

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

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Ep 47: None Of Us Are Too Small To Make A Difference: Humanitarian & Author of *I Am A Girl From Africa* Elizabeth Nyamayaro

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other news makers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host, and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another episode. Today I'm excited to be here with Elizabeth Nyamayaro. She was born in Zimbabwe and raised by her grandmother in a village ridden with HIV and famine. She spent her days doing household chores and foraging for food. She almost died from starvation and first went to school when she was 10 years old. She left Zimbabwe on her own at 21 for London with no friends or family in London and only 250 British pounds. She was able to support herself through a series of jobs, eventually went to college, earned a Master's degree from the London School of Economics and worked for the UN as a senior advisor. She gave a TEDTalk, which garnered over 1 million views and wrote a book, *I Am a Girl From Africa*. It is a very rare person who thrives in adversity and completely transcends their upbringing, which Elizabeth has done. I am excited to learn how she did it. Welcome, Elizabeth, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

Elizabeth Nyamayaro: Hi, Lynn. Thank you so much for having me on the show. I'm very, very delighted to be here.

LT: It is my pleasure. Can you tell us about how your early days in the village, what your life was like?

EN: I had a beautiful childhood, I was born in a small village in Zimbabwe called Goromonzi and my Gogo, my grandmother raised me, and we lived off our land, we did everything as a community, we farmed together, we grew an abundance of food, and my day was really filled with so much purpose and lots of hard work. I would get up at 5:00 o'clock in the morning, I would go and tie my Gogo's goats in the bush to make sure that they didn't go and eat our crops, and then I would walk for hours to go and fetch water, and then spend the rest of my afternoon with my Gogo farming our land at the bottom of the village. And so, it was a beautiful childhood. We never wanted for anything until a drought hit our village when I turned 8, and then everything changed.

LT: Can you tell us about that drought, please? And what changed?

EN: We had a severe drought when I was 8 years old, and it literally devastated us, it left us with nothing to eat or drink. And also, I think the biggest thing for me was that it took away our dignity and sense of pride because the land was not only our source of food, but it was the way through which we were able to take care of each other, and we took pride in doing so. When you have your lands and your community, your life is just filled with so much purpose, and suddenly we had

nothing to eat or drink, and one day I was so weak from hunger that I was unable to move and I literally collapsed on the ground, and in my young mind, I thought I was going to die, but then this incredible thing happened. A fellow African who was much older, *sisi*, which is the word for sister in my language of Shona, found me, she gave me a bowl of porridge that literally saved my life, and it turns out that this older sister was actually a humanitarian of the United Nations, and that was the moment that literally sparked my dream. I remember thinking, "Gosh, I too want to be just like her so that one day maybe I can save the lives of others in a similar way that my life had been saved."

LT: And she was wearing a blue UN uniform?

EN: She was. Yes, she became a girl in the blue uniform. She was wearing a blue vest although at that time I have to say, I didn't quite know what that meant. I saw big letterings across, it was a UNICEF uniform because I had never really been to school, and it took another maybe two years for me to really realize that she was indeed a humanitarian with the United Nations. And again, I'm so grateful that that moment of adversity actually gave my life so much purpose.

LT: So you did not go to school in your early years?

EN: No, I didn't. But it's one of those things as well that I think we take for granted. The world is still not equal in so many parts of the world, around the world, literally. The issue of girl education is something that has not been fully realized. In my village, the boys went to school and the girls stayed at home and we did all the chores because that was the expectation, and we never questioned it because that was the norm. And so it took me until the age of 10 to finally make it to school, and what an incredible opportunity because it allowed me to dream even bigger.

LT: And what were your dreams before you went to school?

LT: Just to help my community. I grew up in this... As I said, it was such a beautiful sense of community, there was a sense of belonging, and even our greeting in my Shona language, when we see each other, we say _____ which literally translates to, I am well as long as you're well. And it was a daily reminder for us that we belong together, that we are part of each other's community, and that if one of us is unwell then none of us aren't well. And so before that, my dream was that I was going to continue to do something to uplift my own community, and I didn't think of anything beyond that that was just for myself until this moment happened and I thought, "Ooh, I can have a dream that belongs to me, but also can belong to my community at the same time."

LT: And then when you were 10 years old, you went to school for the first time, can you tell us about that?

EN: It was one of those incredible moments, but the moment when it happened, it was quite bitter sweet because I had been raised thinking that my Gogo was my mother, my grandmother was my mother, because my mother had me when she was very young and she couldn't take care of me and so my Gogo ended up raising me. But a second drought hit our village when I turned 10, so that was like two years after the first drought, and there was a real fear that I might not be able to make it, and my Gogo realized that she couldn't take care of me. And so I met my mother for the very first time, and she was living in a township in the city, on the outskirts of the city, and was really struggling. She had gone on to have three other kids, I have an incredible brother and two sisters, and she came to pick me up from the village, so I was being torn away from everything I'd known

and from my dearest Gogo, and it felt like my world was falling apart. But of course, that moment also enabled me to go to school, because once I moved to the township with my parents, I then found myself at school for the very first time, and it was just such an incredible moment and an opportunity that I could not take it for granted. As much as I was devastated about leaving my village, I realized this was an incredible opportunity for me to learn new things and to broaden my horizon.

LT: That's an extraordinary perspective from someone who was just torn away from their village, from their grandmother, the closest relationship you had up until then, and put in a completely new environment with parents that you really didn't know and put in a school at 10 years old, another completely unfamiliar environment. You're phenomenally positive to be able to look on the bright side of all of these experiences.

EN: Well, thank you. I think one of the things I also realized early on, it was destabilizing, I have to be honest, but at some point, I also realized that there was very little that I could change in terms of what was happening to me, I was a child, and so the adults made the decisions. But the one thing that I had control of is how I reacted to those changes, and I've really focused on the idea of gratitude, that I was going to find and manifest my own happiness wherever I could, and I was going to always look for the good in what was happening to me, because my Gogo also had taught me that life happens for you and not to you. And so that enabled me to always find that silver lining to always find the bigger context of what was happening and appreciate all the changes, knowing that these were going to be part of the opportunity for me to do greater things with my life.

LT: So you've landed at 10 years old in your first school where you are unlike the other kids in many dimensions, not the least of which was that you've never been to school before. Can you tell us about that?

EN: So that also became another... Just very jarring experience. So my parents take me and I go to school in the township, which again, I think it was very different because I was still the girl from the village, and there was a stigma with that, being a village girl, it wasn't the coolest thing that you could be. But then just within a year later, my parents moved me, so I got moved again, and I ended up living in the city with my aunt and my uncle, which again, I mean talk about just the complete opposite of an experience. So from a village to a township, but now to a beautiful school, a British school, where I suddenly realized things that I had not even ever thought about. There I was, I couldn't speak or write English. Everything was taught in English, I couldn't even write my name properly, and I suddenly realized that in the eyes of the other kids, I was not their equal, I was the girl from the village, I was late in terms of reading and writing, and I started experiencing these three levels of inequality all at the same time.

EN: It was British school, so the color of my skin became a problem to the other kids, and so I was confronted with racial inequality because of the color of my skin, the social inequality because of my humble upbringing, and of course, the gender inequality because of my gender, because I had not gone to school like most of the kids at my school at a much younger age. And so it was heartbreaking. I questioned everything about myself. My accent, was it too thick? Was my hair too curly? Was my skin too dark? And it was very difficult and I got bullied a lot, which gave me a lot of strength thereafter, but in the moment, it was devastating and very sad.

LT: I'm so sorry to hear that. I don't know how you came through everything you came through.

When you went to school and you started getting an education, how did you fit in in your village? Did things change for you?

EN: And so that was also the most confusing thing for me, because I remember being in school and being bullied and I thought, "You know what, it just doesn't matter, I'm going to go back to my village where everyone is equal, where I don't have to be treated as lesser than because we're all the same." And then, of course, I went home my very first school holiday, I went back to my village, and suddenly I realized that something had changed. In the eyes of my community, they felt that they were no longer my equal, they thought that I was now the girl from the city, and it made me feel so guilty because I thought, "Well, no, you are my people." Like, "This is my community, and we are the same." But then we were not the same at the same time, because I've been given an opportunity that most girls in my village had never been and may never get that kind of opportunity to go to a beautiful school, to get an education that would enable them to dream bigger for themselves, but then it... Also then this guilt immediately turned into a sense of responsibility because I remember thinking, "Oh. Now it makes sense what I need to do." What I need to do is to figure out a way to now uplift my own community, and then hopefully one day uplift other Africans in other parts of Africa, and I'm so grateful that I've been able to do that in my small way as a humanitarian.

LT: And what enabled you as a 21-year-old with no friends, no family in the UK, to decide to go to London?

EN: Because I had this dream, I decided that I was going to work for the United Nations against all odds. And I remember thinking, "I just have to go, and I just have to figure out. I'm going to dream now and the details will follow later." And my Gogo was very kind, she sold a few of her cows and goats and bought me a ticket to London, and I remember landing at Heathrow Airport one morning with 250 British pounds to my name, as you said, with no friends or family in the UK, but I had this dream that I had to be there, I had to make my dream come true. And sadly, like with most big dreams, everything at some point fell apart. I ran out of money, I almost became homeless, I had to take a job as a janitor just to stay in London. But the biggest challenge for me was then realizing that the United Nation didn't even have an office in London. The place that I thought was the UN office was a different organization called the United Nations Association, so similar name hence the confusion, but they were just an independent NGO [non-governmental organization] that was set up to promote the work of the UN.

EN: And again, just like everything just fell apart. I was like, "This is just crazy, that I've come completely to the wrong place, and I don't know how I can actually make it." I can't go to New York, which is where the UN headquarters is, or Geneva, because I don't have the money or visa to go there. And it was one of the most difficult things I've ever done in my life. But again, I stuck it through until I achieved my dream.

LT: You absolutely stuck it through and you got yourself a job at the UN and became one of the leaders of the HeForShe movement. Can you tell us about that?

EN: The HeForShe movement came about as almost a result of frustration for myself and my colleagues and fellow feminists that the issue of gender inequality is often been seen as a woman's issue led by women for women. We have often been made to carry the burden of trying to create a gender-equal world, and yet men are part of society and other genders are part of society, and we

have to figure out a way that it just can't be women who say, "Don't rape me," we need to make sure that men are simply not raping women or putting the responsibility on girls to figure out how to escape child marriage instead of just having men saying, "I will not marry a child." And so I realize that this issue of gender inequality at its core, it's an issue about power, who has it, how they use it, and for whose benefit? And men hold the majority of the power across all levels of society.

EN: And so the idea was to create true solidarity around the issue. We invited men to be part of the conversation, but also part of the solution for them to use their privilege to end systematic and structural gender inequality, and it really proved to be quite a huge success because we saw men in every part of the world. Within the first three days, there was one man in every single country in the world who joined the movement, there was 1.2 billion online conversations of men coming forward, wanting to be part of the solution to address gender inequality. It was the right thing to do. It's a responsibility that we all have to share, it's not just a woman's issue.

LT: Congratulations! A billion conversations, that is phenomenal.

EN: Yes, thank you.

LT: One of your other core responsibilities, as you see it, is something that you call, and I apologize for mispronouncing the name, but Ubuntu. Can you tell us about that?

EN: Ubuntu is an ancient African philosophy that literally translate to, "I am because we are." And it's this recognition that we are all connected by our shared humanity, and because of this connection, ubuntu also realizes that what impacts one of us will eventually impact all of us. So I learned this as a child at the age of 6 because I was wondering a revolution. Actually, my country was trying to liberate itself from British rule, and I remember when I turned 6, we got our independence, which should have been a wonderful moment of celebration, but it also came with a lot of responsibility for us. What were we going to do? Were we going to retaliate against the British who had colonized us for centuries? Or are we going to choose a different path? And my Gogo explained to me about this different path, which was the path of forgiveness and reconciliation, and she called this, "It was part of our ubuntu because at its core, when you recognize that you are part of a community, when you recognize our shared humanity, you also recognize that when you dehumanize others, you also dehumanize yourself."

EN: So as painful as it was, and it was painful, we found a way to forgive the oppressors and worked alongside them to rebuild a new Zimbabwe. And in a similar way, 10 years later, Nelson Mandela, when he became the first president of South Africa... African president of South Africa, he also evoked ubuntu as a way to build reconciliation. And so, it's such a powerful philosophy that I think now more than ever, we truly understand this as well that we are indeed connected. We saw with the current COVID pandemic that what happened in one part of the world ended up impacting all of us. So it's a really powerful way of thinking about our relation to each other, thinking about the responsibility that we only have to show compassion towards one another and in fact, HeForShe was founded on the same principles of ubuntu that recognize that we can only do this together as a collective.

LT: What's next for you, Elizabeth?

EN: There's a saying, once a humanitarian, always a humanitarian, so I am always going to be

searching for ways that I can make a small contribution to the world. The issue of gender inequality has been one of my core focus areas, and I think I will continue to explore that because it is ridiculous to think that it's going to take us at the current rate of progress, another hundred years to achieve gender equality, and that the fact that no country in the world has achieved gender equality is quite shameful, to be honest with you. And so I think I will continue to focus on this issue until we make significant progress.

LT: Before I asked for the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already discussed?

EN: Yes, as an African, one of the reasons why I also wrote the book was to bring forth this powerful idea of ubuntu from the African continent to the rest of the world, and also as part of that, try and change the relationship between Africa and the rest of the world, in particular with the West. We've often had a very difficult relationship where Africa is often seen just as a recipient, and yet the African continent has a lot to offer and has already offered so much to the world. And so, it's my hope that, and in a moment like this, when we're all trying to figure out how we can heal as a collective and how to rebuild that my beloved African continent can indeed offer a very, very important tool of ubuntu to the rest of the world. And so, I hope people get a chance to read the book. I hope we embrace this thinking that we are all in this together because that is the only way we can truly all be free, because none of us are going to be free until we're all free.

LT: Elizabeth, what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with?

EN: Three takeaways, I will emphasize the fact that there's more that connects us than divides us, and that's really important, especially right now as well in America, where everything feels so divided, and we tend to focus on the things that separate us and yet there's so much, our shared humanity being the core of that. My encouragement is that we embrace that and we focus on the things that unite us. The second takeaway is perhaps the idea that we are often talking about how we just want things to get back to normal. Well, here's the reality, normal wasn't working. We have to dare to invent the future. We were living in a world right now of rising inequalities where more than 700 million people live below the poverty line of \$2 a day, and yet at the same time, the 26 richest people in the world own as much wealth as half of the world's population. Such widening inequalities. We have a statistic of one in three women and girls around the world will experience some form of violence in their lifetime.

EN: So, normal isn't working. We have to figure out a way to actually reset and create a more sustainable and more equal and a fairer world. And the last thing is that it takes each of us to create change. We can't wait for someone else to do it for us, and there's even one of my favorite African proverbs that I'm going to leave you with, which is, "If you think you're too small to make a difference, try spending a night in a room with a mosquito." So you realize that none of us are too small to make a difference and it's going to take literally each of us contributing in our own small ways to create a world that works for all of us.

LT: Thank you, Elizabeth. I admire all you've accomplished and your resilience and ability to overcome adversity. I enjoyed our conversation today, and I also enjoyed your book, *I Am a Girl From Africa*.

EN: Thank you so much, Lynn, for having me. And also thank you for being such a role model.

You know, there's a saying you can be it unless you see it, and we see you, and so thank you for being our role model.

LT: You are too kind, Elizabeth. Thank you.

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