

**An Excerpt from *Saved by a Poem: The Transformative Power of Words*
by Kim Rosen**

I discovered how the separating lines of culture and age can dissolve in the presence of a poem the first time I went to Africa. In Kenya, at the Tasaru Ntomonok Rescue Centre for Girls in the Rift Valley, I unexpectedly found myself speaking a poem to a group of Maasai girls, only a few hours after I met them. I had long wanted to visit this miraculous place, ever since it was opened by Eve Ensler and her organization V-Day in collaboration with Agnes Pareyio, a Maasai woman who dedicates her life to stopping the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). Tasaru, also called the V-Day Safe House, was created as a haven for girls escaping FGM. Fifty or so girls live at the house at any given time. Each has had to leave her family and community. Many have traveled alone for miles, barefoot over the rough roads, spending nights hiding under the bushes for fear of being found by wild animals.

My first few hours there were awkward. My shyness kept me from striking up conversations with the girls, most of whom, though they understood English, did not speak it willingly. They were shy with me too, keeping their distance and watching me in twos or threes, whispering in Maa (the language of the Maasai) and giggling.

Finally I decided to go over to the kitchen, where I heard lively singing as a group cooked ugali (porridge made of cornmeal) and cabbage over an open fire. I listened outside as the last song dissolved into gales of laughter and a cacophony of exclamations in Maa. But the chatter instantly hushed when I walked in. A tall girl who spoke excellent English came up to me and stood directly in front of me: “Do you remember my name?”

I didn’t. I had been introduced to about 20 girls in the last couple of hours and could not for the life of me remember which beautiful Maasai face went with which name.

“Salula?” I asked sheepishly, grabbing for the only name I remembered. “No!” The girls shrieked with laughter at what must have been a big mistake on my part. “That is Salula!” They pointed at one of the youngest girls, who had arrived at the Safe House only months before at the age of 9, having been rescued in the midst of a forced marriage to a 42-year-old man.

“I am Jecinta.” The tall girl spoke to me with exaggerated patience, as if to a two-year-old. “Do you know any songs?” Clearly she was giving me an opportunity to redeem myself.

“I know some songs,” I said. “But what I really love most is poetry.”

“I write poems.” An older girl with exquisitely chiseled features and piercing eyes was looking at me intently from behind a huge cauldron of steaming cabbage. She was dressed with more sophistication than the others, wearing a tight sleeveless shirt and matching short skirt that made her look more woman than girl. I noticed her gold necklace and earrings as they glinted in the light of the cooking fire.

“Do you know any of them by heart? Can you recite any of them here?” I asked.

“I am too shy to do that.” Her beautiful accent made even this simple statement sound like poetry. “I cannot.”

“May I recite a poem to you?” I asked her. “Then maybe afterwards you will want to recite yours to me.”

She nodded. Suddenly I panicked. What poem might these girls relate to? I pored through the archive in my mind. Not one seemed remotely appropriate. Their life experience was so different from mine.

The kitchen had become strangely silent. The clatter of washing and cooking had ceased. The whispering and giggling that had been a constant soundtrack in the background was quiet. All the girls had stopped their work and were waiting for my poem.

Out of nowhere “The Journey” by Mary Oliver, a poem I hadn’t thought of in months, burst into my mind. Without even taking the time to run through it silently to see if it was appropriate, I began speaking: “One day you finally knew / what you had to do.”

The poem is about leaving home, turning away from the many voices that demand that you stay, risking the anguish of those who seem to need and love you, and walking alone into a wild night in order to save “the only life you can save.” The girls listened, transfixed. Each of them had lived through such a turning point. Each of them, at a very young age, had defied tribal tradition and left her parents, friends, and community to save her own life. Who could understand these lines better than they?

It is difficult to describe what happened in that crowded, smoky kitchen as I delivered the poem. There I was, a white, middle-class American woman speaking words written by another white, middle-class American

woman, surrounded by Maasai girls who had grown up in tribal villages in the Rift Valley, in families so poor that the two cows their parents would get when they gave their daughter to an old man in marriage were their only hope of a better life.

But as “The Journey” filled the kitchen, there was no separation between us. We were transported into a timeless, placeless, languageless realm where we were the same. By the end of the poem, tears were running down my face and several of the girls were crying as well. Several of them dove toward me, wrapping their arms around my waist. There was a long silence. Then Jecinta asked, “Who is this woman, Mary Oliver? Is she Maasai?”

I shook my head, barely able to speak. “American,” I whispered. “*Mzungu*. Like me.”

“How did she know?”

...In these moments of poetic communion when life comes into a harmony, miracles happen organically: the stroke victim’s brain starts making new synaptic connections; a sense of uncanny peace and joy pervades the Freedom Space as bombs explode in the surrounding streets; the armed Sunni soldier embraces the Shiite poet in tears of joy to discover they feel the same grief and longing; a runaway Maasai girl hears her own story told by a white American writer, and she is empowered to find her own voice. When you speak a poem that is written in the language of your soul, you become a voice for the heart in the world, and everyone around you is blessed by a sudden grace.

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