, I replied. His face changed as he said: “What?”. I had my story ready about how I didn’t need a degree since I had no compelling reason to finish what I had started and I was already doing so much interesting stuff. As I went on, he just looked at me, stunned. “What a shame!”, he said. “Do you know what a fortune education is?”. Education, he went on, is such a privilege because it enables you to learn and to develop. At that very moment he made me see education in a different way. I never thought of it as a fortune. And I realized I don’t have an excuse for not doing it.

### **The feeling of failure**

I got back to my room and I cried. There I was, at this summit, being told how amazing I was and how beautiful everything that I was doing. But all I could ask myself was what I was doing there. At that moment I felt like a failure. I was crying because I thought that in everything I had done there was one thing that I hadn’t finished. It made me feel I was not supposed to be there. All sorts of doubts came up and my inner critic was saying how it was a mistake that I was there.

### **Lets leave the past**

As I navigated my career, I always thought I would finish school at some point. But then there were so many things that came up. In my mind I had thought about being a failure because I was doing it part time. I was disappointing myself. I felt stuck going on with this so I convinced myself it was ok not to have finished.



Thinking I didn't have the discipline and that I didn't want it bad enough I started telling myself the story I didn't have a compelling reason.

### **Whose expectations?**

Growing up I was the smartest kid, getting good marks. I was expected to be the first one to study. No one in my family graduated in University, to graduate was considered being a success. I always thought I would be the one to make my parents proud. But I didn't go to University. They never openly expressed their expectation, they even encouraged me to work so I would be ok. On the other hand I know it would have made them proud and that there was some kind of expectation, less overt and more implicit.

### **Own your story**

I was born and raised in Alexandra, a township in Johannesburg. When I was young we used to hear gunshots. That's normal. It is not something I would talk about because I never thought of it being important. With life in South Africa, there are so many people that suffer. So why share about my background and story? But yet, it's influential. I didn't realize it was and that the circumstances I grew up with formed my doubts and fed the critical inner voice. It shaped me. Now I realize I need to own my story.

### **Be strong**

I looked in the mirror and remembered my mom. She always told me to be strong. So I thought, looking at my sobbing face; I can't be seen like this. I am supposed to be strong. I told myself I shouldn't feel sorry for myself.

*“The question ‘what is it you want to learn’ was eye opening to me.”*



But in the back of my mind the thought of being a failure overtook all of my confidence. If people ask me about my background I would cringe. Until that time I always choose not to tell people I didn't finish school. Not as something that I was hiding, I just wouldn't share it out of myself. After I told myself to stop crying, in that moment, I decided to go back to school full time.

### **Education is about learning, not a degree**

“What is it you want to learn?”. That question was eye opening. Because the degree might not mean a lot to me, I do want to learn. It really made me think. There are all these things I like to learn about. How do communities work? And societal development? And to speak of a place of knowing, I want to know where we are coming from. If I think of how I know more history, it will be better for me. More gravitas.

### **Talking about failure makes it no longer a failure**

I still feel scared to share and speak about it. Lots of people think of me as a person who knows what to do. But I often don't. I have a lot of fears and doubts that you don't see. What I have learned is that I am my own critic. Every time I do something I have this inner voice. It has to do with home and not finishing school. I need to learn how to go about with that. I have been doing a lot of reflecting, in dialogue with myself and with others. Discussing fears, doubts and failures with friends is not something that is very common, that we would do easily. But talking about it helps me to reflect and not seeing it as a failure. By sharing my story and to learn what's been happening in my life I learned about

the kind of person I am. Now I realize it's not about failing. It is learning.

*Neliswa is co founder of SpringAGE in Johannesburg, a youth organisation of young South African leaders who are coming up with solutions and ideas to create more employment opportunities for young South Africans. Neliswa is a member of the World Economic Forum Global Shapers Community and the Nelson Mandela foundation as a agent of change worldwide and in South Africa in particular.*



A black and white portrait of a woman with dark hair pulled back, looking upwards and to the left with a slight smile. She is wearing a patterned top, a heart-shaped necklace, and a teardrop earring. Her right arm is raised, with her hand near her head. The background consists of a brick wall and some foliage.

Lesley Donna  
Williams



When I was a kid at school I was very bored. Most of the time I did not believe what the teacher told us. There was this one history teacher who said; this is what I am supposed to teach you, pointing to the history book, and then continued: “And this is what really happened”. That I remember very well. I always questioned the status quo. My grandparents told me: ‘you are a leader’. That is the truth I grew up with. At the same time for many years I always felt I was the weirdo. Just imagine, I had this ‘grunge’ phase, wearing black clothes listening to REM while living in a township.

### **A crush that wasn’t tolerated**

I was one of the shyest people. But if there are issues I can’t stand, I step forward. That doesn’t come natural to me. But I feel have no choice; there are many things that need to be said. In university, a very Afrikaans environment, I was a minority at campus. People tried to bullshit on me. I remember I had a crush on a black guy. I was told by my fellow coloured people to be cut off from the coloured community if I would date him. That didn’t make any sense to me.

It illustrated how tensed things were back then and I raised all kinds of societal questions with me.

I have always found myself confronted with these kind of questions; about race, equality and economics. I saw white people moving into managerial positions whilst blacks got lower jobs like administration. I had friends and students asking me questions and I didn’t know how to respond.

### **A pioneer of change**

Things changed when I joined international community’s of people committed to societal change. I met all these people that wanted to create change in South Africa and the African continent. I felt at home. My professional international network exploded when I became the global director of the Pioneers of Change. This place, this network, was very meaningful to me. I lived by the principles of the network that still matter to me: Be yourself, don’t stop asking question, do what matters, engage with others and start now. I met all these female leaders, like the first lady of South Africa, discussing the state of South Africa. It was around that





*“I had made the decision to sell my car and go abroad. And then I had to do that shit work. It was the hardest point in my life, and the most celebrated one.”*

time I read a book ‘bridging the divide’. It made me quit my job. I sold my car and went to London

### **Different worlds, different stories**

In London I met all these people from the Pioneers of Change network and hosted events. To get some money coming in I had to start waitressing. One I was working as a waitress at this posh horse riding event. Someone treated me badly. They saw me as this lower end of society. It was confronting. And I laughed in myself thinking; back home I was with the first lady, on the top end of South Africa society. And here I am, waitressing in England being treated badly. It was an important moment, a transformative moment. Humility is a big value for me. I had made the decision to sell my car and go abroad. And then I had to do that shit work. It was the hardest point in my life, and the most celebrated one. Because I realised we don’t know people’s stories. And I experienced things can shift any time. From sitting with a first lady to waitressing snobby English people.

### **The shrink, the coach and the priest**

I did a lot of reflection. With my shrink, my coach and my priest. And by sharing my story at the evenings we organise about failure. One important learning is that I am always creating pace for others, but I need it myself too. I realized after closing down I needed real friends. The bigger my network grew, the fewer friends I had. I was giving a lot but not receiving enough. I had to learn about self-care.

## **Friends with failure**

We don't learn how to become friends with failure. We're not open to the learning. Because we in South Africa were told to be strong. We always celebrated individuals; society wants us to put the best forward. Investors who wants us entrepreneurs to be successful... parents who want to brag with us... customers to expect positivity. But this is not reality. Now I feel things are changing. The focus of failure is coming here.

*Lesley is founder of the Impact Hub in Johannesburg. One of the things she initiated are the F\*ck Up nights. Where entrepreneurs share about their mistakes and failures in starting up and running their businesses. She shares her own story, about her history and her own mistakes, which led up to founding the Impact Hub and starting these nights.*





Godfrey Mokaieni



**I want big and I know I will have to work hard for that. Growing up in the Free State in a Catholic family I left home at age 16 to go to high school in Pretoria. I was a teenager, living on my own. I learned how to budget and take care of myself. Of course there were high schools in Free State. But I didn't want to grow up in a little town, in a little mind. I wanted to experience big things.**

### **Loosing is winning**

I never win anything, no prizes, lotteries. But I play the lottery and I am excited when I don't win. Because I never win, never have. So when I loose, again, I know I am still on the right path. It means the world is still as I know it, that my plans will not change and I get what I want.

### **When is it my turn?**

When I used to want something my older sister had when I was still young, my parents would answer that she was older and therefor she got it. The same happened with my older brother. If I wanted something he had my parents said he got it because he was only a child. 'When do I get something, when is it my turn?' I wondered. I learned that if I want something I need to work my but off. For me, I have to work, to get what my brother and my sister got. And that's how it will always be for me.

### **The people you are surrounded with**

In the context of the world we were poor, but both my parents worked so they could put me to school. My family was never rich, immediate relatives neither. That fuels me to not take things for granted. I have been exposed to many successful people. My first job after graduating was at this property development firm. My clients were all rich and successful. With some of them I got close and became friends. Being exposed to these wealthy people and hearing their stories inspired me.

### **She was my television**

There was this women, Deborah, who came to South Africa in 1995. She taught English at my school and we



immediately clicked. I was 13 when she ‘adopted’ me in the unofficial sense. We got along very well and ended up spending lot of time together. We even happened share the same birthday! Through her I got fused into the Catholic Church and She was the key to a lot of stuff opening my eyes to the world. Her different way of thinking made me think how closed up we are. I saw the world through her eyes.

On one moment we walk on the main road. She was holding my hand, a white lady with a black child, in Free State once the heart of Apartheid. Although Apartheid was over the resemblance was and is still there. Everyone was looking at us. I thought that was crazy, people staring at us because her colour was different from mine. It made me curious. Being with her was like watching television and understanding the world. It is because of her I am open-minded and became an explorer.

### **When things don’t go as expected**

When I started my own Project development business I had been talking to many people, I had a big network and everybody was ready to give me work. I left my job and started my own business all ready to go. But I didn’t sign any contracts with these people. I only had their word of mouth. For a few months no one returned my calls, no one gave me anything and I had no work. So I hustled and bustled advertising my business, doing tenders and putting flyers in post-boxes. I had made a decision to do this work and to make it happen. It wasn’t an option to fail and quit. I was so convinced that if I would get just one project, I would be great.

*“As soon as I get too comfortable I am alert. I fear I stop growing and I need to feel that I am pressured.”*



## Embrace the struggle

That year was very stressful. I had a mentor at that time, a guy who was a former client, who said to me: *Embrace the struggle!* That made me angry. I had nothing in my fridge. Later on I realized he was right and that it was an opportunity to learn. Now as soon as I get too comfortable I am alert. I fear I will stop growing and I need to feel that I am pressured. I don't want that year to come back. One way to deal with it is just not thinking of the possibility of failing.

## How was today?

I do a lot of reflection on my own, when I get home, just by myself. What did I do wrong, what went well. Knowing yourself is extremely important. I don't have to be a closed off man, I deal with things in my own way. I was always taught at Catholic school that before you go to bed you must reflect on your day. To see what change I have made, how I dealt with things, and reflect. I still do that constantly. On Friday afternoon I go to mass and every week I leave as a better person. I trust God will never let me down.

## Turn the sun on

There are days I have doubts and feel frustrated. I just go home, I don't want my emotions to stand in the way of my work. I switch off and ignore the world. I tell myself that tomorrow I am going to wake up and turn the sun on. I give myself time to grieve; whatever I need to do to be low and feel it. But I always decide tomorrow is a new chance.. Don't give yourself too much time. I never forget where I am going, I need to expect that there are negative influences happening and stumbling blocks. There're always things getting in the way, but I

decide not to let that have too much influence. I never settle for less, never in my life. I am a dreamer, I set goals and achieve things.

## A call from the president

I don't consider myself successful. My dream has come true the day I sit in my rocking chair, 50 years of age, and having people calling me asking for advices. That's when I have succeeded. When the president of SA calls me and asks: 'We have a problem with funding our education system, what to do?'. Having so much information and knowledge that I am being called for my opinion. And I dream of having a family and kids and that they will make a difference. That is success for me. Otherwise I am not done yet. The minute you call yourself successful it feels like you're done. What's left then? So no...don't say that I am successful.

*Godfrey is an entrepreneur and businessman living and working in Cape Town. He is CEO of several company's in the construction industry, like property development and hospitality, he co-owns a restaurant in Cape Town called 'Haas'.*







Kgomotso  
Ratswana





**Sometimes I fail to understand my dreams. In my culture (Tswana) dreams are important and have meaning. For example when you dream of water or a snake, there is a believe that someone in the family is pregnant. Sometimes I dream about my late grandmother talking to me but when I wake up I'd forget what she was saying to me. Sometimes I'd dream and forget what I dreamt about and then when I'm somewhere I'd feel like I've been here before and I'd think probably I dreamt about being here before. Some people say dreams have to do with ancestors but I believe dreams are the way to communicate with God as sometimes you dream something and then it happens, or something similar.**

### **Back home**

I grew up in Hammanskraal, north of Pretoria, with my grandmother, my two sisters and younger brother. My mother (single parent) worked as a domestic worker. She is a very hardworking woman. Besides being a domestic worker during the day she was a sewer during evenings. Still is actually. She used to work so hard. We all went to school and I never went to bed without food. We were not poor, my mother worked hard to make sure we wouldn't go to bed hungry. We were just ok and trying. Two things she taught me were to love and respect myself. She used to say "how will you love someone if you don't love yourself and say respect is earned, if you respect yourself the next person will respect you."

### **The love for numbers**

An important moment in my life was when I received a call from Vodacom to tell me I got a job. I thought: now my mother can rest, better days ahead. I loved working at Vodacom and since it was the first job after my studies I had a lot to learn and eager to improve my knowledge every day. My plan has always been to become an accountant. I love numbers. And I like money, in the sense that I like it coming in, but do not like to spend it. Money makes the world go around. For some people money is happiness but for me money is a security. I remember when my uncle wasn't working and had 3 children and one of his children passed away 3 years ago. We couldn't sit around with sad faces but we helped with arranging the funeral. Funerals are expensive, so many things needed e.g coffin,



food, drinks etc. We black people have big funerals. We have to cook and a cow has to be slaughtered. Having a good attitude and coming together as family we managed to sort out everything. It was that moment I realised we need money for emergencies like this one. To me money is a security, as security is about 'just in case'.

### **Sad experiences of life**

One Friday afternoon, I was 17 years old, I received a call from my best friend but because the weather was bad outside the signal wasn't so strong. I couldn't hear her properly and then when the signal cut our telephone call I just thought she probably wanted to tell me about a school project. The next day in the morning I heard one of my neighbors knocking on the door, I walked towards her and I could see the sadness through her eyes, and she said to me "your friend died in a car accident". That moment wasn't easy. I started asking myself questions like, what did she want to tell me when she called me? Regretting why I hadn't listened more attentively. I used to spend most of my free time with her and that made me feel her absent. People felt sorry for me, I didn't like it. My family supported me so much. I learnt 'you don't know what you have until you lose it'. I always try to live in the present as I do not know what the next minute will be holding for me. We cannot sit down and have sad faces. Things that happen are all part of life. We manage to sort it out. My siblings and me got that kind of attitude.

*"I always try to live in the present as I don't know what the next minute is holding for me."*



## Being open

I am very friendly and open, but on the other side, I have a boundary line that no one may cross. When I grew up there were things that I was taught not to allow people to do or say to me.

My openness is so open to the point that I rather hurt you with the truth than make you happy with a lie. My weakness is I sometimes find it difficult to say sorry when I made a mistake. I'd rather act sorry than say it. My uncle used to say to me when you have made a mistake and you say sorry, you are indirectly saying: what I did was wrong and I will try never to do it again. So it's important to say sorry. It's about acknowledging and avoiding it in the future.

*Kgomotso works in Johannesburg at Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company. She manages the office space, is responsible for the financial administration and supports the consultants.*



# Learning from stories

Mara Spruyt

What did I take from the conversations? I analysed the stories and wrote down my findings. Next to this I briefly write my personal reflection on interviewing, capturing the stories and being in South Africa.

## Transformative moments

The people I interviewed all lived one or more key-moments that were meaningful because they led to a change in their lives. We explored these particular moments in the interviews. I asked to tell me about a situation in their lives that turned out different from what they expected. The moments shared were transformative because the interviewees were somehow confronted, or inspired, with something new, some perspective or thought or idea that shed new light on their lives and questions. These transformative moments often involved others. Take for example Neliswa who met someone at a conference whose comment made her think about not having a degree. Lazola whose crying mother made him realise the impact of him going to prison. Take this one moment Lesley worked as a waitress at a snobbish British upper-class event in London and was being treated badly. Or Godfrey who remembers vividly how he as a child walked the street hand-in-hand with a white American woman in the Free State, being stared at. A young black boy with a white foreign lady was not seen as normal. All these moments, little and big, seemed to immediately connect them with their pain, their values, and their drive.



## Some findings

### 1. Talking about failures, uncertainties or doubts

“Discussing fears, doubts and failures with friends is not something that is very common, that we would do easily”, Neliswa explains. Surprisingly she says she feels scared to talk about her idea of getting her degree. This woman, who seems confident, open, and to have no problem speaking out? She did bring it to the table however, not only in the interview, also with some of her friends and relatives. And it opened up a lot of conversation. Talking to Neliswa about her transformative moments and her feelings, her eyes are bright and fierce. Not a girl that looks like she has many doubts and fears.

#### *A paradox*

There're certain things you don't talk about, this much becomes clear to me. In the conversation with Kgomotso she claims she is very open and honest yet she doesn't want to be an open book. I recognize this from other interviews. Maybe with family you share your deepest thoughts. But with others, friends or even a coach, that seems taboo. On the other hand...all people I interviewed do see value in talking about failure. And more broadly in sharing one's story, even if it's a personal one. Although they found it scary and uncomfortable, it helped them. New insights and closer friendships emerge. It is a paradox we might all recognize. It feels scary to share your uncertainties, vulnerabilities and doubts. Yet, when we do so, it connects us, the relation deepens because we shared something personal and delicate. It our deep need for connections, one of the basis needs humans have (Deci & Ryan, 1985) that help us overcome the initial threshold to talk about failure and uncertainty.

#### *Be strong and move forward*

Be strong! This maternal counsel seems to be widespread in South Africa. At least we hear the influence of the mother in the stories that we were being told from the five youngsters. Lesley: “Here in South Africa we were told to be strong and move forward. [That way] we

didn't learn how to become friends with failure". The value of being strong can bring a lot. But, as these stories show, it can also stand in the way of being open for learning from mistakes.

## **2. You can't make a change if you don't know where it started**

All of the interviewees do quite a lot of reflection. They every now and then step back and do some thinking. On the toilet in prison... at home before going to bed. The interviews also show self reflection doesn't always come naturally. They learned the value of it by experiencing key transformative moments that somehow 'forced' them to sit down and reflect. And by doing so they changed the way they think and behave. In this way the learning from reflecting on these moments happened unintended but later on evolved in intentional learning. Because now, having experienced the value of reflection on learning, they deliberately create time and space for it.

Reflection starts with a question. Lesley is a good example of how to always live your (and others) questions. At different moments in her life she experienced not knowing the answer to a (societal) question and it fuelled her to look for answers, to evaluate and to reflect. This way, it seems, she learned to deal with ambiguity and 'not knowing' was an accelerator for action. Whether it was starting a community, travelling to London or creating space for social entrepreneurs. Another great example is Lazola who knew at some point it was his task to find the answer to the question where things went wrong in his life. It took him years of thinking and reading and writing. Ending up with answers but also new challenges. Even though they do engage in reflection quite a lot and quite regularly, it hasn't always been that way. All the stories show the relevance somehow of balancing out extrinsic and intrinsic goals, focussing on learning or on achieving results, in other words; bringing together action and reflection.

Most of the interviewees did reconsider their values and beliefs after these experiences. Like Lazola who says; "I did things I thought were right but they weren't". He claims it is



impossible to make a change if you don't know where it started. He learned not only to reflect on his actions and behaviour, but also to reflect on a more fundamental level. The transformative moments as mentioned above led to a reconsideration of fundamental values and beliefs. Reflecting on one's goals, values and beliefs is a more complex way of evaluating, learning from a wider perspective reconsidering our assumptions that are at the roots of decisions and actions. When it comes to learning and making a change this reflecting on beliefs is stronger than only reconsidering your actions (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

### 3. A mindset that contributes to change

Change can happen when you have a certain mindset focussed on learning instead of on results and performance only. Even though the interviewees have reflected a lot, it wasn't very common to reflect... to evaluate... in other words, to learn. These five people seem to have learned about the value of reflection and had somehow learned how to learn. To talk about their successes, failures and learnings because it gave them something. The difference between focussing on learning or focussing on results is often made (Dweck, 2006). Most of the people we interviewed are eager to focus on results, on performing, as this was what they were told that mattered. Illustrative is Neliswa's story when she was asked the question: 'What do you want to learn?' This question was a breakthrough for her: "[...] A degree might not mean a lot to me, I do want to learn". And just this insight meant a shift from a result orientation to a learning orientation.

A focus on learning sparked a crucial flame to move forward. It is the more intrinsic type of goals that contribute to personal growth. Extrinsic goals, like financial success or fame, are likely to be more apparent when basic needs are not met. This is what Kgomo's story shows, and Godfrey's story. Their psychological needs of being autonomous and independent seemed to fuel their drive to be financially successful. When these needs are met, as in the case of Neliswa and Lesley, intrinsic goals become more apparent. For them personal development and learning seem to have become key things to 'achieve'.



Both learning and performance orientations can fuel achievement. So one is not necessarily better than the other, they are different and have different effects. With an over-emphasis on results and performing one doesn't learn how to live with errors, mistakes and uncertainties. This requires a learning orientation; the desire to learn and understand new things and develop new skills.

## A personal reflection

Meeting these five people and capturing their stories was a beautiful thing to do. Some I met only once, others several times. One encounter, with Lazola, I remember vividly. How lucky this young man ended up in prison and not dead. I am deeply touched talking to him, sitting in Company's Gardens in Cape Town. The surroundings are so lovely, with the old trees protecting us, rays of sunlight coming through. Gentle city sounds on the background. He tells his story carefully choosing what he shares and what not. In the beginning of the conversation he says he wants to sit somewhere else on the terrace. The table I chose in the middle, surrounded by people, made him uncomfortable. Immediately I realise he lived already an entire life, being inside for 10 years at such a young age.

### *Embracing uncertainty*

The stories show the struggle of making sense of what happens in life - all five people somehow are grappling with issues of finding a sense of identity. The ambitious businessman trying to make sure his desired future will become true. The young entrepreneur asking herself what it means to be black and female, coming of age in post-apartheid South Africa. The ex-convict, only in his twenties still, now a social worker himself and working hard to get a sense of living well after 10 years in prison. In finding this sense of identity they meet all kinds of questions.



In a similar way I am experiencing this myself during my stay in South Africa. The beauty of the country and the kindness of its people touch me. And the recent history that is so influential. It raises all kinds of questions about the meaning of my trip and about myself. Who am I, travelling here, so privileged. What does it mean that I am white, that I was born in The Netherlands, that it was self evident I could educate myself the way I wanted?. Being confronted with the stories of others makes me reflect on my own story. I guess this is why there is such great power in telling and sharing stories. It connects, because we all can recognize even the tiniest thing in other people's struggles and questions.

*When the answer isn't clear*

I experienced there are neither clear answers to the questions I have myself, nor to the questions of the people I had interviewed. That brings us to a next more fundamental issue; How do we deal with questions that have no clear answer? What are helpful beliefs and values for learning? And which ones aren't supportive?

What the young South Africans in the story have in common is they live with ambiguous feelings, uncertainty and doubts. Their stories also show it can be discomfort that fuels action, a chance to grow and full of opportunities. The stories learn us about the importance to be able to live with ambiguity, doubt and uncertainty. How it requires continuous exploration, inquiry and reflection. Embracing our struggle is easier said than done! Engagement with others is then helpful. Especially people who are different as they show us a different way of looking at the world. Godfrey says about the American lady: "Being with her made me see the world with different eyes". I learned by these stories about the importance to connect, to share and talk about all our questions, failures, and by doing so learn about others and myself.



↑ M62 Cape Town  
Waterfront

KLOOF NEK RD  
Gardens →

← BURNSIDE RD  
Tamboerskloof



breakfast all day  
portuguese breakfast  
steak, chorizo sausage, eggs, bacon, roll

italian omelette  
parma ham, buffalo mozzarella, pesto, rosa  
tomatoes, toast

poached eggs with peri peri  
croissant salmon  
poached salmon

# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Mark Turpin & Mara Spruyt

Doubt, uncertainty and failure were always part of the lives of these young people when growing up. Listening to their stories we realise how new it is for successful young South Africans to acknowledge their background and where they come from as being influential to their lives. How thoughts and beliefs were shaped by mothers telling their daughters to be strong. It is useful to have guidance to be strong from mothers, but has a shadow side in that it can leave people alone in their struggle to be strong. No one told them how to deal with her doubts or have a productive conversation with his or her inner critic. It's about living with doubts and questions even when you don't have a clear answer. And its about the 'boundary question'; wanting to be open on the one hand and not wanting to be exposed or exploited because of being too open on the other hand. South Africa carries a legacy of mis-trust that runs quite deep. All about fear, reluctance to trust etc...



Stories that tell the story

## Why telling stories matters

Many people in South Africa don't know each other. And each other's stories. The shared history of the people in this country is only very recent. And there's seems to be not much of a shared identity. Although apartheid is over, divided races are seeking common cause in the same land, trying to overcome the legacy without much of a shared identity. Stories, personal experiences, help to connect. This writing attempts to contribute, even though in a small way, to a common story.

The recent report issued by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (2015) shows that a significant majority of people in South Africa from all race groups have a desire to get to know each other better and to learn to trust each other. In addition, due to the distorted geography of the country, where people live in separate communities, people see the workplace as the place where here is an opportunity to connect and share each other's stories – to have conversation and dialogue.

## Stay alive as a nation by sharing stories

How do we create space for meaningful conversation and the type of dialogue that leaves room for doubts and ambiguity? It's about what happens when we are confused and the way forward isn't obvious. Sello Hatang CEO of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, states that race continues to define South Africa and reconciliation has not yet got to the "deeper reaches of [the] cultural and social structures". To stay 'alive' as a nation, stories, ideas, perspectives and voices must be shared. So everything that is here can be made somehow collective. So it can be part of a collective identity that is to be shaped. This leaves us with a call for more stories, more sharing and more questions.



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