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Tererai Trent
Helps Women
Empower Themselves

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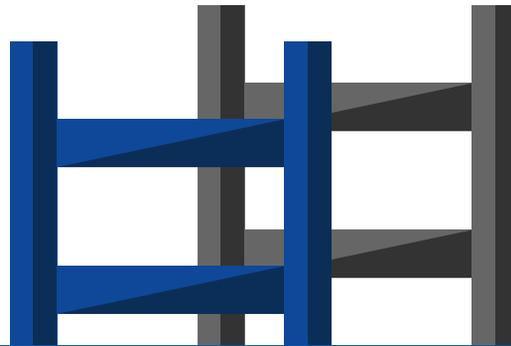
When **Tererai Trent, Ph.D.**, was growing up in rural Rhodesia during a war that would liberate Zimbabwe, poverty kept girls out of school. Undeterred, Trent dreamed of getting an education and taught herself to read and write from her brother's schoolbooks. She was permitted to attend school briefly before her marriage at an early age. Trent was barely 14 when she had her first child. However, in her early 20s, she met an aid worker who inspired her to work toward her dream. Ten years later, she began her undergraduate studies in the United States. After earning her Ph.D. in 2009, Trent received \$1.5 million from Oprah Winfrey to build a school in her village. She recently talked to *Unity Magazine* editor **Katy Koontz** about her journey of empowerment and how she now helps others to empower themselves.



Listening in With ...
Tererai Trent

From Believing

to ACHIEVING



Katy Koontz: As a young girl, if someone had told you what your future would bring, would you have believed it?

Tererai Trent: I don't think so. The life that I was living, in abject poverty, can be very difficult, very demeaning, and it can take away your self-esteem. But in my heart I always knew I needed a different life.

KK: How did meeting Jo Luck from Heifer International spark that change?

TT: Before Jo Luck visited our village in 1989 to talk to the women about our dreams, I had no idea I had a voice. She inspired me to believe in myself, creating an environment for me to articulate what I felt deep down inside. I remember the other women in the group talking about the food insecurity in their households. Their dreams were educating their children and getting uniforms, but I was quiet.

Jo looked at me and said, "Young woman, why are you quiet?" I didn't know what to say, so I just stayed silent. She then nodded at me and said, "I'm waiting."

"I want an education," I started.

"What kind of an education?"

she asked.

"I want to get an undergraduate degree, a master's, and a Ph.D.," I told her. I became a chatterbox and couldn't stop. She had no idea that I didn't have a high school diploma, or that I was living in an abusive relationship.

"My organization has seen many women become empowered, able to educate their children after our intervention," she told me, "and I know if you believe in your dreams, they are achievable."

Now I have someone who believes in me, I thought. Now the sky is the limit!

The other women were thinking, *What is your husband going to say?* I no longer cared because I was so happy—I had finally expressed the dream in my heart.

KK: So you finally felt permission to have those dreams, plus the determination not to allow anyone to hold you back.

TT: Yes. I was always a stubborn girl, and even now, when someone says "no" to me, they are just putting fire in me. I'll respond, "It's going to be done, and I'll do it."

KK: Isn't it interesting that a woman would be described as stubborn when a man under the same circumstances would be considered ambitious?

TT: It's very true. That's the way society has silenced and demeaned women.

KK: Your mother was also influential, even though she, too, was married very young. How did she encourage you?

TT: She was my steadfast compass and a central figure in my life. Despite her own struggles, she always compelled

me toward something greater than I was at the time. She encouraged me to dream and nurtured my inner reserves with true passion until I achieved the resilience I needed to save my own children. It was this same maternal gift that enabled me to save myself.

"Write your dreams down and bury them in a can," she told me, "and if you truly believe in these dreams and you work hard, you will achieve them." So I wrote them down, but then she added something so profound: "Your dreams will have greater meaning when they are tied to the betterment of your community, to the greater good." So I added that when I was finished with my education, I wanted to return and improve the lives of women and girls. I didn't want them to go through what I had gone through—being married very young and having three kids by the age of 18. It was a terrible life.

KK: Did something happen in your mother's life that unfolded that truth for her?

TT: My mother had this wisdom, which I also saw in my grandmother. When I married, I was exchanged for a cow as a bride price, a common practice in southern Africa then. My mother would challenge that concept, saying, "The bride price is designed to nurture relationships and our culture, but it isn't working. Without education and their own sources of income, our women are subject to abuse. They must

rely heavily on a man's income and they never gain dignity, so the next generation of girls repeats the cycle."

Even my grandmother thought the exchange was demeaning. She would say, "God was a woman up until men changed that. If God was still a woman, I don't think God would want us to live in poverty."

KK: What did she mean by "until men changed that"?

TT: She would say before the missionaries came to Africa that women were the leaders. They were respected for their ability to cure diseases and deliver babies, and they were the psychologists of the community. When the white man

is still there, deep down inside. It's just been silenced.

KK: How did your father react to all of this?

TT: We are *all* victims of our environment—my father got his thinking from his own father, and his father got it from *his* own father. This was just a way of life shaped by poverty, ignorance, and colonial oppression. My *aha!* moment came when my father was very encouraging about my plans to come to America. "I didn't know that girls could actually achieve their own dreams," he told me. "I'm so proud of you."

Now, when I go to the village, men will come up to me holding

KK: I love the fact that people didn't tell you to stay in your place.

TT: It helped when Oprah came to the community. They realized there must be something in women that society fails to see. Our community began to realize that they knew of no man who migrated elsewhere and came back with the gift of education. Statistics show that when you invest in women, they're more likely to return and invest in their community. Now they are seeing that and wondering, *If we educate more girls and have more Tererai in our community, what would our world be like?*

KK: Your nonprofit organization, Tererai Trent International, builds

My mother would always talk about this invisible ladder that we are all climbing together.

came with his Bible, the missionaries told us that women's sexuality was bad and women should abide by the rules of men. Suddenly, women were marginalized. They became the puppets for men.

KK: It sounds like this very independent-thinking streak was a vital part of your matrilineal line. That's impressive.

TT: We assume when people are vulnerable and living in poverty for so much of their lives that they are voiceless victims who cannot even think. In reality, they can be very smart, and they can also be part of the solution if they have an opportunity to do so. We need to help women empower themselves and get their voices back. The voice

their 8-year-old daughters, saying, "Tererai, she should be just like you."

KK: Wow!

TT: My mother encouraged me to reject the destructive norms that demean women and to prevent my children from inheriting these generational curses. As I reflected on this, I realized that all along we've been saying these traditions are part of the culture. This is *not* our culture—it's ignorance that leads to demeaning women. When you bring education, when you bring new role models to communities, then both men and women are transformed and start emulating these new role models. After all, everyone loves their children. No one really wants their children to suffer.

schools in Zimbabwe. How many schools has it built so far?

TT: We now have 11 public schools, including both primary and high schools, educating 6,000 students. One of the primary schools is Matau, my childhood school, which was demolished and completely rebuilt in 2014. In its first 60 years, no child from Matau went to university until me. Now we have a child going to the University of Zimbabwe, which is like our small Harvard, and another child studying medicine in Algeria. We also have many kids going to other colleges.

KK: Are the schools just for local students in that region?

TT: Matau has become one of the largest schools in the whole district

because of our success, so some parents from other areas are sending their children there. Some students walk eight to 10 miles each way to attend this school. They wake up at 4 a.m. and start walking. It takes them up to three hours to get there. Then after six hours, they walk back home, arriving very late and often going to bed without anything to eat.

KK: What happens after all these children, especially the girls, are educated? Can they get jobs in their villages, or do they have to leave?

TT: That's always been one of our frustrations—when these kids are finished, what happens? And now that they're going to universities, who pays the tuition? The major challenge in providing universal, quality education is the parents' unemployment. Of the 67 percent of people living in rural Zimbabwe, 52 percent are poor women, including mothers and grandmothers of our students. Without economically empowering these women, we can't achieve our mission. While our prior funding from Oprah Winfrey addressed the quality of education, if we don't address the empowerment of women, we'll reverse our gains. When more women become economically empowered, more children—particularly girls—will head to universities and achieve the life they deserve. We want our foundation to have a business model to create jobs in the community.

Currently, we're working on building an artisan center where women can get jewelry and beadwork training. As they earn more income, they can become proud sponsors of their local school and help grow the larger community. When students graduate, some of them can apprentice as artisans at the center and learn a trade.

KK: Are you doing anything else to specifically help the girls?

TT: Many girls don't come to school when they have their periods because they don't have sanitary pads. When I was young, we would use newspapers or dirty clothes. We don't want our kids doing that. That's one reason I'm so busy trying to build this artisan center so we can create enough money to have more sanitary pads in schools. We could also have more health workers coming to talk with girls about their health, pregnancy, and all these things.

KK: I would imagine you'd have to also make social and cultural changes in society before educating girls is going to have a lasting impact. As you said, you have to change the way people look at things, right?

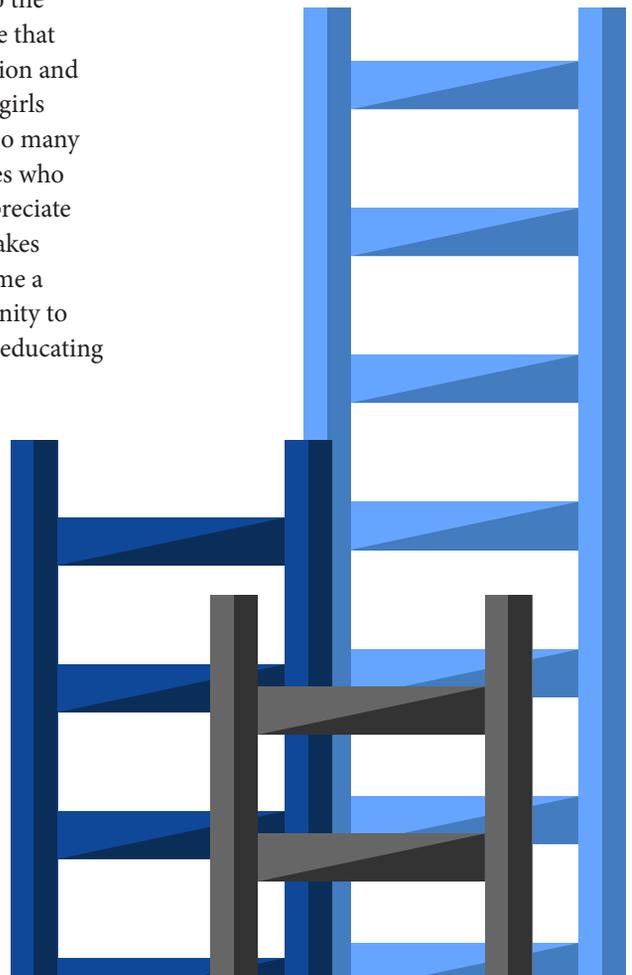
TT: Because I grew up in this community, they know everything about me. I get this education, and then I bring Oprah to the community. Then they see that my life is all about education and empowering women and girls without excluding boys. So many men in other communities who might have resistance appreciate what I'm doing, which makes it easier. My life has become a testimony for the community to realize the importance of educating women and girls. There is an admiration in the community because I get involved in everything they're doing. I even get respect from the chiefs, which gives me an opportunity to talk about other women, asking

why they can't be a part of this movement?

KK: What you just described is a community changing from the inside, wanting to evolve its own thinking rather than being told what to think or do. That's always more empowering—and more successful.

TT: Exactly! We want ownership in the change. Otherwise, we're a silent audience. I saw that when I was growing up in the '60s and '70s. An organization would build a community dam and tell us, "This is where you can get water." After they left, the community wouldn't take care of that dam, but when you create a water well *with* a community, they feel it's theirs, and they protect it. That's how you inspire change. You don't go and preach to someone to change because then they feel inferior. What I do is different. I value our culture, and I get involved in the rituals. When

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villagers see me, they see part of themselves in me and realize that we can *all* transform.

KK: Your new book, *The Awakened Woman: Remembering & Reigniting Our Sacred Dreams*, will be published this fall. What's it about?

TT: I interviewed women all over the world about awakening their forgotten dreams. We have a tendency to shelve our dreams so we can help our children pursue theirs or so we can take care of our husbands. These women's dreams are not only personal, they also impact the greater good. That kind of dreaming is sacred because it comes from our greatest desire to right the wrongs that women experience in society and the need to heal while recreating our world for the better.

KK: If we are all truly one, then we can't be fulfilled unless we're

contributing to the whole, wouldn't you agree?

TT: That's true. I always talk about what we have learned from the Native Americans—that we are all connected and we need each other to survive. Our survival is bound together with the thread of love.

My mother would always talk about this invisible ladder that we are all climbing together. We need the people who are on the higher rungs to help pull up the people on the lower rungs. We also need the people on the lower rungs, so when those on the upper rungs fall, they can embrace them

and say, "We can climb together." It's a reciprocal relationship. I truly believe we are here for each other.

KK: Is that why you attached the term *sacred* to these dreams?

TT: Yes, because of the long invisible ladder that we are all climbing. When you are in agreement with that invisible ladder, you become sacred. You are on a sacred journey to help one another. 🌍

