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Some Thoughts on a Teacher, Father Figure, and Mentor

Nwando Achebe

I have often been asked why I made the transition from Theater Arts to History and as many times as I have been asked that question my answer has always remained the same, Dr. Boniface Obichere. From the time that I was a little girl, I always enjoyed the performance arts—specifically theater, music and dance; so much so that I was at various times a member of my primary school band, the church choir and young adult's opera in Nigeria. Majoring in Theater Arts at the college level was therefore a natural progression—a continuation of my calling.

History on the other hand, was a totally different story. I cannot remember a time when I enjoyed history, not as a youngster attending the University Primary School in Nsukka, Nigeria, nor as a teenager at The University Secondary School in Nsukka some years later. As a college student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, History again was a much dreaded subject. I remember sitting at the back of my classrooms and catching up on all of my letter writing.

It was therefore with great trepidation that I entered Professor Obichere's UCLA History class at the beginning of my graduate studies during the fall quarter of 1992. Were the truth to be known, I actually took Boniface Obichere's class as a favor to my dad, who recommended his as a course that I should take. The other reason that I took it was because the only Africanist filmmaker at UCLA was on sabbatical and consequently I would be unable to take any film courses until he came back. The class that I walked into that cool Fall morning was entitled "Africa During the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade." Even though it was 10 long years ago, I remember it as though it were yesterday. From the very first moment that I stepped into his class, Professor Obichere captivated me in a way that no other professor had ever done. There he was, standing in front of this huge auditorium and telling a story—the story of the African people, my people—a story which I could not only relate to, but one in which I was actually one of the actors. That encounter was the beginning of my journey—a journey that is 10 years in the making and will continue until the day that I die—this quest to learn, uncover and docu-

ment the history of my people. I have Professor Obichere to thank for laying the foundation for what has become a passionate love affair with African history.

The relationship between teacher and student blossomed with the passing of years. Professor Obichere would become more than a professor to me. He was someone that I could talk to about almost anything. He was there to listen to my frustrations and my joys. He was much like a "father" to many of us.

Therefore in the winter of 1997, when I stood pregnant with child in the UCLA Fowler to honor my teacher, my mentor, my friend, it seemed only fitting that I read in our shared mother tongue, a poem which my father, Chinua Achebe, had originally written for the fallen Nigerian poet, Chris Okigbo; a poem which Professor Obichere had incidentally loved.

It is with a bittersweet reminiscence that I invite you all to sit back and enjoy the powerful words spoken in tribute to the great man and teacher Professor Boniface Obichere.