

The Story of William Kamkwamba

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‘The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.’
Isiah 9:2

Once known as the dark continent by Westerners who had no knowledge of it and saw it as obscure, Africa is still sometimes referred to as dark but for a different reason. According to *The Economist* in 2007,

Seen from space, Africa at night is largely unlit, as dark as all-but empty Siberia. With nearly 1 billion people, Africa accounts for over a sixth of the world’s population, but generates only 4% of global electricity.

Various estimates state that between 2 percent and 8 percent of the population of Malawi have electricity at home. Recently I read the book, *The Boy who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope* by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer. William Kamkwamba lived in a village in Malawi at a time when the country was suffering from drought and famine; he was forced to leave school aged fourteen because his family could not afford the fees and he was needed to work on the farm. Like most Malawians he had to go to sleep at about 7.00 pm because there was no light in the house. He was curious about how things worked and wanted to improve life for his family. He began by taking broken radios apart to discover how they worked; he found a bicycle dynamo and worked out how the light came on and ultimately put his mind to how he could create his own electricity.

A book called *Using Energy* borrowed one day from a primary school library changed his life. ‘Energy is all around you every day’, it said. ‘Sometimes energy needs to be converted to another form before it is useful to us. How can we convert forms of energy? Read on and you’ll see.’ He did, he saw photos of windmills and understood how they could be used to generate power. He collected scrap metal, PVC pipe, a broken bicycle and wooden poles and managed to construct a windmill that powered a light for his room and later he extended it to all the family’s rooms.

He was called mad, lazy, crazy by the people of his village until the windmill was finally assembled and producing light. Eventually he was discovered by some education officials touring the region, quickly followed by the media rushing in, then he was taken to conferences in Africa and America and even met Al Gore and appeared on the Jon Stewart Daily Show when the book came out. Bryan Mealer, his co-author and a journalist who had covered the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, befriended him and was determined to share his powerful and uplifting story with the world and to finally go home from Africa ‘with some good news to tell’.

When William Kamkwamba first saw the photos of windmills in the book from the primary school library, what he saw were ‘giant beautiful machines that towered into the sky, so powerful that they made the photo itself appear to be in motion’. When he was taken to California years later to visit a wind farm he was amazed at the miles of windmills, more than six thousand of them. Looking up, he saw ‘the hundred-foot blades twirling slowly like the toys of God.’ In total, the wind farm produced over six hundred megawatts of electricity, which was enough to power the whole of Malawi. ESCOM, the almost totally government-owned electricity supply corporation of Malawi produced only 224 megawatts at the time. As he watched them, he wondered whether he would return to Malawi and plant a forest of windmills along the green fields; or would he teach others to build more simple windmills to power their own homes and villages? He has travelled an extraordinary journey to date and will no doubt continue to do so.

Although he is lauded by environmentalists at international technology conferences, to people in Malawi, William Kamkwamba said in a recent interview, wind power is not talked about as a way of helping climate change. ‘We talk about wind and solar power because it’s a simpler and safer way to give us electricity and irrigation. Clean water and power is our right as humans on this earth, and for too long our governments in Africa have failed to provide these things.’

When his story was reported by the BBC, many comments were posted from readers in Africa praising William Kamkwamba and hoping that other young Africans will be inspired. One came from a reader in The Gambia:

‘It is indeed a great joy to see a talented young African brother having a big dream to modernise his community with water and electrical supply. Africa has a lot of talented youths but there are no resources to work on. The intelligent poor children have no seats in the classroom and our greedy politicians are only looking after their own interests. Job well done my brother, I hope many will take your steps in the love of our own people.’