

## The Call that Changed My Life – Sample Chapter

I was born into a tiny village with the big name of Mpintimpi. The small settlement is situated about 150 kilometres to the north of Accra, Ghana's capital city. Strangers to our village had such difficulty pronouncing the word Mpintimpi that for a while the residents seriously considered renaming the village. That is yet to happen!

According to my mother I was born in the small rectangular wooden structure that served as the family bathroom. It measured about one metre in length and eighty centimetres in width. The wooden wall rose to about a metre and half above ground level. At the top the structure was open to the free tropical skies. The floor was not cemented but covered with fine gravel.

When I compare the surroundings and the circumstances of my birth to the first delivery I was privileged to witness myself, I can only be amazed! The delivery I witnessed happened during my early years in medical school.

The district hospital at Neustadt am Ruebenberge, a small town a few kilometres away from the northern German city Hannover, where I was doing my elective, was equipped with the latest equipments in the field of Gynaecology and Obstetrics.

Immediately the eyes of the baby girl, christened Ina by her mother, saw the light of day, the midwife and the obstetrician on duty took pains to check meticulously whether all was well with the new arrival to our troubled planet. And as if that wasn't enough, a few minutes later they invited the paediatrician on the adjacent ward to check her as well!

I could only dream of the privilege Ina enjoyed at birth! There was no specialist around to attend to mother as she went into labour. She had to bear all the pain with no medication available to minimise her suffering.

When I finally arrived in the world, I took my first breath and screamed in protest for having been forced to leave the comfortable conditions prevailing in mother's womb for the prevailing tropical heat of Africa! No specialist was around to examine me to determine whether all was well with me—whether my heart was sound; whether my nervous system was in order; whether the channel through which air passed from outside to my lungs was completely open; whether the tube through which food and fluid passed on their way to my stomach was not blocked along the way! No one checked me for any deformity. In line with the Twi proverb 'God drives away the disturbing flies from the beast deprived of a tail', my parents looked to Providence to take care of their tiny new arrival to the world.

That is not to say that mother wasn't attended to by anyone.

Papa Osei, the village 'doctor', diligently directed affairs. Papa Osei—what a person he was! He never received any formal education. He had neither an idea of human anatomy nor of pathology. Terms like physiology, biochemistry, pharmacology sounded like Latin in his ears.

Yet he dutifully and meticulously went about practising his art of healing—from the common cold to severe malaria; from ordinary headache to migraine; from menstrual pain to the inability of a woman to bear children, Papa Osei was the first person residents of the village contacted for help. In time his name spread far beyond the boundaries of our small village as the sick travelled many kilometres to consult him.

The villagers who consulted him hoped and prayed that he would find solutions to their problems. They hoped to be spared the need to travel to Nkawkaw,

a town located about thirty kilometres away. That was where the next hospital was located.

Others chose to bypass Nkawkaw and travel about twenty kilometres further, to Atobie. The reason they gave for this was that the latter generally charged lower fees as compared to the former.

Taking the sick to hospital was something the villagers did as a last resort, not only on financial grounds. Even if one were financially in a position to do so, the means of transportation could bring further difficulties. The village happened to be located on a road linking two district capitals. Every morning about half a dozen vehicles travelling in both directions passed by. Often there were no seats or only a couple of seats left by the time they got to the village.

After the 'morning rush-hour' hardly any more vehicles passed by until late in the evening. That was the time when the vehicles that passed in the morning were returning from their destinations.

Even in this the people at Mpintimpi were somewhat fortunate, for elsewhere there were villages that had no roads linking them. Those villagers had to carry their sick on makeshift stretchers to the next available road to catch the next vehicle which may or may not arrive that day!

There was a third factor in the calculation. The villagers were small-scale farmers. They grew what they ate and ate what they grew. Accompanying the sick to hospital could cost them a whole day's work on their farms. They could not boast of any government agency that would compensate for the loss.

My arrival on this planet did not affect any existing statistics. Why not? The answer is simple. My birth, like many others that occur in rural areas of Ghana (the same could be said about many parts of the developing world) was not registered. Needless to say, no one issued my parents with any birth certificate. Without any official document at hand, my date and place of birth went through several alterations, depending on who was filling a form on my behalf at a particular time.

The fact that I did not possess a birth certificate was not an issue until I arrived in Germany. All of a sudden, issues like date of birth, birthday celebrations, birth certificates and so forth assumed a different level of importance! I had no choice but to instruct my brothers to help get me a birth certificate.

Even before I had the time to familiarize myself with the planet I had elected to visit, something happened to threaten to cut short my stay here. I was barely eight months old at the time. As any child born into the harsh environment I have described will tell you, right from the word go we were exposed to all kinds bacteria, viruses, parasites—too numerous and too varied to list here. They could be found in abundance in the water our parents gave us to drink; there were hordes of them in the atmosphere waiting for their chance to attack through any openings in the skin, minute or large or both; and then there were the innumerable specimens that sought entry into our bodies by means of the very air we breathed!

As if these enemies were not enough, the ubiquitous mosquitoes also introduced deadly plasmodium parasites en masse into our bloodstream.

I did quite well in the initial stages warding off one onslaught of germ attack after the other—but on one occasion the microscopic soldiers defending me succumbed to a horde made of millions of bacteria which attacked me from the left side of my neck! This initially resulted in a small boil. In time the swelling increased in size. Ultimately, not only did it threaten to choke me, it also threatened to poison my whole body system as it kept on pouring trillions upon trillions

of bacteria into my bloodstream.

There is a common belief that persists to this day in my culture to the effect that handling boils is not the speciality of conventional medicine! Mother and father decided therefore to resort to traditional medicine. Nevertheless, this showed no sign of being capable of managing the situation, for the boil continued to grow and grow in size. The little me was dying!

‘Why didn’t your parents use a razor blade, for example, to cut the boil open to allow the pus to empty?’ someone might ask.

Good advise, friend! Don’t afford blame to them, though, for not having had the courage to do so. Indeed, one can only applaud them—considering what those two simple farmers could achieve in life with the scant resources at their disposal! Hats off to them!

This time round, however, Papa Osei was at his wit’s end in his attempts to help me.

Just before all involved in the fight were close to throwing in the towel, someone directed my parents to a traditional healer at Afosu, a comparatively larger settlement about six kilometres to the south of Mpintimpi. My parents hurried to the traditional healer, mother bearing me tenderly in her arms.

‘Very serious, very serious!’ the healer shook his head as soon as he saw me.

‘The next few hours will decide whether your little child will survive or not.’

Imagine the effect of his words on my despairing parents! A few minutes later he left for the woods. He returned after a while with some herbs in a small bag. He pounded these into a paste and applied it to the boil.

In the meantime I could hardly breathe and the battle was going terribly against me. The three adults watching my struggle with death could hardly suppress their tears.

Then came the turning point! All of a sudden, as if an invisible hand had used an invisible instrument to cut it open, the boil literally exploded!

During mother’s lifetime she always had difficulty holding back her tears whenever she came to this point in the narration. According to her, so much pus issued from the boil that for a while it looked as I would drown in it!

And so—praise the Lord!—I was soon on the way to recovery.