

Listening to our Grandmothers

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For Evelyn & Margot, I can still hear you

To both the Mary Anns, my direct ancestors (one from each side of my family) for gifting me my name

And to and for all the women who came before us.

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My gratitude goes first and most of all to the women who agreed to talk with me and let me ask you questions so that I could record your stories and create this book. Thank you Angela, Jean, Tricia, Helen and Pat so so much for sharing your lives with me.

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To Bi Semkande for teaching me that there really is something universal about Grandmothers - their spirit. I am glad to have known you.

To my sister Hannah because both Grandmothers are something only we share.

To all the other women I work alongside and who have supported this project; Cali, Bev, Judith, Amy, Sue, Sarah & Stephanie (who I share one Grandmother with).

Finally to Matthew for believing in the writer in me even when you had no idea what on Earth I was going to write or why.

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FORWARD

*When the Grandmothers speak, the Earth will be healed
When the Grandmothers pray, Wisdom will be revealed
When the Grandmothers sing, the Earth will be made whole.
- Circle of Grandmothers Newsletter*

A couple of years ago, my grandma had a stroke which, for a time, robbed her of the power of speech. When I first saw her in the hospital, she looked at me, opened her mouth to speak, and nothing came. Silence. She closed her mouth and we looked at each other, our words expressed through our eyes instead of tripping off tongue and lip.

And then the possibility swept through us both that I might never hear her voice again, that she may never be able to speak her truth as she always had before. And we cried, hands clasped, hearts heavy with words swallowed.

Over the coming days, weeks and months her speech returned and we are now back to our regular conversations. Yet there is an appreciation there now. Not that we didn't appreciate one another before - but now there's a quality to our communication, a weight to our words. Because we know now how it feels to have lost this part of our relationship. And that we have it once more feels like a blessing.

When I read the tender, honest words uttered in these amazing interviews conducted by Mary Ann, I was reminded of this moment in my relationship with my grandmother - the woman who represents my own source of deep feminine wisdom, the

one who holds my history in her hands. And I feel overwhelmingly grateful that one as compassionate and dedicated as Mary Ann has put together this stunningly beautiful book.

Because we cannot afford for the wisdom of our grandmothers to be lost. It is too important. For if we lose their words, we too are lost. Whether the words of our grandmothers are spoken, prayed or sung - they must be listened to, received and welcomed.

It is through the wisdom of our grandmothers that we find our way - our way forward and our way home.

As you read the testimonies of these grandmothers, it is my wish for you that they reveal to you the heart truths which lay dormant within your psyche, seeds of wisdom planted there by generation upon generation of women, waiting to blossom. Awoken by the words of a grandmother.

Dr Amy Palko
September 2013

INTRODUCTION

*Not all of us become Grandmothers ourselves.
But whether we meet them in the flesh or not,
We all have Grandmothers.
The Grandmother spirit nurtures,
protects and sustains us.
It cares for us and loves and defends us
No matter what*

A decade ago I spent a year listening to the life stories of mentally ill people in health facilities in Tanzania. At the time I was a graduate anthropology student at Goldsmiths, University of London, writing a dissertation based upon the stories which they toldⁱ

Then in late 2010 I found myself stuck in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique reading Alice Walker's new book of poems, *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*ⁱⁱ and was struck by one, 'Calling All Grandmothers'. In the poem she makes a plea to 'Grand Mothers' and those who 'possess' their 'spirit' to become leaders, for it is they whom she believes, have the wisdom needed at this time. Soon after, my former research supervisor and friend Pat Caplan asked me to read the draft of a book documenting the life story of a man she had known and worked with in Tanzania for over 40 years. Whilst I was reading it occurred to me that I would like to document life stories myself, in particular the life stories of older women and I knew then that Pat would be one of them.

The act of recording the stories of these five grandmothers felt like a significant one in and of itself. For me personally, it felt like I was offering to really hear people again through the process of sitting with women and asking them to tell me their stories. In recording them I felt somehow that I was making my own small contribution to the re-framing of 'his-tory' and the telling some 'her-stories' which deserve to be heard. I hope too that the women I interviewed will choose to share these stories with other people in their lives. Perhaps sharing my version of their story will prompt more re-telling and re-sharing of their lives. All to the good, for I believe that our stories travel with us and are not fixed or completed at any one moment in time.

The women whose lives are documented in this book have lived through times of transformational change. Born during or soon after the Second World War, their childhoods in the 1940s and 1950s were lived in an era when war was still very present. When these women were born contraception was largely unheard of and abortions were illegal. Many professions remained for the most part the preserve of men. Little legal protection existed for the female workforce and many older women, including some of their mothers, lived with the frustrations of professional dreams that would never be fulfilled. The transitions these women, and many like them, pioneered and fought for during the 1960s and 70s make modern women's lives unrecognisable today.

The world was a very different place too without personal computers and mobile telephones and the stories remind us of the many things which have made our lives easier since. These women spoke both of the optimism of their youth and their frustration with some of the ways in which the world has changed, particularly the lack of safety and wastefulness in society today. Despite all the change in women's lives during their lifetimes many of them point towards things that haven't changed enough: the objectification of women and of their sexuality, perpetual violence against women and the sexism

that prevails in specific sectors of society which remain resolutely male.

When I speak about Listening to our Grandmothers in the context both of this book and the project to which it is linked (about which there is more at the end of the book) I am speaking less of a biological reality and more of the impetus to listen to older women more generally. I am speaking of us really hearing women who have entered into what we might describe as their 'crone hood', the period after the menopause has passed. As it happens, the women whose stories feature in this book are all biological grandmothers, though not all were at the time I interviewed them and this was not one of my criteria for selecting them. They have had a range of different roles and careers in their lives and are all passionate women living their lives to the very best of their ability. I hope that you will enjoy reading their stories as much as I have enjoyed listening to and recording them.

London, September 2013

To read the stories of Angela, Jean, Tricia, Helen and Pat order your copy of Listening to our Grandmothers from the [website](#) or from [Amazon](#).

LISTENING TO OUR GRANDMOTHERS

Listening to our Grandmothers started as an idea for a book. As the book came to life I felt more and more that I wanted to facilitate more opportunities for older womens' stories be heard. It feels like something we all need no matter our age. I began to imagine more and more manifestations of this. Places where older women share their stories, are heard by each other and by younger women who can benefit from the wisdom and experience in the stories of women who have gone before them and work looking at models of leadership and community developed by older women in different parts of the world.

Then I shared some of my thoughts with a dear friend Aisha Hannibal who in turn shared her vision of researching the traditions of older women in South America and of creating circles specifically for older women where they can share their stories with each other.

I always knew I wanted any profit from selling this book to support projects that worked with women and so was born an idea.

Any profits from this book (60%) of the sale price will be used to fund the start up of a longer term project with the working title 'Listening to Our Grandmothers'.

We envisage this work getting off the ground when we have sufficient funds from the proceeds from this book and other potential sources to support research and development of some of these activities.

If you would like to stay in touch with this work please sign up for the Listening to our Grandmothers mailing list at **www.listeningtoourgrandmothers.com**.

ABOUT THE STORYTELLER



Mary Ann Mhina was born in Berkshire and grew up in South Oxfordshire. She has since lived in Zimbabwe, Scotland, Tanzania and South and East London. Her interest in life stories began when, as a graduate researcher at Goldsmiths University she began to investigate the stories that mentally ill people told about their own lives. A year of listening to their stories in villages and health facilities in Tanzania convinced Mary Ann that there was much wisdom to be found in all of our stories. She is now an anthropologist, writer and facilitator with a passion for telling stories and asking questions that help us to think and feel differently about our own lives. This is her first book.

www.maryannmhina.co.uk

Picture by Jonny Donovan

Endnotes

ⁱ Delineated Stories: getting involved in Mental Health in Tanzania' in *Uncertainty in Contemporary Africa* (NAI, 2009).

ⁱⁱ 'Calling All Grand Mothers' in *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing* (New World Pres: San Francisco, 2010: 30).

