

# Chapter 3

## Scrounge in My Executive Lounge

### 3.1 Dear Dr. Schwab, Queen of Jordan

Professor Klaus Schwab  
Founder & Executive Chairman  
World Economic Forum

&

Queen Rania of Jordan  
Chair of the Selection Committee  
Young Global Leaders 2007

Binyavanga Wainaina

GR(g)1; HW(g)1; PA(f)2;  
PA(q)1; SH(f)2; SH(i)1; SH(s)4;  
TH(d)3; TH(d)32

Dear Mr. Schwab, Queen Jordan,

I received your nomination letter over a week ago, and have been, until today, at a loss as to what to do with it.

Some things were immediately clear to me from the letter and from the website [www.younggloballeaders.org](http://www.younggloballeaders.org): the quality of the letter's paper; the gigantic networks of spectacular résumés on offer; the princes, the princesses; the beauty queens and violinists; the presidents; the iconic athletes; Hollywood comedians; the artists; the various savers of various troubled societies.

It was also immediately clear to me that the reasons given for our coming together were vague. They felt flat and meaningless. After much time on your website, and after reviewing the documents you sent, I remained disinterested and confused about the things we are all meant to do together.

For instance, your letter said that we will all 'engage in the 2030 initiative as well as related project work.'

Why would I troop off to China to participate in something so under-detailed and unexplained?

I assume that most, like me, are tempted to go anyway because we will get to be 'validated' and glow with the kind of self-congratulation that can only be bestowed by very globally visible and significant people. And we are also tempted to go and talk to spectacularly bright and accomplished people – our 'peers'. We will achieve Global Institutional Credibility for our work, as we have been anointed by an institution that many countries and presidents bow down to.

These are not bad things at all.

The problem here is that I am a writer. And although, like many, I go to sleep at night fantasising about fame, fortune, and credibility, the thing that is most valuable in my trade is to try, all the time, to keep myself loose, independent and creative. To avoid dogma. To avoid things that give me too much certainty – about one’s place in the world; about the world; about the perpetual shifting nature of characters; and their interaction with each other; and with space and time.

It would be an act of great fraudulence for me to accept the trite idea that I am ‘going to significantly impact world affairs’.

That little phrase is a kiss of death for any writer. It seems to me that what this society of peers will inevitably do are things that will further their fame and fortune. It is not clear to me at all, what good this will do to ‘the future’, ‘the world’ or our own work.

I have come to understand that dizzying trajectories are available to some people who are skilled and talented, and charismatic; and also to many who are none of these things.

But – they all have to rearrange their life’s work around one idea: ambition. An ambition that is self-fulfilling; that rides on its own steam, fuelled by hype, chance, global media, prizes and the like. Many happily take this course. I have imbibed eagerly – and cannot be sanctimonious about it. I find though, that this new offer leaves me too discomfited to succumb.

Many people are able to produce their finest works while under the influence of ambition and an upward trajectory. Most people, even those who have shown spectacular abilities very early, have eventually risen on hot air and mediocrity. In fact, many have put aside their talents – which are chaotic and contradictory – to become mediocre, in order to receive sustained fame and ever-expanding fortune. The marketplace of ‘hype’ and ‘spin’ likes simple, repeatable things.

My father, Job Wainaina, is a man of grace and honour. And a man of achievement and ambition and duty. He has spent his life building an industry, and making it useful and durable. He has never once, to my knowledge, put aside his duty and his doubts when offered access to the hot jets of upward air that serve no clear purpose, except to provide power and influence.

Others who did come close to destroying our country – thinking they had the superhuman ability to manage power for power’s sake, and sometimes hoping they could ‘use it for good’. They lacked perspective; they lacked the ability to control their power, for it was only at the service of its own growth.

It is with genuine regret, and much relief that I decline your invitation.

Yours Sincerely,

Binyavanga Wainaina