Topo
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In the late afternoon my classes were over for the day and I took my usual walk up the road that led out of the village and into the African countryside. Thorn trees lined the rutted, dusty track. Scrub brush grew along its edge bearing hard fruit, nature’s version of tough love in the Kalahari.

In the distance, I saw dust stirred by a donkey cart, but as the cart approached the village it jerked,lunged, and then stopped. The animals seemed aimless and the cart weaved from one side to another. It stopped, and then lurched forward crazily.

I thought the driver must be drunk and giving confusing signals to his donkeys, but as it got nearer I could see the driver wasn’t drunk. Sitting high up on a crude wooden seat with a friend beside him, I recognized the driver as a young man named Topo, a former student. Plainly, he had no idea how to direct the donkeys and his lack of skill slowed his progress. But it didn’t stop him. Nothing stopped Topo.

I’d gotten to know Topo when I was new to the village, shortly after the Peace Corps had delivered my wife and me to the dusty Botswana village in the back of a cattle truck. I was assigned to lecture at the new college of education. As it happened, my students were scattered around the country doing their practice teaching. Meanwhile, I spent my first six months teaching at a nearby secondary school.

I’d been at the school for only a few weeks when I attended my first staff meeting. Topo was the main item on the agenda. The headmaster was being taken to task by the teachers for his failure to properly discipline the boy. A dignified man with skin
the color of light coffee, the headmaster sat in the circle listening to comments. As usual, he was impeccably dressed, wearing a tan sport jacket, starched white shirt and dark tie.

“He needs to be beaten soundly,” one of the teachers said of Topo.

“Why is this boy even allowed to stay in school?” asked another. The question suggested the rejection of a child, something that almost never happens in a village in Botswana. When students were sent home, they were expected to return as soon as possible with a parent. It was a measure of the degree of frustration with Topo that someone would suggest sending him away.

I was seated in a hard wooden chair slightly outside the circle. I wasn’t the only expatriate teacher on the staff. Near me, sat a woman from India. An Australian teacher of English was across the room. There were two men from Zambia, teachers of math and science. All of us had felt our share of annoyance with Topo, but we listened in silence.

I was surprised to hear the headmaster being chided for his leniency. A week after I arrived he had spoken to me sternly for being too soft. He wanted a more authoritarian presence, someone who used the cane to keep students on their best behavior. He was disappointed with this white skinned middle-aged man who refused to strike students. I told him, “I quit a perfectly good job to come to teach here. I didn’t give up a career in America to beat African children.”

Now, the shoe was on the other foot and he was being deemed too soft. He sat quietly across the room taking in the comments and occasionally, jotting a note on a pad, or calling attention to a matter of process. He showed no visible reaction to the scolding tone of the teacher’s voices or the direct accusation that he was coddling a student.

Topo’s given name was a shortened form of a much longer phrase
in the Setswana language that meant, *This is the child I have requested from God.*

In my afternoon class, however, he showed no awareness of his divine origins. He squirmed in his seat for two hours. If he had been in an American school his impulsiveness and acting out would get him a diagnosis of A.D.D. His attention span barely carried him five minutes into any assignment. Thinking deeply or concentrating on a classroom task was not his thing. On a typical day he twisted in his chair midway through a short study time to steal an essay book or to copy another student’s work. A minute later, I’d see him throw a pen to a friend across the room. After that he pointed, convulsed in laughter, at the antics of a classmate. In those moments of action, his eyes sparkled with the thrill of the moment and the companionship of his friends – or “partners in crime” as I sometimes thought of them.

My reluctance to use corporal punishment on my students did not mean that I didn’t feel frustration with his behavior. But even if I’d become more authoritarian it wouldn’t have made any difference. Topo was in constant trouble in all his classes.

Annoying as his behavior was in class, he was always good natured. There was never a time when I saw him display anger. On our once-a-month cleanup day when students swept, washed windows, waxed floors, Topo was a great help. He loved physical activity. He reminded me of young men I’d known in Seattle, whose personalities seemed to change when they played sports, worked, or created something with their hands.

At the secondary school, each day began with a gathering on the grounds for a ten minute assembly. The deputy headmaster, a French speaking Tamil from Mauritius, presided over the singing of a hymn and bible reading. One morning in particular, the deputy made a few announcements after the brief prayer, and then added, “I want to see these students immediately after assembly in my office.” Everybody knew that anyone whose name was on that list
had an appointment to be beaten that morning. The deputy ended his list in a humorous tone, “…and my good friend, Topo.” It was a line he used frequently and that always got a laugh from the assembled student body.

Others laughed, but it made my heart sink to see him that morning. Even Topo, enjoying the attention, joined in the laughter. But then he stood still for a moment as if frozen to the spot. Silhouetted in the sunlight, I saw his large head and broad shoulders that tapered down to narrow, child-like hips. Pausing in the middle of the school grounds, he looked around as if expecting help. As I watched it made me wonder what he was thinking.

When he finally moved away from the assembly towards the administration offices, he wasn’t performing for his friends; nothing about his actions seemed comical. His rhythmic, rocking, shuffling walk – usually Topo’s form of “cool” – instead, seemed more like a form of controlled turmoil. His small, almost delicate, arms and hands were pressed tightly to his body as if bound by a rope. I had the impression of a large person, almost adult, whose body had withered. His head and shoulders, too large for the rest his small body, moved back and forth with the rhythm of his gait. His feet placed one ahead of the other, his whole body tapering to that single point making contact with the earth.

Topo’s behavior had become an agenda item at the staff meeting because he’d crossed a line and the headmaster began the discussion by outlining the facts for the teachers. Apparently, the police had come to school to talk to Topo about a theft in the village. His misbehavior had been elevated to criminal activity.

Topo had been living by himself in a mud walled thatched hut. His mother disappeared and a neighbor woman, realizing he wasn’t getting enough to eat, invited him to stay in her compound. She fed him for about a week, but one day when she returned from doing errands she found that money was missing – twenty pula –
from a bag stashed under her mattress. The woman was furious that this boy she had fed would steal from her. She called the village police. The headmaster added that the woman continued to feed Topo, but she no longer would let him enter her house.

After hearing the story, a teacher at the far end of the room spoke up, “This one – Topo – he is in the office of the deputy one day. He is in the office of the headmaster the next day. This goes on week after week. If it were anyone else he would have been sent from school after three visits. Why is this boy getting such favorable treatment? Why is he being allowed to stay in school?”

A buzz of conversation began around the room and without waiting for the headmaster to recognize her, another teacher shouted angrily, “How many strokes is he getting when we send him to you?”

The teacher had spoken out of turn and the headmaster reminded everyone in the room that all comments must be directed to the chair, meaning himself.

Despite his best efforts, however, the discussion became noisy. Members of the staff argued that it would be more effective for teachers to beat the students as soon as the offense occurred. When a student is sent to the deputy or the headmaster, the student is not seen immediately and may not receive the beating for two or three days, they said.

I looked around to the other expat teachers. They seemed as puzzled as I was by the arguments. The young man was already receiving beatings from the headmaster and the deputy, several times a week and it puzzled all of us why more would be better. None of the punishments seemed to change Topo’s behavior.

The headmaster restored order by reminding teachers there is a prescribed manner for administering punishment. One can only use a stick of a certain size, girls cannot be struck on the buttocks, and no one may be hit on the head. He stressed that it is important to follow the rules and have a witness. Even if students do not
receive punishment immediately, it is better to refer those matters to the administration in case of a complaint by the student or by parents.

In the case of Topo, he went on, “He is not receiving special treatment. As a student here, he is a member of our family, and as any one of us would with a troubled member of our own family, I have talked with him, counseled him, and I have administered beatings to him. But with this one, this boy, Topo, I cannot close my eyes to the damage that he has suffered. He is emotionally scarred. He is a problem here at the school, but will that problem go away if we turn him loose on the village? I do not think so. I think he will be in jail. And then what have we accomplished? Here is a boy – a child really – whose mother has beaten him mercilessly and deserted him. Can you imagine? She tried to kill him. She tied him to a tree. Beat him on the head. Look at the scars on his head sometime.”

The headmaster turned to set his notepad on a table, and then continued, “I admit that I have a soft spot for Topo when I realize the cruelty he has endured. I think he deserves a chance to succeed at something. I think he deserves to belong somewhere. In good conscience, I cannot turn this boy out of the school as long as I think there is a chance for him here.”

Every one had apparently had their say and even the headmaster seemed to tire of the matter. By the time he ended the conversation he sounded short of patience. “This administration and this headmaster can be soft. We can be soft when it comes to students that need a second chance and we can be soft when it comes to teachers who sometimes break the rules. I can be understanding when I see the circumstances. I do not report everything. However, do not think that if you ask me to be unbending and hard to the extreme with students that I cannot be hard, as well, when it comes to asking wayward teachers to toe the line.”
In late June, I transferred to the college and for many months saw nothing of Topo, until that afternoon when I walked up the road leading away from the village. The ruts were deep and the sand was mixed with the dung of cattle, goats and sheep, the usual travelers there. Occasionally I saw a donkey drawn wagon hauling water, but I’d never seen a wagon out of control until I saw Topo, sitting atop a crude wooden bench above the animals he was supposedly driving.

The well dressed teenage boy next to him was doubled over with laughter. The cart weaved back and forth, but though Topo seemed aware of the humor in the situation, he tried desperately to concentrate on his task. For my part, it was humorous to watch, but I was also happy to see that Topo had a friend.

In his left hand he held the reins and in his right, the whip, but Topo was clueless as to how to use either. Some drivers flicked the whip over the backs of the animals, not touching them, just letting it crack in the air above to remind the donkeys who was in control. Like adolescents misbehaving in a class gone amok, these donkeys had no doubt as to who was in control.

When they slowed, Topo with whip in hand, yelled at them. Then he whistled. Finally, after getting no response from the donkeys, he bent over in laughter. The two young men acted like the giggling schoolboys they were.

When the cart came close enough, I greeted him, “Dumela, Topo.”

He recognized me and struck a momentary pose – Topo, donkey cart driver. For a brief formal instant that deceived no one, he played the part of a student observing décorum in the presence of a teacher.

“…’Mela, Teacher,” he answered.

His sudden formality was unexpected and I smiled. 

Tsamaya sentlay, Travel well, Topo, I started to say. But at that moment, the donkeys decided to bolt off at full speed while
the whip hung limp in the driver’s right hand. As the cart tore off, I could hear the laughter of the two young men.

I stood watching the cart disappear in a cloud of dust and realized I was still smiling. The village had continued to take him in. He’d been nourished, embraced, and befriended. The village was his hope. Also, I saw that like myself, Topo was not a born whip wielder.