



**Nigeria**

## **Letter to a young african who wants to be a journalist**

Lagos, 1 December 2005

My young friend,

During a session on Peace Journalism during the conflict resolution training I attended at the Austrian Study Centre for Conflict Resolution in Schlaining, Austria in September 2003, Johan Galtung who has come to be regarded as "father" of peace studies, due to his carving out Peace as an area of study, listed about fifteen professions and institutions like restaurants, schools, banks, military, hospitals, sports, media etc, and asked the participants to strike out the one the world could do without. Even while other professions were being thrashed, journalism stood tall.

The reason is simple: the media offers itself as the lens through which the world could be best understood. It dissects every system and structure, and excavates buried facts. And the process of discharging its duties sometimes pitches the institution against those who are desperate to suppress the truth. Despite this, it still dwarfs its opponents. Hence the maxim, "The pen is mightier than the sword."

I grew up in a society where the pen has played a pivotal role in societal liberation, rejuvenation and transformation. Nigeria was once an enslaved society; thanks to the colonialists.

Those who wanted to overthrow the yolk of imperialism knew the importance of the media, and so, explored and employed it in their consistent fight against the imperialists and their collaborators. Even though they succeeded, putting the society in shape was another task that must be done and the pen came handy. It has been the same story in the military and post-military Nigeria, especially now that serious war is being waged against corruption and other foundations of societal debasement.

The wonderful role of this potent tool generated my interest and since my high school days, I had longed to be a journalist. And this I tried to do by joining press clubs and societies to get myself acquainted with the system. I was also active on University campus.

My joy knew no bound when I got my first appointment as a reporter in a new generation media establishment after graduation and I then promised not to let my friends, families and admirers down.

Little did I know that the media world is not a teacup affair. Indeed, it tasks the diligent. And News, is not what is picked on a platter of gold. News, serious news, is not easy to come by. Investigative journalism marks you out. You need to have the nose for it, persevere, and do serious digging if you must excel as a news hound.

For our landscape, there is neither permanent friend nor foe. Your friend today could be gunning for your head tomorrow.

For instance, Dele Giwa, the Editor-in-Chief of Newswatch (a Nigerian Magazine) who was assassinated sometimes in 1996 was touted to be close to the powers that be before he was killed allegedly by holders of state power, over his daring report, which they felt was putting their reputation and positions on the line. Perhaps you are aware of the drama of absurd going on in The Gambia under Yahya Jammeh.

But determination is the game. Every profession has its own challenges. I experienced some of these as a reporter of Tempo Magazine between 1996 and 1999, where I had to work as a guerrilla journalist in our efforts to combat military dictatorship and its attendant evils. Places like church, mosques markets halls, abandoned buildings, schools or coaching centers, street corners and so on became our meeting points, following the seizure of our office and the plot of the then head of state to wipe us out of existence through its security networks.

But despite this persecution, the military institution fell and the commendation went to the valiant pen.

There is the allure, the thrills and the joy that journalism offers which is not present in other places. May be, it is because I have not tried other professions. But quite a number of colleagues had had to rush back to their first love - journalism – after trying other places. Even though the salary might be nothing to write home about, the byline is your credit.

At times, great joys swell inside me when I see my stories being discussed by those who could not identify me, even though I was present in the environment. It has taken me to a lot of places within and outside the country.

It offers me the opportunity of meeting people –high and low - on daily basis and quite a number of my stories have compelled the holders of state power to redefine their policies. Though at times, I experience harassments by those who have seen me as a threat to their unprogressive activities. But so far it heralds the general good, I am contented. And I am always happy when I see media defendes like Reporters sans frontieres doing their best to secure for us, as ideal place to practice under the sun.

Friendly yours,

**Ayodele Ale**  
**Reporter, *The Saturday Punch***