

A conversation with Kimeli Naiyomah

Kimeli Naiyomah began life as a homeless boy in Kenya's Maasailand. He knew he wanted an education but he also knew that he would not be able to go to school in Kenya. "I was fortunate that my struggle caught the attention of the Washington Post," he recalled. The newspaper granted him a scholarship to a major American university and a plane ticket to get him there. Kimeli was visiting New York City when tragedy struck. The young man from Maasailand spent the next two weeks in a city reeling from unimaginable disaster. "The tragedy became very personal to me," confided Kimeli. Back at school in California, he continued to be haunted, not just by the event but by a need to help. "So I had to do something. I was thinking and thinking and thinking.

"The idea of giving a cow to America just came to me," Kimeli marveled. "I'd never owned a cow—I've been homeless all my life." But now, he could buy his first cow and ask the elders of his village to bless it. "I found something important to me that would mean something to give."

For Kimeli, finding the solution was both a great relief and a delicate matter. This was something that had never been done before. "We don't give cows to strangers," he explained. "All cows must come home. You grow up knowing that cows stay in Maasailand and, as a warrior, you do not ever betray that." It took a warrior's courage to implement his plan.

Kimeli began his campaign with the first elder, sharing the story and telling him, "I think God will not punish us for this." It was a gentle beginning but the idea built momentum. One elder led him by the hand to another and Kimeli repeated the story and his request for a blessing. Kimeli personalized the Americans for these people who knew only Maasailand, making them like family-- it would not be a curse to give this gift to a kinsman. Kimeli explained to them that "These people feed me, they give me the milk of their cows, they are the reason we have clean water in our village." But it is not just the gifts they had given him that he wanted the elders to understand, it was also their common humanity. "These people are us, and they have been very hurt." The elders saw this young warrior break down. "They knew that I was a man and they know I am not weak," he said simply.

Finally, the elders told him that "we have to consult the divine elder who speaks with God." What Kimeli had requested was very difficult and could be perceived as a betrayal. "It was the most intense period of my life," remembered Kimeli. "If they had said no, I would have been an outcast."

When at last they affirmed his gift, they also told him, "Son, if you want, I can give you my calf, too." These people knew of the young man's poverty. They were moved by his sacrifice to offer many of their own. The elders created a new "American" clan in Maasailand, and, with the help of the US Ambassador to Kenya, created a new ear brand that had never existed before: two parallel cuts pointing up, representing the twin towers. The children had a part to play as well: keeping Kimeli's calf from running away.

Kimeli's note at the end of *14 Cows for America* details what happens next—how the herd is held by the community in trust for the Americans. But how did the story become a book? Kimeli was approached by many people who wanted to bring his story to a wider audience. Kimeli chose Carmen Agra Deedy because "she captured the entire spirit of the story." Her version's closing sentence came directly from the heart of the story, "Because there is no nation so powerful it cannot be wounded, nor a people so small they cannot offer mighty comfort."

Kimeli talked with her after seeing that last phrase, knowing she understood the sacrifice and vulnerability of his act. “What am I?” asked the young man. “Nobody knows my father. Only by education did I become somebody. I was going back not as a strong Maasai—I had to beg the elders to understand me.” Carmen needed to capture Kimeli’s humility for the book to work. She needed to make this, as Kimeli sees it, “a human story with a Maasai context.”

Kimeli said that “People are people—we’re all human,” but he went on to add that “this story has blessed my people because it has told them who they really are. I was reading into the ancient Maasai.” Hospitality and compassion are central to their beliefs and values. “You’d see children by the side of the road who would tell strangers to come and drink milk; they care about the wellbeing of another person regardless of who that person is.”

Kimeli is proud that “Now, in my village, we know we are compassionate people. We are the people who comforted America.” And at the moment when the Star-Spangled Banner played, when he put his hand on his heart and saw his people follow his lead, Kimeli was healed as well. “This was a defining moment. Some things you must do.” Carmen Deedy has done her part as well. **“I wanted so badly to leave a true version of this story behind—newspaper stories contain the truth but not the spirit. What ever happens now, I am at peace.”**

Kimeli leaves these words to the children who read his story: “What you feel in your heart is important. Mature with experience but keep your heart. I learned this from my people. **The song is there, just start singing it. Soon you will have an entire world singing with you. When you die you leave the song behind.**”

A Conversation with Kimeli appears courtesy of Kimeli Naiyomah and Ellen Myrick.