

THE BOY WHO HARNESSSED THE WIND

WILLIAM KAMKWAMBA AND BRYAN MEALER

Biography

William Kamkwamba's biography is thoroughly covered in *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. It is also the subject of a documentary called *William and the Windmill*. This link is to a trailer for the documentary (six minutes) that describes his early life and achievements. It includes narrative by William and footage of the village where he grew up.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arD374Mfk4w>.

Students may be interested to learn that today William is a student at Dartmouth College. He is majoring in environmental studies and minoring in engineering. He is slated to graduate in 2014. At Dartmouth he has been involved with the Dartmouth Humanitarian Engineering Program, a group of students who help communities in need through engineering projects. After graduating, Kamkwamba intends to return to his village, Wimbe, and put his engineering skills to use by creating energy resources for his village. Additional information can be found in this interview:

<http://now.dartmouth.edu/2012/01/video-a-conversation-with-william-kamkwamba-14>.

William was born August 5, 1987. He is 26 years old.

Bryan Mealer was born in Odessa, Texas. He graduated from the University of Texas in Austin. He has written three books including *The Boy who Harnessed the Wind* (with William Kamkwamba); *All Things Must Fight To Live* about the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo; and *Muck City: Winning and Losing in Football's Forgotten Town*. Mealer chronicled the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 2003-2007 as the Associated Press and *Harper's* staff correspondent. He traveled the country by bicycle, foot, train, and barge to cover the war.

This link is to a review of his book *All Things Must Fight to Live*: <http://www.csmonitor.com/Books/Book-Reviews/2008/0809/all-things-must-fight-to-live>.

In 2012 Mealer and Kamkwamba also released a children's book version of *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* by the same name.

Country Information



Land Area: 118,484 sq km (About the size of Pennsylvania)

Population: 16,777,547 (a little less than Florida based on the 2000 census)

- Ranks among the world's most densely populated and least developed countries.

Annual Per Capita Income:

- \$900 (GDP per capita).
- 53% of the population is under the poverty line.

Chief Industries:

- Agriculture (tobacco, sugarcane, cotton, tea, corn, potatoes, cassava [tapioca], sorghum, pulses, groundnuts, Macadamia nuts; cattle, goats).
- Industries (tobacco, tea, sugar, sawmill products, cement, consumer goods).

Average Level of Education:

- male: 9 years of schooling
- female: 9 years of schooling (2007)

Other information:

- Malawi is a former colony of Britain. It was released in 1964.
- About two percent of the population has electricity and running water.
- The economy depends on substantial inflows of economic assistance from the IMF, the World Bank, and individual donor nations.
- Radio is the main broadcast medium in the country. The one television station is state-run.

Source: CIA.gov (World Factbook) <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mi.html>

Vocabulary

Harness

Kilometer (5)

Maize (19)

Kwacha (21)- Malawian monetary unit

Lorry (55)

Nsima (72) corn bread eaten with every meal. Below is a picture of Nsima:



Bicycle dynamo (78): these are headlights on a bicycle that do not require batteries. Electricity to power them is generated by pedaling. [No, the dynamo is the generator that makes contact with the wheel. – Dr. Fike]

Cholera (148): an infection in the intestine causing diarrhea and vomiting. Transmitted through contact with contaminated feces. Cholera is often contracted during the rainy season in Malawi due to poor sanitation and plumbing. Health education and supplies have greatly reduced the number of cholera outbreaks in Malawi since 2010.

AC generator (191): (*alternating current generator*) a machine (usually rotary machine) that generates alternating current power from mechanical power. A bicycle dynamo is an AC generator.

Malaria (233): a deadly disease transferred to human bloodstream by mosquitoes. Causes fever, chills, sweating, vomiting. Malaria is one of the major causes of morbidity and mortality in Malawi. Transmission is year-round, but particularly high during the rainy season.

Themes and Discussion Questions

Education

1) Affording education: William Kamkwamba had to drop out of school when his family could not pay for it. Is education a right or a privilege? You can tie this back to the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (#28 in the Reader).

Kamkwamba was desperate to stay in school but he had to drop out because of money. Think about American K-12 and college students. With all the opportunities for schooling, why do you think some students are disinterested in learning? Why especially do you think some college students, who are paying for their education, are not engaged? What accounts for the differences between William and his American counterparts?

2) Education can empower individuals to succeed: When education was taken away from William he sought it out for himself. He taught himself basic mechanics and electricity (among other subjects). Many gifted people have been self-taught (Ernest Hemingway, Ray Bradbury, George Bernard Shaw, Frank Lloyd Wright, Benjamin Franklin).

What are the advantages of self-directed learning? What are the advantages of directed learning? Why have we moved away from the Socratic model of learning discussed in “The Allegory of the Cave”? Is the classroom model effective? What makes it ineffective? [Ms. Moyon is not clear about the Socratic method here. It is not involved in self-directed learning; nor is it necessarily a factor in classroom education but may be. She seems to assume that “the classroom model” is non-Socratic. –Dr. Fike]

Do you think that it is difficult to succeed in today’s world as a self-taught individual? Why or why not?

Famine and Poverty

The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind approaches the famine from the perspective of William, a fourteen-year-old boy. The number of “meals” his family eats decreases to one per day, and William must drop out of school due to lack of funds. Though the book deals with poverty from its first pages, William does not focus explicitly on poverty until the famine.

Kamkwamba’s life reflected the economic realities in Malawi then and now. Malawi is a country based almost entirely on agriculture; 85 percent of export revenues come from tobacco, tea, coffee and sugarcane. William’s family subsisted on tobacco crops. [And maize. –Dr. Fike]

How has the West (historically and currently) helped contribute to Malawi’s problems? What exacerbates poverty in Malawi? In the final paragraph of the book William lays out his vision for the future in Africa. What do you think he means when he talks about “creating a new kind of Africa, a place of leaders instead of victims, a home of innovation rather than charity”? (286).

Overcoming hardship

The Wimbe library becomes one of the sources for Kamkwamba's exit out of the "cave." It was not, however, his only source. Kamkwamba also used drive, hunger, ambition, patience, and hard work. He had help from his community and his family.

Consider what it takes to successfully overcome major obstacles. What characteristics do you think are required? What can we learn from Kamkwamba's efforts? Given Malawi's socioeconomic position, what qualities will Kamkwamba have to nurture to succeed in making his country a better place to live today?

Compare William to his mother and father. Are they alike? What impact did William's parents have on his outlook? Does he impact their outlook on education and work? Do you think that William's sisters would have been given the same latitude that William was given?

Religion/Magic

What would you say that William's religion is? How does magic impact his religion/what is the role of magic in the story? How does William meld traditional religious beliefs with magic? Is there room for both in William's life? Is there room for both in our Western culture?

Electricity/Power

See "activities" section.

Connections

"Universal Declaration of Human Rights"- education (Article 26), living standards, remuneration (Article 23), standard of living (Article 25)

"Person and Community in African Traditional Thought"- paragraph 3: In what ways does Kamkwamba's experience reflect Menkiti's understanding of the definition of an African man? In what ways does it differ?

"But This I Can Believe"- Can Kamkwamba's belief in magic be illuminated by Winter's article? Is this taking Winter's ideas too far?

From “Environmentalism: A Global History” - Kamkwamba offers his inspiring life story of breaking a cycle of poverty and improving his community. Though he does most of the work himself, we now know about it because of Western involvement in his life. How may his work improve relations between the developing and developed world? How may it perpetuate old relationship patterns?

Activities

Winthrop Earth Hour

October 23, 2013 is Winthrop Earth Hour. All students will be encouraged to turn off their lights and other appliances in their dorm rooms for one hour after dark. Some possible discussion questions for the class meeting after Winthrop Earth Hour:

- How dark was it?
- What can you do in the dark?
- What couldn't you do that you normally do in the evening?
- What could William Kamkwamba do in his home in the dark?
- What couldn't he do?
- Imagine living with little or no electricity. How would your life be different today? How would it have been different growing up?

Writing Prompts

Education

William Kamkwamba's quest for knowledge reflects Plato's story of the prisoner's journey from the cave, but it also reflects Emerson's vision of embracing the inner self and Mill's belief that knowledge of the truth enlightens society as a whole. Which of these authors do you think most closely resemble Kamkwamba's world view? Defend your choice. Why doesn't Kamkwamba's view fit as well with the world view of the others?

Science

Community

Based on Bellah's "Why do We Need a Public Affairs Mission?," William Kamkwamba grew up a member of the underclass, a group engaged in "a Hobbesian struggle for existence which is always only one step away from catastrophe" (186). Today Kamkwamba is in the United States, earning a degree at Dartmouth College. William's family's struggle was similar to the struggles of many other families during the same period in Malawi. What made William's experience different? Bellah discusses a "deracinated global elite" (185) who work with new technologies and do not have a connection or care for any particular society. Given the state of globalization today, how can William avoid becoming a member of the global elite? What challenges will William face in Malawi upon his return?

Sacred

As evidenced by the ideas presented in the *HMXR Reader*, "the sacred" is understood in various ways. In an interview with Stephan Bodian, Arne Naess considers, "In what situations do I experience the maximum satisfaction of my whole being?" (Bodian 257). Tillich describes our relationship with the sacred as an "ultimate concern...[which]...demands the total surrender of him who accepts this claim" (269). More specifically, Swimme notes the effects of the "religion of consumerism" which inundates our American culture and defines our "cosmologies" (156). And while Lewis describes the sacred as personal transformation attainable through a relationship with Christ, Moore notes a "sacred dimension" in the "secular" which nurtures the soul (294).

In what ways does William Kamkwamba define "the sacred?" How does it give his life meaning and value? Does he share essential elements, concepts or ideals with you in what is sacred? How do you define "the sacred"? What are the ideals that you and William share?

Resources/Sources

http://www.ted.com/speakers/william_kamkwamba.html

<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/14-non-fiction/147-boy-who-harnessed-the-wind-kamkwamba-mealer?start=3>

<http://transparency.org/country#MWI>

A good resource for further information on the famine:

http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2007-8/papers/Menon_Roshni_2007a_Malawi.pdf

For those interested in learning more about Africa, look for these classes while you are at Winthrop:

- ARTH 281 (3) Arts of Africa, Americas, and Oceania
- ARTH 381 (3) Arts of Africa
- AAMS/ANTH 323 (3) Cultures of Africa
- AAMS/GEOG 303 (3) Geography of Africa
- AAMS 322/SOCL 320 (3) Sociology of Contemporary Africa
- AAMS/HIST 337 (3) Early Africa
- AAMS/PLSC 338 (3) Government and Politics of Africa
- AAMS 339/HIST 338 (3) Modern Africa
- AAMS/HIST 561 (3) The History of the Caribbean
- MUST 203 (3) Jazz Appreciation or MUST 514 (3) History of Jazz
- AAMS/PSYC 320 (3) Racial, Cultural and Ethnic Influences on Identity Development
- AAMS 300 (3) African American Studies
- AAMS/PLSC 317 (3) African American Politics
- AAMS 318/ENGL 312 (3) African American Literature
- AAMS/HIST 509 (3) African American History
- AAMS/SOCL 314 (3) Race and Ethnic Relations
- AAMS/PLSC 518 (3) Politics of the American South
- AAMS 390 (3) Selected Topics in African American Studies
- AAMS/HIST 308 (3) American Ethnic History
- AAMS/PLSC 515 (3) Urban Politics
- AAMS/PLSC 551 (3) African American Political Thought
- THRT 212 (3) African-American Theatre