



# Storytelling Rituals that Nurture Our Humanity

by AWELE (ah WAY lay) MAKEBA

*We must validate and affirm our identity, opening hearts and minds to see ourselves in the stories of others, to build bridges, bear witness to our humanity, explore the unspeakable, and envision new possible selves and new futures. Our stories hold powerful medicine that can feed our soul and help us heal and transform our communities. Stories introduce us to the beauty in what it means to be human, help us to make sense of the world and our lives while honoring two of the most fundamental needs in this world—to be seen and to be heard, both giving us a memorable gift for a lifetime.*



## LITERACY CHAMPION: AWELE MAKEBA

Awele (ah-WAY-lay) Makeba is an internationally renowned storyteller, a stage actor, an acclaimed recording artist for film and CDs, an award-winning drama teacher, a literacy specialist, a racial justice activist, the producer of the annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Oratorical Festival (Oakland Unified School District) featured in the Emmy-winning documentary, *We Are the Dream: The Kids of the Oakland MLK Oratorical* (2020). She is elated about

her forthcoming role, *The Dark Queen of the Night* in the animated production of *The Magic Flute* (Pocket Opera and The Gibbs Sisters) premiering in 2023! She is recognized as a “truthteller,” someone who sparks “aha!” moments.

Inspired by folklore, life experiences, and the hidden histories of African Americans, Awele’s stories focus on making meaning of the present, understanding the influences of the past, and imagining new futures. Her life’s work is to tell history through the words of silenced and oft-forgotten witnesses; and use art to catalyze deep conversations about race, our common humanity, and our vision of a just, humane, multiracial society.

Awele researches, writes, and performs African American history, folklore, and personal tales. She provides opportunities for audiences to grapple with the meaning of their own lives and make meaning of past lives. Awele uses performance as text, and she animates democracy through her art. She has mesmerized audiences around the world, from the Kennedy Center

for the Performing Arts (Washington, D.C.) and Peace Center for the Performing Arts (Greenville, S.C.) to The Musikverein (Vienna), Tsinchu Teacher's College (Taiwan), Suriname (U.S. Dept. of State Tour), Russia, Austria, Australia, France, Costa Rica, and Canada; and she has toured the United States from Alaska to Mississippi and Hawaii to New Hampshire. And has she got a story for you!

Storytelling was there at the beginning of Awele's life, passed down from her great great grandparents and grandmother Ruth to Awele's thespian daddy, who animated his constant stream of tales with sound effects and gestures during long family car trips from St. Louis to visit extended family in Mississippi. From a young age, she studied dance (ballet, pointe, tap, and modern) and piano, excelled at gymnastics, and started her career in theater arts at Normandy High School, continuing her training in song, dance, and theater at Webster University's Conservatory of Theater Arts, where she earned a B.F.A. Later, she received her M.A. in Education: Language and Literacy from San Francisco State University and a Career Technology Education Credential from University of California at Berkeley. She has given keynote performances, guest lectures, and interactive workshops at museums, cultural centers, festivals, libraries, churches, and universities (including Stanford) across the fifty states.

Whether on stage in Bay Area productions, traveling the world on a myriad of storytelling tours, speaking at TED-2012,\* appearing in films (for example, *Milk* with Sean Penn), or providing voice-overs for award-winning projects,\*\* she has balanced her dynamic artistic career with outstanding achievements as a drama teacher at Skyline High School in Oakland. Her students have performed at the American High School Theatre Festival (Edinburgh, Scotland), received a Broadway World San Francisco Region Award for Best Performance, and they've been invited to perform at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. In 2018, Awele was honored with a CTEIG 21st Century Innovation Grant; in 2019, she received a NBC Universal Sports All-Star Teacher Award; in 2020, an American Theatre Wing Classroom Grant; in 2021, the HBO EMMY award winning documentary featuring her district-wide oratorical program was nominated for the NAACP Image Award (Outstanding Children's Program); and she is the recipient of the 2021 Webster University Distinguished Alumni Award. Ms. Makeba is also Storytelling Lead at DEWEY, an innovative family learning online solution available as a subscription membership for school districts and companies; a company member of Theatre First; former community producer for the Magic Theatre's Magic Oakland program; the Associate Director of Audience Development for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival; a founding member of Vukani Mawethu (a South African Freedom Song Choir based in Oakland); a contributor to the book *Diversity, Inclusion, and Representation in Contemporary Dramaturgy*, edited by Philippa Kelly, Routledge 2020; and the author of four one-woman shows, *Rage Is Not A 1-Day Thing!: The Untaught History of the Montgomery Bus Boycott*, *I'm Not Getting On Until Jim Crow Gets Off* (about the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott and four courageous, visionary women: Claudette Colvin, Mary Louise Smith, Rosa Parks, and JoAnn Robinson), *Family Genealogy*, and her forthcoming work, *Bearing Witness: Breaking the Silence*.

## One to Know: Storytelling Rituals

Bring story to life in an interactive, fun, and engaging approach that establishes trust, intimacy, and intensity in a shared experience, allowing audiences to collectively breathe together—building community among students, family members, colleagues, friends, and strangers—in person and in virtual spaces.

# What to Do: How to Create Storytelling Rituals

Here are some guidelines and resources for getting started:

## Provide Audible Books

- [Audible Stories: Free Audiobooks for Kids](#) These resources whet the appetite and provide a hook. They provide access for all children and adults who might need access for any reason.

## Read Aloud to Youth from ages 0–18

For inspiration see:

- [Radical Imagination Children’s Literature Changes the World](#)
- [Windows and Mirrors and Sliding Glass Doors: Ensuring Students See Themselves and Others in Literature](#)
- [Marley Diaz 1000 Black Girl Books](#)
- [Ideas to Match Kids Up with Stories They Love – Jennifer Serravallo](#)
- [Take a Look: An Oral History of ‘Reading Rainbow’ – MentalFloss](#)
- [Alfred Tatum on Literacy Education for African American and Latino Students](#)
- [Why We All Need to Start Reading Aloud to Our Kids, Keisha Siriboe](#)
- [Mem Fox, The Short Road to Happiness and Long Road to Failure: Why reading aloud to children changes their entire life’s journey](#)
- [StartWithABook.org.](#)
- [NPR Story Hour 100 Favorite Books for Young Readers](#)
- [The Read-Aloud Handbook: Chapter 1, Why Read Aloud?? By Jim Trelease](#)
- [Levar Burton Reads](#)
- [Danger of a Single Story](#)

## Share Their Personal Stories

- [The Family Stories That Bind Us – Strong Family Narrative](#)
- [Homework for Life, Story Worthy Moments](#)

## Share Family Stories

- [See NYT: Stories that Bind Us, Strong Family Narrative, DYK Scale](#)
- [Telling Family Stories](#)

## Engage in Classroom Storytelling

- [Why Storytelling in the Classroom Matters](#)
- [The Power of Storytelling in the Classroom: 5 Ways It Can Be a Great Help](#)
- [Multimodal Literacies](#)
- *Folklore, Proverbs, Best RA on Youtube for Classroom or Home*

## Harness the Power of Process Drama

- [Process Drama: Taking a Walk in Someone Else's Shoes](#)
- [Dorothy Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert Approach to Teaching and Learning: A Brief Introduction](#)
- [Dorothy Heathcote: Three Looms Waiting. BBC Omnibus \(Dir. Ronald Smedley, 1971\)](#)
- [Freedom, Rights & Agency – Intro Freedom, Rights & Agency #3 Freedom, Rights & Agency \(#4\)](#)
- [KS1/2 Drama – A Workshop with Cecily O'Neil](#)

## Tap Text

- [Performing Texts](#) Theories of Performance (live performance as multi-layered text—themes, symbols, imagery, dialogue, gesture, movement, writing, listening, speaking—layers of meaning within performance; nurturing empathy)
- [Poetic Justice Theatre Ensemble: Cops in the Head with "Sect-actors"](#)
- [Overview of Multimodal Literacy](#)

## Introduce School Storytelling

- [Simple Planning for the Perfect Family Literacy Night](#) + Invite a Librarian or Storyteller
- [Halloween Zoom Storytelling – Scary Stories with Ms. Awele & Professional Drama Honors CTE](#)

## Engage the School and District

- [HBO documentary: We Are the Dream: The Kids of the Oakland MLK Oratorical](#)
- [Telling Tales 2009 – "If You Tell a Kid a Kid a Story..." Annual Storytelling Festival](#)
- [Living Arts Playback Theatre Ensemble](#)

## Stories of Who We Are

- [Stories: Legacies of who we are – Awele Makeba](#)
- [Storytelling and Culture](#)
- [Joseph Campbell – The Stories That Guide Us](#)
- [Reading Relational in Mildred D. Taylor: Toward a Black Feminist Care Ethics for Children's Literature](#)
- [My Night at the Planetarium](#)
- [Stories of Resistance](#)

## Community Storytelling

- [Playback Theatre](#)
- [Snap Judgment](#)
- [The Moth, also Education Program](#)

## Envisioning New Futures

- [Octavia Butler's Prophetic Legacy](#)
- [Beyond 'Black Panther' Afrofuturism is Booming in Comics](#)
- [Afrofuturism Fiction Suggestions for Kids, Teens, & Adults](#)
- [Agusto Boal & Son Julian Lead Theatre of the Oppressed Seminar](#)

## More to Know and Do: Homework for Life

[Homework for Life](#): Capture and document the most Story-Worthy Moment of the Day, before you go to sleep. Ask yourself: "If I had to tell a story from something that happened today, even if the story might not be worth hearing (right now) what would be my most "story-worthy" moment of the day?"

Write something down but not the whole story. Try to capture a moment of realization or transformation as best that you could find that day. You will soon see stories where you didn't before, and where most people won't. You will learn to see your life in a different way.

Read the sources listed above, under "What to Do." Consult with Awele for step-by-step guidance through the storytelling rituals.

## How to Reach Awele Makeba:

- You can learn more about Awele and her storytelling services at [Awele.com](#) or email: [awele@awele.com](mailto:awele@awele.com) directly for performances, speaking engagements, workshops, professional development and collaborations.
- Twitter: [@AweleMakeba](#)
- [Awele Makeba Buffalo Commons Storytelling Festival 2011](#)
- To listen to Awele Makeba's TED presentation, marking the anniversary of the landmark case, *Browder v. Gayle*, ending bus segregation in Alabama, and the role of 15-year-old, Claudette Colvin arrested 3/2/1955, visit <https://youtu.be/5UD0RjZdUHK>
- To listen to her Stanford University lecture on the women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott visit <https://youtu.be/icWAoepdTpo>
- To view the HBO EMMY award winning documentary, *We Are The Dream: The Kids of the Oakland MLK Oratorical* that features the Oakland Unified School District oratorical festival that she produces <https://www.hbo.com/classrooms/we-are-the-dream>
- To further explore Awele Makeba's voice-over work, see *Have You Heard from Johannesburg: Apartheid and the Club of the West and The Legend of the Dragon* (Atari PlayStation2); and listen to these award-winning CDs: *Music for Little People*; *This Land Is Your Land: Songs of Unity*; *African Americans in the California Gold Rush*; *Tell That Tale Again!* <https://www.amazon.com/AweleMakeba/e/B001LHD6I4>
- To learn about the Gibbs Sisters, visit <https://gibbssisters.com>
- To view her interview for the 2019 NBC Universal Sports All Star Teacher Award visit <https://www.nbcsports.com/bayarea/marketing/all-star-teacher-awele-makeba>

# Even More to Do: Plan a Family Storytelling Event

## Engage in Storytelling Moments and Rituals to Create a Strong Family Narrative

Storytelling is a powerful experience for the storyteller as well as for those who listen. One especially meaningful storytelling situation is within your own family—including immediate family, extended family, and as many generations as you wish. It is a way to share memories and reflections with people who share your history, but also have their individual perspectives. Here are some suggestions for incorporating storytelling rituals into your own family. Feel free to adapt suggestions to suit your own family and its needs and preferences.

### Story Moments from My Life

#### **Step 1: Journey**

Write a story chapter title for each year of your life. Take a moment and reflect on special moments that you remember from your life. You can also ask family and friends to share the special moments that they remember from your life when you were a particular age or in a certain grade. Jot down bullets, notes, find photos, and draw stories that you or others remember. Now think: If I were writing a book, what title would I give for each age I've lived?

#### **Step 2: Create a Book**

Use paper—full sheets, half sheets (folding paper in half), quarter sheets (folding paper in half and then in half again)—to create the book. Write your age at the top of each page from—zero to however old you are—and, if you are of the “older and wiser generation,” feel free to think in terms of decades rather than single years (your 30s, 40s, and so on...). You can stack the sheets in order and then clip them together.

#### **Step 3: Write Your Titles**

Record your titles in the book you've created. Write a title for each age as you think of a title for each age. (Hint: you could pick a title that captures a memory or the most important thing you can remember that happened in your life that year.) You don't have to work in chronological order. Start on the age where you have the strongest memories and or the most artifacts that are connected to story moments. Add to each age as the story moments come to you. This could be your first draft, working draft, or final draft. You can make and design a book cover when you are ready.

#### **Sample titles (by age)**

0: Moving In Mom's Belly When She Use to Sing or On The Day I Was Born

1:

2:

3: Three gifts Under the Tree: Rocking Horse, Electric Train, & My Black Baby Doll

4: My Very Own Swing Set

5:

6: I LOVED to Read

7: Going Down South to Bigmama's

8:

9:

10:

and so on ....

## **Plan a Family Storytelling Event**

Plan ahead for a Family Storytelling Time that lasts 45-60 minutes to take place in the next three weeks. This will give family members time to prepare.

Create an invitation for Family Storytelling Time. Pick a date and time that is about three weeks in the future. Add the date and time to your invitation. Share the storytelling prompts that appear below with family members. Ask everyone to bring a story to share. Ask folks to RSVP so you know who is coming. Place the date on your calendar.

Share your Family Storytelling Prompts with everyone so they can think about which story they would like to tell. You can share the prompts with everyone coming in-person, participating by phone (speaker phone so others can hear), family far away who would like to send an audio or video story for everyone to cherish, or for family who want to participate via a live video platform.

### **Prompts for Family Storytelling**

Take a look at the storytelling prompts below. Keep them all, choose some, and create 10 more prompts. Add them to your Family Storytelling Prompts list.

Pick a prompt so that you can work on your own story. You could tell a story from your book, *Story Moments from My Life*, or choose from the suggested Family Storytelling Prompts below.

- A moment in your life you will never forget
- Childhood special place? Why was it special?
- One of your most favorite years in school—what happened?
- If you really knew me you would know...
- A silver lining that COVID-19 allowed me to experience
- Scar story: how did it happen?
- A hair story I will never forget
- A time when you learned something from a child
- A gift or accomplishment recognition/didn't deserve that caught you by surprise?
- A birthday or holiday you would like (not like) to live over again
- Best/Worst family gathering and what made it special?
- Something folks don't know about me and I wish that they did
- A night your parents never found out about
- A birth story from our family
- A/the most challenging moment I believe I've ever faced
- The funniest moment I've experienced
- My first memory of memory
- 1st kiss or 1st date
- It was the best of times ... It was the worst of times...
- This is how mom and dad met
- A terrible time that our family pulled through was when...
- Family trip you would like /or not to take again
- The funniest moment that happened in this family was...
- Our family comes from (grandparent, great-grand-parent story origin story)

## **Here are some tips for ensuring a wonderful event:**

### **Preparation for Family Storytelling Time**

1. Ahead of time prepare slips of paper, each numbered to reflect the number of participants.
2. Sit in a circle so that everyone can see one another.
3. Place numbered slips you prepared in a container for folks to pick in order to determine who is going to go first, second, third, and so on.
4. Pass the Family Storytelling Prompts around just in case folks need to see it again.
5. Ask if family would like to audio or videotape Family Storytelling Time to share with family who is not there or for each other to just to enjoy again and again.
6. Announce: "Let the Storytelling Begin!" Have fun!
7. Decide when the next Family Storytelling Time will take place.

### **A Little Extra: A Story Gift for everyone!**

Ask family members if it is OK to audiotape or videotape their story so that everyone can cherish the moment for years to come. Be sure to share the stories with all participants. You all can "hear" the story in your heart from memory or you could play it back on audio or video. Enjoy! A strong family narrative is a strong predictor of emotional health and happiness

## **Culmination: Everyone is a Storyteller!**

### **Storytelling Coaching with Awele**

Learn the tools of the storyteller so that you can bring your story to life and paint pictures with words, as you get ready for Family Storytelling Time. Awele's storytelling coaching session could cover:

- Story Structures and The Tools of the Teller
- Painting Pictures with Words
- Breathing Life into Characters: Dialogue
- Rehearsal Time, Feedback, and Adjustment
- Bringing History to Life
- Imagining New Futures
- Storytelling Drama Games
- Process Drama: Delving Deep Into a Concept, Place, Moment in History, a Person's Life

## **For more information, contact Awele:**

[Awele.com](http://Awele.com) • email: [awele@awele.com](mailto:awele@awele.com)