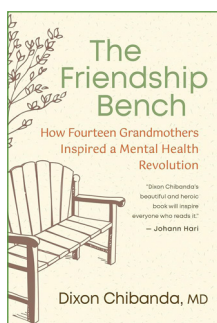




Opening our minds:

An alternative way of responding to personal and collective despair



*A review of The Friendship Bench:
How fourteen grandmothers inspired
a mental health revolution
by Dixon Chibanda*

Reviewed by David Denborough

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Abstract

David Denborough reviews Dixon Chibanda's (2025) book, *The Friendship Bench: How fourteen grandmothers inspired a mental health revolution*. New World Library. 240 pp. ISBN 978-1-95583-102-4 (print); 978-1-95583-103-1 (ebook); 978-1-95583-117-8 (audio).

Key words: *Friendship Bench; Dixon Chibanda; Zimbabwe; Africa; decolonizing; local knowledge; peer; book; review; narrative therapy; narrative practice*

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Author pronouns: All pronouns welcome

Picture this. It's a dry, warm winter's day in Zimbabwe. We are driving across dirt roads under big blue skies to the relatively new urban settlement of Hopley.¹ The poverty is striking. Only after I return to Australia do I learn that Hopley was established by the Government of Zimbabwe 20 years ago following Operation Murambatsvina², which is a Shona phrase meaning "remove filth".

The effects of Operation Murambatsvina are described by local psychiatrist Dixon Chibanda like this:

The siege lasted just a few months, but the damage was done: by the time Murambatsvina was over, seven hundred thousand people were homeless, and an estimated two million had been psychologically impacted ... We had been plunged collectively into a national crisis, and the only way out was through. (Chibanda, 2025, p. 30)

Twenty years ago, Dixon Chibanda found his way through in collaboration with 14 grandmothers and initially one Friendship Bench where those in despair could meet with a volunteer grandmother as an alternative to mainstream mental health responses. There are now Friendship Benches in communities across Zimbabwe (and beyond).

When we arrived in Hopley, we were greeted in song by two grandmothers, one grandfather and three local residents whose lives have been quietly, but significantly, transformed through their meetings on Friendship Benches.

One local resident described how she was suicidal before the grandmother sitting next to her "closed the grave I had dug for myself". This is a phrase I think I will always remember.

As we sat together in Hopley, I had a copy of Dixon Chibanda's new book in my satchel: *The Friendship Bench: How fourteen grandmothers inspired a mental health revolution*. When our meeting drew to a close, I asked if our hosts would each sign this newly published book and they kindly obliged. Later that day, when Cheryl White and I met with Dixon Chibanda at the new Friendship Bench Hub³ in Harare, he added his signature. Looking now at these seven signatures, they seem a fitting symbol of significant collaborations between a psychiatrist and a local community. It's the accounts of these collaborations that are most moving to me in this book. In particular, how Dixon Chibanda has carefully and honourably acknowledged

the contributions of the initial 14 grandmothers in the development of what is a unique approach.

Sometimes, a thin version of the Friendship Bench story is told, in which it's said that the grandmothers were *taught* Western cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and that this is what they then *deliver* on the Friendship Benches. But this book tells a much richer and more interesting story.

It describes how Dixon Chibanda, in collaboration with a collective of local Indigenous knowledge holders (grandmothers), collaboratively developed and articulated a local response to social suffering. It was Grandmother Jack who declared "Our people have always used the outdoors to share stories and resolve conflict" (p. 46) which led to the idea of outdoor benches. And it was the grandmothers who decided that the benches would not be called "Mental Health Benches" but instead "Friendship Benches". It was Grandmother Hwiza who emphasised the significance of song and dance in their approach, and Grandmother Chinhoyi who refused to work with material that was not written in the local Shona language: "Emotional problems are best said in your own language" (p. 51).

The collective of local Indigenous knowledge holders (grandmothers) did not always agree with each other, but through spirited discussions they created "a philosophy of care" (p. 113) and in careful and respectful collaboration with Dixon Chibanda developed their own concepts to describe their approach to healing. Within this tender-hearted book, it's possible to read about their three-part healing process, which Grandmother Jack describes:

The three most relevant steps that help us to address these issues are *kuvhura pfungwa* [opening the mind], *kusimudzira* [to uplift], and *kusimbisa* [to strengthen]. These are the three most important pillars of the therapy we provide on the bench! (p. 67)

Initially, this process involves a volunteer grandmother meeting a person at one of the Friendship Benches and receiving and responding to their stories of suffering. The grandmothers (and now some grandfathers) "immerse themselves" in people's stories (isn't that a beautiful concept!) and as Grandmother Kusi describes, they use the person's own language "to give them hope" (p. 108). This includes listening to and honouring the stories brought to the grandmothers, including the local idioms used to convey and share suffering such as "I have a painful heart" or "my spirit has abandoned me"

(p. 70) or *kufungisisa* (meaning over-thinking). And as Grandmother Kusi describes, this process involves “making people feel respected and understood, regardless of their money or status of the problems they bring to the bench” (p. 54).

Significantly, the process also involves joining people together in peer support/action groups called Circle Kubatana Tose (meaning “holding hands together” in Shona), which then spark and sustain income-generating projects.

It's an approach that involves personal, emotional, social *and* economic empowerment, and it's one that has now sparked the imagination of many people. These days, the Friendship Bench team receive many visitors. Knowing this, we thought we'd better come prepared with a song to offer in return. If you have ever been to Zimbabwe, you might be familiar with Zimbabweans' exquisite harmonic singing skills. It's a somewhat intimidating place to sing! Luckily, the folks in Hopley were gracious and kind and perhaps a little surprised that the Australians had brought a song.

To the grandmothers of The Friendship Bench

We've come from across the seas
To the Friendship Bench and CKT
[Circle Kubatana Tose]
We've heard the legend of Gogo Jack
So we've travelled a long way down this track

Kuvhura pfungwa
Kusimudzira
Kusimbisa

You're opening our minds
You're opening our minds

Zimbabwe is a special place and one that has known, and still knows, great suffering. All the grandmothers involved in the creation of the Friendship Bench approach had tended to family members dying of HIV/AIDS. Around the same time as Operation Murambatsvina, the Tree of Life narrative approach⁴ was developed in response to children in Matabeleland whose families had been devastated by HIV/AIDS (see Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006). Dixon Chibanda's book is tender and poignant as he writes his own experiences of heartbreak and friendship into the story. He evocatively describes how the Friendship Bench approach was “bootstrapped from scarce resources and a broken heart” (p. 134).

Dixon Chibanda has wider dreams now, of contributing to de-medicalising responses to mental health in other countries and contexts (the Friendship Bench approach is now being engaged with in a number of countries). He is also looking to generate forms of research, through the African Mental Health Research Initiative, that can explore people's experiences of wellbeing in local African cultural terms. This is including efforts to create a “Hope index”. If such an index already existed, it would have been able to measure a marked increase in my sense of hope after our visit!

It seems appropriate to return to the words of the grandmothers and grandfather whom we met in Hopley. When we asked them if they would like to send a message to grandmothers in Australia who might be thinking of establishing a similar Friendship Bench project, here were their responses:

One grandmother said, “This job requires you to be a confidential person, to know that the stories shared on the bench are not to be shared with anyone else. You also have to be someone who is empathic, and to be someone who is very good at listening. To do the job well requires more listening, less talking. Sometimes you will come across tough stories, and this requires you to be a strong person. But you shouldn't be a person who is judgemental or who advises people what to do. We do not offer advice but assist people to come up with their own solutions. This is a beautiful job. It's very enjoyable. And we need sometimes to be humble.”

A second grandmother said, “We wish we could have some exchange visits with grandmothers in Australia and other places! We could learn from each other and then learn to use all the different methods that grandmothers from different cultures are creating.”

And the grandfather said, “To the male counsellors, it's important to know that most men do not open up. They are shy to open up. But men are also suffering, and too often they are suffering alone. They do not talk about it. As men, please be open to share problems so that we can find solutions together.”

Many communities in different parts of the world are struggling with problems related to mental health, and the medicalising of suffering seems to be making things much worse rather than better. The grandmothers of the Friendship Bench and Dixon Chibanda have a different approach to share. Theirs is a story of honouring and articulating healing ways from Indigenous knowledge holders. It's also a story of turning to community members rather than professionals to receive personal

stories of suffering and then link these stories to collectives of peer support and economic action. There is also a story of people in their elder years, not retiring, but instead continuing to offer so much to the younger generations.

I am left with this poignant image:

Often, I'd see a grandmother slowly trudging, with measured steps and absolute determination to her bench – usually with the help of a grandchild, who would return a few hours later to walk her home. (p. 172)

A number of the initial grandmothers have passed on now, but through this beautiful book by Dixon Chibanda, their knowledge and stories and contributions will be forever known.

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Notes

- ¹ Hopley is also known as Hopley Farm Settlement. To read more about its history and living conditions, see Abraham R. Matamanda (2020).
- ² To read more about Operation Murambatsvina and its effects, see Potts (2006).
- ³ To learn more about the Friendship Bench Hub and organisation, please see their website: <https://www.friendshipbench.org/>
- ⁴ To learn more about the Tree of Life Narrative Approach, see: www.dulwichcentre.com.au/tree-of-life

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