

The Danger Of a Single Story and What We Ethiopians Can Do About It

By
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Based on Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie's Global TED Talk, which was filmed in 2009, I recently wrote a blog. The talk was very powerful- over 9 million people have watched it. In that blog, I complained concerning the unfair treatment of the media at world stage against our country. Notwithstanding of Ethiopia being one of the two countries in Africa that never been colonized, irrespective of our coffee- one of Starbucks' signature brands, regardless of our long distance runners who hold multiple world records, the media is obsessed in painting our nation with a single story of famine on a consistent basis. It is true, as you read this article, millions of Ethiopians are starving, thanks to the maladministration and faulty policies of TPLF. But, we have so many other great stories that should have been shared to the world. At the end of the blog, I put forward some suggestions on how to tackle distorted single stories, brand oneself and one's business. If you are interested, you may check it out from here: <http://www.successpws.com/?p=1338>

The blog was shared on my social media pages, and one of my followers, who happened to be someone I know very well, had read the commentary and raised the subject when we met to discuss another business matter. We took time to exchange ideas regarding some of the points addressed in the blog. We covered lots of grounds. We recognized the importance of overcoming stereotyping by sharing more stories. The common understanding we reached in the end was that we should not be silenced, and allow others to mischaracterize us- this is our individual responsibility to take charge in defining who we really are using our authentic stories. I like Harvey Fierstein's powerful advice, *"Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim. Accept no one's definition of your life; define yourself."* My friend didn't have any problem with that. His concern was branding, rather, the lack of branding in our community. He pointed out that many of Ethiopian organizations are plagued by lack of branding more than other communities.

Even if we attempt to brand ourselves with great stories, my friend figured it out that some people might still disregard those and create for us single stories that make us look bad or even vulnerable. Of course, the architect storyteller-TPLF, which has been fabricating perverted single stories against some ethnic groups for its sinister agenda- divide and conquer, was also in our radar. In this article, I'd like to share with you the main discussion points, and a little more. Since we are talking about story telling, I tried my best to share with you first hand and true stories as much as possible.

Ethiopian businesses and organizations are plagued by lack of branding

It was bothersome for us to acknowledge the fact that the majority of Ethiopian organizations are unable to pick a brand and create a story in alignment with their mission. We see duplication everywhere and in every industry. For example, someone opens a restaurant in one corner. Behold, someone starts a restaurant the next door with a different name and begins serving the same menu. You struggle to choose, especially if you aren't from the area. They made it hard for their customers. You have to go and eat at each place before you understand their unique offers.

The same with Ethiopian churches we both know in the DC metro area. We attempted to figure out their brands. We couldn't. They have the same mission with different wordings. You can't see any major brand difference. Most of them tell you the same stories with different spicing. When you ask some churchgoers why they frequent in that particular church, they reason out that they are attending there because it has childcare or free parking or it's very close to where they live or because they know the preacher.

I plan to send this article to some Diaspora Ethiopian websites, and I may find myself in trouble but I should disclose that we also talked about them too. Of course, we agreed that the editors of many of the websites that we know of put extraordinary efforts, sacrifices, and dedications to serve our community. We enumerated the challenges they face including from the ruling party that blocks their contents from reaching millions back home. There is no denial that these websites have broken the online media monopoly of TPLF's mouthpieces. They've been providing alternative news to our community for years. Yet, as much as we admired and appreciated what they do, except those few who took the

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extra mile to brand themselves, we concluded that the majority of these websites are duplicates- unable to provide unique service to their respective audience.

Think about Fox News and MSNBC for a moment. These media outlets branded themselves so much so that they made the lives of their audience easy. It is unlikely that a conservative constantly watches MSNBC. Likewise, a liberal doesn't sit there and watches Fox News the whole day except in those instances where she might have pressed the channel's number by accident. Even then, she doesn't stay there, she switches channel quickly.

Successful individuals and businesses understood the importance of creating a clear brand. Not only they know why they exist, but also artfully crafted a distinctive brand that differentiates them from the crowd. Geoffrey Zakarian asserted, ***“Determine who you are and what your brand is, and what you're not. The rest of it is just a lot of noise.”*** If you know your true self, why you exist, your unique offer (s), and if you communicate that skillfully to the right target audience; your success is inevitable, if not now, at the end of the day.

Please note that we were not complaining regarding the great services our restaurants, churches, websites, associations, and organizations have been delivering to our people, and their extra ordinary commitment and dedications. We need as many services and organizations as possible as far as they pick their own single lane. The problem is that many of them haven't come up with a single unique story true to who they are and what they stand for. They thread on a single path crowding the field and stumbling one another in the process. Rather than finding their uniqueness that differentiates them from the rest, and creating a story that reflects this uniqueness, they appear replicas. Bruce Lee advised, ***“Always be yourself, express yourself, have faith in yourself, do not go out and look for a successful personality and duplicate it”***.

This is another long story by itself so let me stop it here. But, before I do so, let me leave you with this question: Have you crafted a brand for yourself and/or your organization? If you have, you must be one of a kind. If you haven't, you are permitting others to create one for you, and you may not like it.

Are you happy with the single story people are using to define you?

In our conversation, we came to realize that even if you created your own brand, people may deliberately or inadvertently disregard it and create one for you that doesn't fully reflect who you are and your cause. To make a point, my friend asked me, “Are you happy with the single story other people are using to define you?” I confessed, “No. Regardless of my efforts to have a brand that could have painted me in a positive light, I sometimes hear stories that make me crazy.” My friend sympathized and added, “I relate to that. It's frustrating when people prefer to pick stories of ours (accurate or not) that misrepresent us.” While nodding my head in agreement, I noted, “From my experience, many of these stories are distorted and far from the truth.”

One of the decisions I recently made was to be as open as possible. And therefore, I decided to give my friend a real example on how people disregard many of your great stories and pick one (even alter it) in an effort to discredit, blackmail, or hurt you for whatever reason they may have in doing such a filthy job. Until that point, I never shared the following story to anyone. Nonetheless, I decided to be vulnerable and share it with my friend and now to you concerning a single story that was once used to misrepresent me.

Disclaimer

I've a disclaimer though. I'm not here pausing myself as a big shot. What is a big deal if my little image gets distorted, you may ask? You're right. It's not a big deal; I'm fine with that. Nonetheless, I always believe that writers should share some intimate stories close to home once in awhile to connect with readers- to show that they too are humans like everyone else with some frustrations. Of course, I understand the risk of doing so. In our culture, those individuals who talk about themselves are considered egotistical. Well, this is one of the admission fees we writers must be willing to pay ☺

Confronted by a man who heard an inaccurate single story

Here is how I began the story, “I've a friend that I respect and admire; that is why he is still my friend. The way we began our friendship, however, was awkward”. My friend leaned forward to hear what I had to say. It seemed I drew his at most attention. I cleared my throat and continued, “A couple of years ago, I facilitated a workshop in Virginia, and at the end of the session, I stayed behind to chat with some members of my audience. While I was chatting with a group of

participants who had questions, comments, and suggestions for future improvements, someone tapped me on my shoulder. When I turned my head, here you go a middle aged man who looked a little agitated. He demanded, ‘Doc, can I talk to you for a second?’”

My friend interjected and asked, “Shouldn’t he wait until you finish?” He was right- he should have waited. My guess was that he must have been in hurry to leave, and thus couldn’t wait until I was done with the group. Any ways, I apologized and kindly asked him to wait for me till I’m done with the group.

Even if I was chatting with the group, in the back of my mind, I was thinking about this gentleman. I asked myself inaudibly, “Why he didn’t join the conversation?” I even complained in my head silently, “The topic is leadership and whatever he intends to discuss, why he doesn’t share it within the group setting?” Since I was eager to know why this fellow wants to talk to me in private, I rushed the discussion, apologized the group, and walked to the place where he sat at a corner of the conference hall.

He stood and introduced his name, “My name is Mamo (not his real name) and I’m new to the US.” And he did let me know that he would like to be straight with me. I gestured my two hands downward and invited him to sit, and myself took the next seat. I didn’t dive into the main issue; I struck up small talks first. Maybe, at subconscious level, I wasn’t prepared to confront the issue right away. I asked him questions like when he arrived here, how he found the US, and the likes. Finally, I got the guts and redirected our conversation toward the main thing, I smiled profusely and asked: “What was the issue you would like to be straight with me?”

Mamo kept quite for a while, and appeared hesitant. I wish I knew what he was thinking right there. Was he reconsidering his plan to confront me? Was he struggling to decide from where he should begin? I wasn’t sure. Nodding my head, I encouraged him to speak. In the meantime, my eyes locked with his. It looked like my eyes were scanning his to figure out what he was thinking. I couldn’t tell what was running in his mind at that moment but my eyes’ reading communicated a signal that read something like this: This person is a genuine, truthful, and caring person. Looking back retrospectively, my assessment was right. There is a saying, *“When you look into someone’s eyes you can see their soul.”*

Finally, cautiously, Mamo spoke up, “I must be honest with you.” He is a man of few words. “I understand, go ahead,” I allowed him to continue. He explained, “A friend of mine gave me a ride and on the way I asked him to join the training. Unfortunately, he feels that you disrespect us, and thus, he didn’t want to participate.” I was confused and instantly became defensive. Don’t be surprised or alarmed. Some of my colleagues have already told me so many times that I’m too defensive. Unlike being defensive, this is the first time I was accused of disrespecting others. I thought I’ve grown to the point where I treat each person with dignity regardless of my disagreement with his or her ideas and positions. With a cynical tone, I demanded, “Who are you and how did I disrespect you?”

Initially, I never thought for a second that this man was going to open my eyes, and provide me a feedback I’d remain thankful in the rest of my life. There was a brief silence that felt eternity. I didn’t know what to expect. I was eager to know whom I disrespected unintentionally. The next statement he uttered staggered me though. Mamo professed, “You disrespect people from Wollo.”

I was bewildered and asked, “What do you mean?” Mamo continued, “My friend told me that you singled out and criticized individuals from Wollo in your book.” To buy time and refresh my memory, I threw a question at him, “Did you read the book?” He smiled and admitted that he didn’t. But he trusted his friend who told him this single story. It’s hard for me to think why someone intentionally tells inaccurate story to his friend. Who knows, he might be a victim himself where he heard the story from a third party. In any case, it’s true. In my first book, I criticized some individuals who happened to be from one region.

Creating a distorted single story by taking things out of context

The title of the book Mamo was talking about is *“Redefining Leadership: Navigating the Path from Birthrights to Fulfillment in Life”* It was published in 2011. The book has five parts. The first part argued that leadership is the birthright of all. Leadership should be adopted as a life pattern was discussed in the second part. Part three enlisted the true measures (fruits) of leadership. The barriers that deny billions of people from becoming leaders were discussed in part four. The last part provided the most important leadership attributes individuals need to develop in order to claim

their birthright of leadership, adopt it as a life pattern, bear the fruits of true leadership, and breakthrough the barriers that kept them at bay from enjoying the full benefits (fruits) that come from becoming a leader.

Since the book was partly autobiographical, in part two, I shared the different leadership initiatives that I took, the people I interacted, where we disagreed, the challenges I faced, and the lessons I learned. My innocent intention was to demonstrate the need to adopt leadership as a lifestyle, not as a career left for a few. The goal was to inspire each and every one of us to become the leader of our destiny, and take leadership initiatives wherever we find ourselves. The book argued that it doesn't matter where we are right now and whether we have the formal leadership authority or not. Wherever we may find ourselves, we should, at least, lead ourselves to get fulfilled in life and also successfully accomplish our job descriptions.

The main thesis of the book is that leadership is not just for few who are orators and charismatic. It begins by leading self first. Let me modify this familiar saying- "Charity begins at home," and say, "**Leadership begins with self.**" Once we lead ourselves successfully, we begin to influence and finally lead others effectively. The purpose of part two was to signify the importance of not waiting until we are given leadership authority to take leadership initiatives. This part of the book was dedicated to show how the author tried his best to pursue leadership as a lifestyle- nothing more, nothing less.

Coming back to my encounter with Mamo, I immediately understood the damage I'd done inadvertently. I was crashed, felt bad, and even stupid. God is my only witness. Why would I intentionally target people from Wollo? While writing the book, it never occurred to me that most of the individuals I disagreed with were from the same region. I never bothered to find out their hometown. Of course, I wouldn't have changed what I wrote nor refrained from speaking my mind publicly regarding the officials, even if I had known their hometown back then. Nonetheless, one thing I would have done was coining some disclaimers to deter some people from twisting my intention.

It wasn't neither about the individuals I mentioned in the book nor myself. Helping my readers understand a principle by providing some of my own stories as examples was my preoccupation. Unless I first test something and see whether it works, I never write about it, teach, or advocate it. I wrote my first leadership book after two decades of practicing leadership as youth, student, political, and business leader.

I explained to Mamo that it was coincidental. It happened that the majority of the officials that I interacted as a student leader of AAU Students' Union in 1997/98 were from one region. As the president of the union, I was required to negotiate with the president of AAU, Professor Mogessie Ashenafi, on so many issues that affected students. When there was a stalemate between the union and the university administration, at the end of my term, we invited the then Minister of Education Genet Zewdie to intervene and break the deadlock.

Yes, I was naïve- to say the least, to request the then Speaker of the House Dawit Yohannes to allow graduating classes of AAU Students attend the parliament when ministers present their annual reports. The idea was that when, for instance, the minister of industry reports in the parliament, graduating students from engineering and other relevant fields of studies attend the report and ask questions. As you might have already guessed, the request was denied. Of course, later, I heard that they allowed high school students to attend such reports. Knowing TPLF's animosity toward university students, I should have known better. Any ways, in my book, I shared my encounters, conversations, and my disappointments with these officials.

Even if Genet were my sister or mother or wife, I wanted Mamo to know, I'd have criticized her the same way I did to the then minister of Education. Even if Mogessie were my brother or father or brother-in-law, I'd have shared in the book my frustrations toward him. When I interacted with these officials or when I was writing the book, I made it clear to Mamo, their hometown never came to my mind nor swayed me of my opinions. For that matter, I sent the manuscript to some of my colleagues for feedback, and no one alarmed me. I guess they too were unaware of the unintended blender I was making. In short, I didn't see it was coming.

Becoming friends without checking our ethnic backgrounds are gone?

Maybe I am old school. I still don't care about the ethnic origin and hometown of my friends and colleagues. Some of them have names that are self explanatory of their ethnic background; some don't. Some introduce themselves and reveal their hometown starting from day one, some don't.

Once, I was chatting with my long time friend. We first met during my early stay in the US, in 2005, if my memory serves me correctly. After more than 8 years, she spoke some Oromigna phrases during one of our usual hangouts. I was surprised and asked, “Do you speak Oromigna? I didn’t know.” From her face, I could read her disappointment. She looked surprised because she thought I had befriended with her knowing her ethnic background.

When I told her I didn’t know her ethnic origin, she told me that I must be naïve not to pay attention to people’s ethnic background these days. As a friend who cares for me, she educated me. “Assegid, even if you don’t care, others care about your background. Don’t be delusional. Things have changed since TPLF came to power. Don’t think for a second that people become your friend without first knowing your ethnic background.”

Right there, I argued with her but promised to give her the benefit of the doubt. Subsequently, I began paying a little attention and found out that my friend was somewhat right. Once, I socialized with a lady on face-book. We began talking over the phone after chatting online for a while. One day, she stunned me when she suddenly asked whether I am a Tigrian. I was uncomfortable and unable to answer the question right away; shame on me ☺ “Why do you want to know?” I answered her question with another question. It was just for her information, she insisted, and I told her, “I’m not.”

To make the story short, the friendship cut short. Later, I asked myself so many questions. When she first reached out, was she thinking that I was a Tirgian because of my last name (Habtewold)? And now I’m not, the friendship is over? In the end, I accepted defeat, and buried my hope to be her friend. Nonetheless, I didn’t judge her. I rather sympathized and concluded that my former friend might be a victim of a single story about non-Tigrians. Rather than staying to hear more stories, she ran away when she found out that I was not a Tigrian. The danger of a single story in action!

Should we ask what kind of blood runs in our friends’ veins?

Coming back to my book, I talked a little bit longer regarding Leditu. I shared in the book that I joined EDP in 2002, and had been a Central Committee Member and Vice Chairman of Research Department up until I came to the US. Of course, before joining the party, I conducted a mini research, and found out that, back then, EDP was the only multiparty. Other parties were ethnic based. I also held discussions with some known figures in Ethiopian politics. I had also a couple of back and forth discussions with my AAU Students’ Union colleague Andwalem Aragie, who is now in jail. He was part of the leadership of EDP and I had so many questions, which I wanted to get answers first hand from one of the leaders. He answered my questions and finally convinced me to join the party, and introduced me to Leditu.

Let me say a few words here. I never asked Andwalem what kind of blood runs in his veins. We were friends, ate together, and spent time drinking coffee and discussing politics. We cared about our country. What brought us together was the love of our country and its great people. The story I still play and replay in my mind, again and again, is his courage and commitment to freedom- nothing else.

For the sake of justice, democracy, and the rule of law, he sacrificed his wife and kids. This great respect and honor I have for him doesn’t change even if I come to know his bloodline in the future. That additional information doesn’t increase a bit or decrease my respect toward my colleague. I know the majority of Ethiopians think like I do, and that is why I don’t lose hope when I come across a few who think different.

Differentiating the person from his ideas and positions

Unlike Andwalem, I knew Leditu’s hometown- Wollo. Regardless, I had been one of his close colleagues in the party until after the 2005 election when he decided to split from Kinijit and join Parliament. Prior to the 2005 election, I had supported him unconditionally. Behind the scene, such as during the 2005 Televised discussions, I provided him materials and introduced him to some of my friends who were experts as he prepared for some of the debates.

Where Leditu was born never altered my perception of him as a person, I still consider him as an articulate smart politician. I’m a believer who insists that we should differentiate the person from his ideas and stands. For me, each and every individual that I meet is the image of God. I honor the individual whether rich or poor, educated or uneducated, famous or obscure, whether I agree with him or not, it doesn’t matter. It also doesn’t matter a person’s racial/ethnic background and religious affiliation for me to respect the person.

While I was part of the leadership of EDP, my loyalty was to the ideals of our party and its values, not to an individual. When we parted ways, myself and other more senior leaders like Drs. Admasu Gebeyehu and Hailu Araya, it was because of his wrong and untimely decision that we thought did hurt the national interest of our country and its people. Yes, I disagree with many of his stands and what he still does that harms the opposition camp but I never thought of him less than I used to as a person.

I'm from Harar. Even if Leditu were from Harar, I'd have the same opinion of him. For that matter, many politicians from Wollo hate him more than others. By the way, when I tell my friends I'm from Harar for the first time, they couldn't believe me. I see on their face disbelief. Why? Because I don't fit 100 % to the single story they have heard concerning people from that part of the country. You know what I mean ☺ Fortunately, the single story many Ethiopians heard about people from Harar isn't harmful. They say that Hararians are carefree, free spirited, sociable, and frank. But, we know that not all people from Harar are like that.

Of course, there were some politician friends who were angry the fact that I mentioned Leditu's name in my book. They accused me of trying to resuscitate him into Ethiopian politics. I wasn't attempting to resurrect nor demonize him. I was just sharing my thoughts without any hidden agenda.

After explaining everything, I gave Mamo my book to read it and provide me his feedback. After that encounter, we met a couple of times and reviewed some of the points I discussed in the book. Since he was willing to checkout himself the single story he heard concerning me, and I was open to provide him more stories, he understood from where I came from when I wrote the book. Since he had done this amazing thing, I remained respectful to this friend of mine the more. While the person who told him the distorted single story bought into that one faulty story of mine, he sought explanation. And therefore, gave me a chance to tell more stories.

Silence only benefits TPLF

I don't blame the person who came up with that disingenuous single story. The ruling party has been using state resources to create division among people, even people within the same ethnic group. They create dissention among the different regions of Amhara (Gojam, Wollo, North Shewa, Gonder), Oromo (Harar, Wellega, Arsi, Shewa, etc.), and other ethnic groups. They've succeeded to some extent. Many of us bought into the biased single story they created for each region. It's common to hear some people from one region saying, for instance, "What do you expect from her, she is so and so because she is from that region." While we throw slings of dirty name-calling against one another, TPLF remains in power by exploiting our weaknesses.

While TPLF and its cronies, by taping into some groups' esprit de corps, wage war at many fronts based on deceits, the majority of us buried our head in the sand, and preferred to remain silent. We think that it's unlike Ethiopian to talk about it. We remained in denial regarding the damage TPLF has done while we shied away from openly chat about it. This silent strategy is not helping the alternative democratic forces, which are trying their best to create unity in diversity.

Believe me, it was killing me as I was trying to convince Mamo that I wasn't biased by the identity of the individuals I mentioned in my book. It took courage for me to share this story online and in public. I'm aware that it may be a little bit uncomfortable to some of my readers, and also I don't know how my sharing of this story turns out. I took risk, and believed that I'd be treated fairly if in case my discourse in this commentary crossed the line.

In my humble opinion, I'm persuaded that we cannot just ignore addressing such a sensitive issue just because we think we are above it. We've to open up and discuss about it publicly. Let's deny TPLF its deadly weapon of divide and conquer. Let's dialogue! Let's listen! Let's know each other! Let's break the silence! Let's dispel the inaccurate stories the spying machine of TPLF disseminates. We can only achieve that if and only if we are bold, frank, and vulnerable.

It's time to come out in the open and say no to single stories of individuals and groups. Time to share as many great stories as possible. In this case, the proverbial- '*Silence is golden*'- hasn't benefited us. Only TPLF's menacing agendas continued flourishing. We should say enough is enough, break the silence, and dissipate TPLF made distorted single stories that divide, create suspicion, resentment, and lack of a united front in the fight against dictatorship.

For us to mend the relationship damages TPLF inflicted on our society, create reconciliation, bring harmony among ourselves, and solidify our unity, we need to engage in conversations among ourselves. Like Mamo, let's confront one another when we hear single stories that further separate us. In short, silence only benefits the ruling party that employs divide and conquer policy through single stories.

TPLF uses single stories for its own advantage

For its evil intention, the ruling party crafted single stories for the dominant ethnic groups in the country. For instance, TPLF created for the Amhara ethnic group a single story of a cruel master. To frighten people from other ethnic groups, TPLF's cadres and politicians constantly paint Amharas as power mongers, prideful, and egotistical. To help it create a damning image, TPLF picked some tragic incidents from the past ignoring so many great things people from this ethnic group have done to the country- the sacrifices and services they rendered. As Chimamanda Adichie said it well, *"The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."*

Once I had an uncomfortable conversation with someone who knew me while I was at AAU. We met at an event in downtown DC. During the lunch break, he greeted me and told me when and where we met. Before he got frustrated, he had tried to remind me the occasion. I couldn't remember the encounter for the life of me. That had happened to me so many times, and he was gracious. We decided to eat lunch together. We used the opportunity to talk about the event in progress. At one point in our conversation, we engaged in hot discussion concerning one of the positions of the speaker. He was a funny guy so you couldn't tell whether he was joking or serious. "You know what Assegid? I know you very well. You're a typical Amahara!!!" He thought I was a pure Amhara, and that was why I wasn't yielding. He didn't know my bloodline is a mix of Amharas (from Gonder and Northern Shewa, and maybe, from other regions since I'm still instigating and the list may continue), and Oromos. I asked him, while smiling to conceal my discomfort, why he reached that conclusion. He said, "Look at you, you're arrogant and prideful". He must have heard a single story regarding Amharas. I confessed that he has a point. I'd heard that too many times in the past. Yes, I may appear over confident, and sometimes argumentative.

What that fellow didn't understand was that my confidence exudes not because of the blood that runs in my veins. Arrogance for me is when someone inflates himself, and says things he doesn't have any clue. I'm self-aware and recognize both my strengths and shortcomings. I never thought for a second that I know everything. Rather, I go to school, study seriously, read tones of books, hangout with people smarter than I'm, research, think and reflect to grow on a consistent basis. Humility doesn't mean disowning who you are, refraining from sharing what you know, and renouncing what you have. Doing these things is called hypocrisy. Pride comes when who you're, what you have and know prevents you from learning from others and relating with people whom you think beneath you.

For your information, I'm aware of the delicate line that lies between being prideful and self-reliant. I may sometimes cross the line but, especially these days, I quickly recognize my stumbling and quickly get back inline. I also make sure not to open my mouth before I do my homework. I heed to the advice of one of my favorite motivational speakers Les Brown who frequently says, *"Once you open your mouth you tell the world who you are."* One thing I vowed longtime ago, however, was that I don't want to fake my appearance and style, and muzzle myself just so that I may appear humble. No one can able to tell someone's humility by looking at the way that person speaks, dresses, and carries him/herself. It takes reading someone's heart, and the last time I checked, no one has the ability to do so.

My preoccupation in life is serving others with my talent, and sharing what I know to others. I rather consider not fulfilling these obligations as a crime. Knowing that there're lots of people who need your service, knowledge, insights, and refraining from coming out in the open to serve is selfish and cowardice. Only cowards mask their unique and true identity to fit in. Only spineless people abstain from speaking their mind and sharing what they know for fear of making mistakes and then from being criticized. These kinds of people are the ones I call prideful, and you find such people in every ethnic group. They don't want their ego is brushed and therefore they hide in a close set in the name of humility, saying and doing nothing. I'm sharing these principles with you not to brag. Our people should be encouraged to seek their uniqueness, share what they know, and serve our community using their talent and gifting. Of course, while serving, we should remain life long learners, and if possible, get mentoring. There are out there people better and experienced than we are, let's strive to learn from the best while serving.

At any rate, my poor companion was brainwashed to reduce all Amharas into one single story. Okay, let's say that he was right- I'm not humble but rather arrogant, and overconfident. Is this a true story for millions of Amharas? NO! There are numerous humble Amaharas that I know of. I also know lots of prideful individuals from other ethnic groups.

Likewise, I heard and read single stories regarding Oromos. Among other things, they say, Oromos are secessionists. Really? Let's ignore our past. I personally have great Oromo friends who believe in unity. The problem here is that some of us who are pro unity are acting over zealous. We bought into a single story. We rush to conclude that any one who shows a little concern or question whether the unity we're envisioning may squash his/her dream of equality, is a separatist. In true democracy, why anyone seeks independence? If we're now fighting to bring true democracy, we shouldn't lose sleep over who is going to stay, and who leaves the future democratic union built on win-win relationship.

Like the rest of the ethnic groups in Ethiopia, I presume, the majority Oromos knows deep in their heart that unity is strength and power. They are the majority. It doesn't give any sense for them to seek separation from their brothers and sisters, as far as there is true democracy and mutual respect. Thus, let's stop this prejudice for once and for all.

I also heard many single stories about Tigrians. It's common to label Tigrians as racists, for lack of a better word. It's true that TPLF is hiding behind Tigrians. It won the hearts of many individuals from this ethnic group. By using fear, so many tricks, bribes, appeasements, forces, and manipulations, TPLF alienated Tigrians from the rest of Ethiopians. They succeeded to brainwash many to believe that they'll be wiped out from the face of Ethiopia if TPLF loses power. Nonetheless, there are many patriotic Tigrians who strongly detest TPLF and its cheap propagandas against other ethnic groups. These fellow Ethiopians didn't buy into the single stories TPLF repetitively tells to negatively paint and demonize other ethnic groups.

What I am saying is that we too- the alternative democratic forces from different camps shouldn't just buy into one single story of all Tigrians. Let's stop stereotyping. This only benefits TPLF. The more we ignore their multiple stories and misrepresent those Tigrians who are not part of the TPLF mafia minority circle, we are denying ourselves true Ethiopian partners. We need as many Tigrians, both elites and rank and file TPLF members, to join the struggle in freeing our motherland from a few Tigrian elites who are architects of the ethnic Apartheid state in Ethiopia.

In conclusion, using a single story is dangerous. It leads to stereotyping. It denies us unity of purpose. We cannot create synergy in the fight against dictatorship if we fall into distorted single stories about individuals, ethnic groups, and religions. It only contributes toward keeping the tyrants in power for many years to come. The more we tumble to single distorted stories, the more we delay our chance to enjoy freedom, democracy, justice, and the rule of law.

Enough talking. What can we do to change the situation in our favor? We can do so many things but let me take the initiative and put forward some suggestions, and look forward to hear your additions.

What can we do about it? Let's:

1. **Stop labeling.** Labeling had been there in our culture before the advent of TPLF except that it has been institutionalized, funded by the state, and in turn its magnitude has skyrocketed in the past more than 2 decades. This syndrome should be expelled from our culture if our desire is to live together in harmony and mutual respect. Soren Kierkegaard was quoted as saying, *"Once you label me, you negate me."* There is nothing we benefit as a nation from labeling one another except those who are now in power, whose job seems keep playing the negating game ☺ It's easier for our brain to put every one in a group into one basket, attach on it a label based on a single story. It's simpler to say all Oromos are like that; all Amharas are like that; all Gojames are like that; All Gonderes are like that; All Hararians are like that; all Eritreans are like that; all Tigrians are like that; all Muslims are like that; all Somalis are like that, and so on. Let's treat each member of an ethnic group individually based on their unique stories. Let's stop labeling.
2. **Promote diversity and inclusion.** Ethiopia is beautiful not because of her landscapes. The Military regime-Derge cheated us as if there is no place on earth closer to our sceneries. Many of us finally learned the truth. The world is filled with magnificent beautiful places, even more attractive than some of ours. Ethiopia is beautiful mainly because of its diverse people and its history. That is her uniqueness and competitive advantage. Unfortunately, since TPLF took power and adopted a faulty policy of divide and conquer, many Ethiopians have

fallen to this trick and constructed impenetrable walls to keep out people who aren't like them. More than ever in our history, we have reached to the point of forming community organizations, associations, and churches based on ethnic affiliations (even worst, based on regions/hometowns). I'm not blaming and belittling any one. Many fought TPLF's policies and avoided creating divisive walls for so long but finally they too gave up. They justified forming their own monotone groups to survive attacks and exclusions from other groups. Our diversity is our beauty and strength. We should be willing to embrace diversity, become inclusive. We should take the extra mile to listen multiple stories of diverse brothers and sisters, embrace, and own them as if they're ours.

3. **Unlearn the tricks we inherited from the master manipulator- TPLF.** I wish all community organizations, clubs, and political parties are true multinationals. It is a reality- I gave up. Now, more than ever, there are ethnic and hometown/region based organizations. That is fine as far as they don't endeavor to cover it up. What should be unacceptable is deceiving others. Unfortunately, some 'Ethiopian' organizations learned the trick of the master manipulator TPLF. We all know EPRD is a mask. The real power is in the hands of a few family members within TPLF. Some give their organization an Ethiopian name but, at the core, it is led and operated by a group from the same ethnic group or worst region. These organizations should unlearn this trick, and begin to be true to their names. Otherwise, sooner or later, people will find out. When that happens they lose their credibility, and no one trust and work with them any longer. Trust is key to build enduring relationships among our people and organizations. Without this foundation, nothing meaningful could be achieved. Management expert Stephen Covey emphasized, *"Trust is the glue of life. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships."* Therefore, those organizations hiding behind the name of Ethiopia while promoting tribalism should either give their organization its localized identity or live up to their Ethiopian name. Either way, they could play their genuine roles in creating a unified front based on our common interests. We can still embrace one another regardless of our differences. We can co-exist with our multiple distinctive stories as Ethiopians, and of course, if we stop manipulations, tricks, and fake identities that erode trust, which in turn destroys our relationships and the hope to create a unified front.
4. **Use community organizations' platforms in the fight against stereotyping.** The aforementioned suggestions can only become realities if community organizations embrace, nurture, and promote them. They should play a proactive role by proactively using their platforms to fight labeling and stereotyping. Our community organizations (community centers, mosques, churches, clubs, associations, etc.) should educate and empower our people to embrace diversity, and become inclusive.
5. **Use art in the fight against distorted single stories.** We have great artists. A few artists have been doing great so far toward bringing people together and promoting unity. We need more artists. They should produce more songs, poems, most importantly narrate stories that could bring us together than those that separate us.
6. **Engage in public discussions.** Our diaspora media such as TV and Radio Stations, and Discussion Forums should identify counterproductive single stories that have created disunion among our people, and produce programs by inviting diverse discussants to mitigate the impact of such destructive stories. There are some signs, these days, where some media outlets inviting people from diverse political parties and ethnic groups for discussion in the fight against tyranny, especially since the start of Oromo Protests. This should be taken to the next level. There should be forums and discussions among members of diverse ethnic groups (and hometowns/regions) about stereotyping. We need to talk heart-to-heart concerning the distorted single stories disseminated to discredit and demonize some ethnic groups openly and publicly. Silence only profits TPLF. Let's strategize on how we can dispel negative stories and build our country on strong foundation formed out of our beautiful, authentic, and positive multiple stories.
7. **Continue to write about it.** Bloggers, authors, and journalists should write commentaries, narrate stories, and share them on Diaspora websites. It is true that latest and burning news should be given priority to keep our people informed. Nonetheless, we should spare a fraction of that time and dedicate it to educate ourselves, learn one another's stories, and so on.
8. **Individually take responsibility.** If you have never done something individually to resist and defile labeling and stereotyping, wake up! If you haven't taken any action so far to contribute your share in the fight against tyranny, oppression, discrimination, divide and conquer, and so on, this is time. Do you want to see harmony,

peace, cooperation, and unity among our diverse people? If so, then, take responsibility. Wishing isn't enough. Mahatma Gandhi said, "***Be the change that you would like to see in the world.***" Don't wait until things change. The fight mustn't be left to a few. We all should be in it.

Please note that I'm not saying that the aforementioned suggestions alone could bring the holistic and lasting change we all desire. There're many other actions that should be at the center stage to defeat TPLF. The abovementioned and similar other tasks are ground works to weaken TPLF's propagandas that are aimed at dividing and defeating us. These duties, nonetheless, are very important in the long run, beyond changing the current regime. We cannot have that great post TPLF new Ethiopia we all dream unless we make the necessary changes beginning right now. Whomever we're going to choose as leaders of the new Ethiopia, what so ever glamorous development programs and policies we may adopt, regardless of establishing flawless democratic institutions, the transformation we aspire can only be achieved if and only if we the people from diverse ethnic groups have the right values. The latter are the ones that dictate the mindset, attitude, discipline, and commitment of our people, without which lasting and enduring change is unthinkable.

Bringing out our country from the misery she is in right now, and ushering us to a new era of freedom, peace, harmony, unity, and prosperity, requires societal level transformation, which takes years, if not decades. The good news is that, the ground works such as developing our people's awareness, capacity, reconfiguring our culture (by trimming those values that sabotage our advancement and by adopting those that accelerate our progress), and so on can begin now. We should enter into a sense of urgency. We shouldn't wait until the government in power changes. And in these article, I've suggested some of the efforts we should make to contribute our individual and collective responsibilities toward that end. I'm sure. There're other great and better ideas out there that could complement or even improve mine. These are just my two cents.