

YAHAYA BELLO AT 45 -

BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON LIFE, LOVE, LOSS, LAUGHTER AND LEADERSHIP

In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most merciful. Praise be to Allah, the lord of the universe. The most gracious, the most merciful. Master of the Day of Judgment. You alone we worship, and [from] you alone we ask for help. Guide us [to] the straight path. The path of those on whom you have bestowed your grace, not of those who earned [your] wrath, nor of those who have gone astray.

I turn 45 today, and my dominant mood is gratitude. To be sure, I do have reasons to be sad today. I lost my personal assistant and a blood brother to death yesterday but I insist on my right to choose my mood per time. To paraphrase the old saying, I may not have control over how my face looks but I do have responsibility for the expression on it. Thus, I choose joy and gratitude.

Alhamdulillah! I am grateful to Almighty God, my Creator, for life, health and the opportunities I have been blessed with so far. Truly, the Almighty God has been compassionate and merciful to me and mine. But for God, I would have no story worth telling, and no platform from which to tell it.

I am grateful for my beloved wives and darling children. They are the absolute best that any man could wish for. Life itself would be empty for me without them. As the Reverend Billy Graham noted, 'Nothing can bring a real sense of security into the home except true love.' I may have built houses, but it is the women and children who share them with me out of true affection who have transformed the physical structures into home for me - always warm and welcoming.

My beautiful family makes every moment of my life memorable. They light up my life no matter how dark it is outside. I thank them for the strength and stability which their unconditional love imparts to me in the midst of every storm. I love you guys.

One of my daughters shares this birth date with me, so I will mention only her by name here. Happy Birthday Na'ima Yahaya Bello and many happy returns of the day. Daddy loves you!

I am grateful for Kogi State and the good people thereof. They are my employers and my real reason for getting into politics. Kogites are the best people any Governor could ask for. They will set high standards for you, they will knock you into shape, they will keep you on your toes and no matter what you do, only your best will ever be good enough for them. But, if you serve them well, they will prove to the world that you are their own, and when you need them, they will stand solidly with you - an army that no one can defeat. I will never get over the massive support they gave me for my reelection!

I am grateful for my team in the New Direction Administration in Kogi State. We have weathered some incredible storms together since January 27, 2016 when I took the Oath of Office for our first term. The battles we have fought and the victories we have won have taught us that lone rangers who defeat every foe and conquer every obstacle alone are fantastical. They exist only in the movies and come straight from the imaginations of script-writers. In real life, we all need help to complete our assignments.

The team which I lead in the Kogi State Government has some serious playmakers, from the Deputy Governor to the Secretary to the State Government to the Chief of Staff all the way through every Commissioner, Director-General, Special Adviser, Senior Special Assistant and every other category of functionary and civil servant who takes his or her work serious. Gradually, together, in partnership with the Judiciary and the Legislature, we are slowly but surely turning negatives to positives in our dear state.

When I came into Office for the first time, I was the youngest Governor in the country and because of our youthful energy and perspectives I know people, even from outside the state, expected fireworks, magic and an overnight success. People needed change desperately and their expectations were sky-high.

I can say that the fireworks have been plentiful and kaleidoscopic. Some days, especially at the beginning, all you could see in the skies over Kogi were sparks flying off our conflict with vested interests. Even though some were worried and urged us take it slow and easy, those fireworks represented our determination to achieve our mandate no matter what. We undertook nothing that we were not ready to fight for and we never got into any fight that was not connected to our overall mission in governance.

How about the magic? Did we achieve overnight success and turn everything around? The answer is a clear no. Fireworks may light up the night but finally people must calm down and patiently wait for the day to dawn. My team and I promised to work hard and to work smart for the people of Kogi State but we did not promise them magic.

I have always considered Leadership to be a marathon, not a sprint, and I have always known that Legacy is not a medal you award yourself, so we faced our work today as if tomorrow did not matter. As the statues of Christopher Columbus and other men formerly considered great topple all over the US and Europe, it has become even more undeniable that Legacy cannot be frontloaded, it must always be a verdict delivered by posterity, in retrospect.

I did not come into government to glorify impossibilities, but neither did I underestimate the amount of work to be done. I had a vision and I developed it into a roadmap for my work as Governor (the New Direction Blueprint, as we call it). I matched it with a stubborn will and went all out in pursuit of it. I refused to be deterred by intimidation or confrontation though they reared up their ugly heads many times. By the help of God and a commitment to excellence, we have made tremendous progress, even if we are yet to work magic.

We set our sights on security in the state and overhauled it. In 2018, after about 2 years in office, Kogi went from being a violent crime hub and the kidnap capital of Nigeria to the 'second most peaceful state in the country' and 'the state with the second lowest crime statistics in Nigeria'.

Nigerians may want to know that our Law Enforcement Officers are not cowards and they do not abandon whole communities to bandits and terrorists. The vast majority of our officers are good, diligent people who just needed the right tools to do their jobs and a little motivation to give their all. We did our best to give them both. It took a huge toll on our resources, but we got and distributed over 200 patrol vans, over 500 motorcycles and thousands of communications and other gadgets our security contingents in Kogi State, with some financial incentives. The results speak for themselves. We do experience resurgence and opportunistic attacks from time to time, but our gallant men generally subdue such outbreaks quickly.

We also set our sights on the obese and sickly civil service and we overhauled it. Our severely bloated workforce and wage bills were put through the eye of the needle. The wailing was unprecedented and the attacks manic, but we persevered and pushed through. We are not where we want to be yet, but how gratifying it was to be rated one of only 9 states with positive employment statistics in 2019 by the National Bureau of Statistics. For the last 3 years, the World Bank and other agencies have consistently rated us in the top 3 for transparency and accountability in management of public funds.

The last couple of paragraphs are just a review of two important reform areas in the life of my administration. The point is to show that multidimensional and multisectoral progress is being made. On the ground, roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, markets, at least one mega factory and other infrastructure have been built across the state, with more under construction or planned over the next 3-and-a-half years. This administration does not measure itself by how high we have climbed but by what depths we have climbed out from.

One definition says Leadership is the art of motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal. The truth is that it requires sacrifice to motivate people. Followers want to see the leader share their hopes and aspirations, as well as their realities. A leader who is aloof from the weals of his people will never do well. If your people are battling poverty and want, ostentatious displays of wealth, whether yours or the public's is wicked and callous. As a leader you have to learn to cut your coat according to the averages of your people.

The great thing is that the sacrifice of the self required of leaders, if embraced and sustained, will not only yield great results but broaden one's humanity, perspectives - and acceptance by the people.

Developing and showing such empathy in leadership is helped along by developing genuine love for the people you lead - even if you originally joined politics to acquire power and influence. This process is best described in the words of Eudora Welty, the American short story writer:

'The frame through which I viewed the world (a leader's people and territory) changed too, over time. Greater than scene, I came to see, is situation. Greater than situation is implication. Greater than all of these is a single, entire human being, who will never be confined in any frame.'

In a nutshell, see every last human being under your leadership as important and you will become a more efficient and effective leader. For instance, I used to be a free man and I travelled the world at will as a private businessman who had seen a good measure of success. Then I joined politics and got into office. Now I have given myself the liberty to do anything or go anywhere I want - as long as they fit into the narrow confines of acceptable conduct which a leader must exemplify. The result is that in 5 years of governing Kogi State I have not left Nigeria 5 times.

Leadership is the means to a lot of potentially awesome ends, but it is not an end in itself. It gives you a platform to do good and effect change. One area I am going to give greater attention in this second term is the human rights of the girl-child. Like I said earlier, I have the joy of sharing this birth date with my daughter Na'ima. This effervescent bundle of joy and her sisters are my treasures and unceasing reminders of the great responsibility I owe the girl-child as a leader.

I am pained by reports of the sordid abuse and exploitation of girls coming in from all over this nation and I am determined to put up a greater fight on their behalf, particularly in Kogi State. Critically, we must find a solution to the worrisome epidemic of rape and other physical abuses which confronts the girl-child (and woman) in today's world.

We can no longer accept that a man is entitled to destroy the body and psyche of a girl or woman simply because he is physically stronger. Kogi State has long domesticated the Child's Rights Act and we have other laws in place too. Our duty now is to ensure that those who would harm the girl-child know that we will descend on them like the vile and violent criminals they are. I will personally see to it that every abuser

we get does not recover from the consequences of his cowardly choice. I will not go into details beyond saying that we will make graphic scapegoats of them.

It is not enough to keep her safe, we must also break the glass ceilings holding down all our girls from their full potentials. We would have failed as parents and as leaders if we do not raise structures to protect and advance the girl-child. In education and by education and through the liberalisation of opportunity in affirmative action, we must give her an equal chance.

I am acutely aware that Na'ima and all the girls of Kogi State need help to overcome societal norms which reward them less for the same efforts as her male counterparts. They can count on me to even the playing field for them more henceforth and where necessary, give them a helping hand. In fact, if the scales become slightly tilted in their favour, it would be very much acceptable.

Loss is a fact of life and life itself is an ongoing journey to discover what is really important based on the value you place on people. Nothing tells you how much you value a person like the loss of them.

I did not know my biological father, and as bad as the loss of a parent can be, losing them in infancy, is a loss no child should know. It is a loss that is impossible to overcome, even after you reach adulthood. Growing up, every pain will claim that Baba's absence made it more acute. Every achievement will whisper in your heart how it would have been better and sweeter if only Das was around to cheer for you and to share the milestone with you. Throughout my childhood, the ubiquitous 'what ifs' inside every incident were constant reminders that I did not have my father around.

I have since lost my priceless mother, my sister, and several friends to the inexorable passage of time and the will of the Almighty. I can say that in my 45 years on earth I have known and lost a ton of great people. The pain of each loss has been unique and all of them together continue to melt and mould me.

Yesterday was another gloomy chapter as my trusted Personal Assistant and friend, Hon. Abdulateef Suleiman, succumbed to untimely death. Lati left without notice and I am still struggling to come to terms with the reality, especially coming so soon after my dear mother's death. It is a difficult one to say the least, but a leader learns that loss is not always an enemy. If we let it, loss can sharpen our appreciation of those we still have and drive us to treat everyone better. We will find strength to overcome this loss too.

I know the media has feasted endlessly on our alleged face-offs with the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) over the management of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. I would rather say we have disagreements on facts such as the real Covid-19 status of Kogi State and who plays what role in the corporate management of the disease within a state.

Nothing is altogether new under the sun. Whether Kogi State is Covid-19 free or not and whether the coronavirus or Covid-19 or SARS-COV2 is natural or artificial and whether it appeared by happenstance or hostile action, one thing is certain: WE NEED AN EVOLVING SYNERGY BETWEEN SCIENCE AND COMMON SENSE, MEDICINE AND GOVERNANCE TO BEAT THIS PANDEMIC.

The burden is on us as leaders to refuse panic and act intentionally towards creating a semblance of normal life for our people while taking adequate precautions to keep them as safe as possible. That is my mandate and one for which I will always require the cooperation of the NCDC and other federal agencies which show me good faith.

The bottomline is that Leadership can lead you into some lonely places where you may have to stand on your own against some otherwise good people. You may wish to not bother taking such a stand if pride and ego are the only things at stake. But once principles are involved, do it nevertheless and hopefully time will show that you were only being a changemaker. Even if it does not, you still get to have and keep a clear conscience.

Finally, here are 12 general principles on leadership for our youth:

'Not Too Young To Run' will become 'Much Too Old To Run' faster than you think, so if you must get somewhere soon, stop loitering and start running.

Give life your best shot always and stop dealing with a slack hand.

'Busy-ness', that is, to be busy doing nothing, is the worst enemy of business and the most formidable foe of achievement.

Avoid the rocking chair life of constant motion and zero progress.

When actors or actions have no strategic objectives they will always fall short of greatness. How can you catch what you are not chasing?

Always aim for an ultimate prize every time you aim and make every prize you aim for as ultimate as you can possibly make it.

Always want more, always strive for more and stop begging for rights and privileges which are already yours by citizenship or humanity.

This Country belongs to all of us so stop waiting to be invited to a banquet paid for with your money.

Take a seat at the table, in fact, show your mettle and sit at the head of the table.

Start ignoring narratives which preach the myth of invincible supremacy - be it of the white man over the black, one tribe over another or of the older generations over the younger. They thicken your chains of non-performance or under-performance through passivity.

There is no circumstance that cannot be changed if you get your mind free, your thinking straight and your actions right so go ahead and emancipate yourself from mental slavery. Bob Marley (the original Marleyan) says so.

Never settle. Your youth is for making mistakes until you get it right.

I hope to finish writing and release the book on these 12 leadership principles soon, but for now I call them the '12 Unorthodox Pathways To Power' and they will help any youth interested in politics to leapfrog some of the tedium inherent in the process.

I look forward to a future of greatness for the Nigerian youth, for my dear Kogi State and our nation, Nigeria. I am going to be working with willing compatriots around the nation to see how far God will take us in meeting these objectives.

45 looks good on me and I consider it a good age for where I am now. These reflections are simply my own way of saying that I have learnt so much already and that I am only just getting started.

To God be the Glory!

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