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### Electric Wind In The Mind's Eye: The Uplifting Power Of Resilience

*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* tells the story of how William Kamkwamba not only persisted through a time of extreme hardship for his entire nation, but also learned how to thrive in it. Across more than fifteen chapters, he details his struggles with ridicule, poverty, death, and even historic famine, all experienced as a pre-teen, as well as the many other hardships that branched off from these. However, the real focus of *TBWHTW* is placed on Kamkwamba's almost heroic response to constant challenge, showing his tendency towards constructive resilience: A lack of access to education begets independent study, eventually giving way to his enrollment in Southern Africa's most elite private school. Food scarcity inspires him to erect a windmill assembled from literal trash, so that one day his family might pump water for irrigation, allowing them to harvest twice a year. And, in a scene important enough to constitute his memoir's prologue, Kamkwamba proves that his windmill can indeed generate power, prompting adulation by the crowd of nay-sayers gathered below him (Kamkwamba 11-113). What the above examples seek to illustrate, the same as many others within the book, is an idea that grants this publication its core purpose; Kamkwamba displays an instinctive kind of almost-stoicism, built around not just surviving, but also solving critical issues, and importantly, he continues telling and retelling his story in the hope of inspiring others to adopt the same mindset.

As very briefly touched on in the introduction, Kamkwamba's recollection of his journey surely demonstrates his sound understanding of constructive resilience, even though those exact words are not utilized in his memoir. What the term refers to is a concept developed by the psychologist Dr. Michael L. Penn, professor at Franklin & Marshall College, to explain how positive development may be incurred through experiencing hardship or other conflicts. In an example centered around a passage from the book of Genesis, Penn writes:

In contemplating its nature, one is reminded of the way that Jacob wrestled with God: [...] Jacob demonstrates constructive resilience when he refuses to end this encounter without reaping a harvest. He insists on gathering some fruit. Indeed, as the myth of Sisyphus suggests, the most absurd thing is to suffer for nothing—to suffer and have no chance of deriving any benefit. Those who practice constructive resilience, like Jacob and the Bahá'í students of Iran, are seeking to take from their suffering some kind of blessing, some manner of benefit (Penn 31).

This quotation, on its own an effective appeal to ethos, is also bolstered by a more practical example a few pages later, where Penn refers to saplings needing to struggle against the wind, so that they gain the strength necessary to support their own weight as fully-grown trees (33). It's with this perspective in mind that we can find why *TBWHTW* depicts its heaviest content. It's not to garner self-serving praise or sympathy for Kamkwamba, but to show others that they can be just as constructively resilient, even if their experiences have been as dismal as his own.

On the subject of that heavy content, this resilience of Kamkwamba's would prove vital for him, not only in securing a better future for his adult self, but also in strengthening his ability

to survive a time of severe crisis. According to a case study by Dr. Zoltán Tiba, a British Academy Post-doctoral Fellow at the University Of Cambridge, the total number of fatalities in all of Malawi, resulting from the '01-'02 famine, would have been around sixty-five thousand (Tiba 3). That broad statistic aside, the community his paper studies bears uncanny similarity to the one in which Kamkwamba grew up, and covers many of the same famine-related challenges as his autobiography; he addresses work shortage, spreading disease, theft and violence, as well as the obvious points of malnourishment and death (Tiba 8, 9, 22-23). In this way does Tiba's paper, validating the severity of the famine, relate to Kamkwamba's story. What is perhaps the most compelling evidence within *TBWHTW* for this sentiment of desperation can be found in the following lines:

...my father started weighing himself obsessively. By now his mighty frame had shrunk like a piece of fruit in the sun. Sharp bones poked through where giant muscles once dominated. His teeth seemed bigger; I noticed his scars. One day he told me he was having trouble seeing across the compound. [...] One day, sitting in the yard, my father said the strangest thing: 'One of the mysterious, yet wonderful things about the hunger is it only kills men.' He sounded mad, but it was true. Men were the ones going out foraging, and in turn, burning precious energy that couldn't be restored. Cholera didn't discriminate, but hunger seemed to take only the men. Lots of men were also abandoning their families and leaving them to fend for themselves. [...] My father must've been thinking about this, because he turned to my mother and said: 'My family is mine to look after. If we're supposed to die, then we die together. These are my principles. God is on my side.' (Kamkwamba 65).

While this section is followed immediately after by one describing his youngest sister's fight with malaria, and another much later regarding his mother's own battle with it, this passage carries a differing emotional weight that may likely strike closer to Kamkwamba's own heart. The boy's father, his closest role model, is grappling with the thought of his own mortality; nevertheless, he redoubles his commitment to his family as their caretaker, disregarding the personal cost (Kamkwamba 65, 95-96). Through this lens we can see, in his father's actions, a plausible origin for Kamkwamba's strengthening resolve in response to the famine.

Moving on forward after the lean times, Kamkwamba would find a strange kind of opportunity by which to demonstrate the compassionate, generous elements of his own constructive resilience. According to research conducted by Dr. Michael Loevinsohn of the University of Sussex, as a result of the Malawian famine, cases of HIV/AIDS in rural areas increased dramatically, rising by over twenty percent on average, and more than doubling in the worst affected areas. He further provides that an exacerbating factor for HIV's spread was the plummeting availability of ganyu labor, forcing those seeking work to travel further, and separate from their families for longer (Loevinsohn 6-8). Given that this is the same environment as Kamkwamba's village, it makes sense, then, that the local clinical would try and reach out to curb the spread of infection. One of their attempts at outreach was the assembly of a youth croup, which Kamkwamba joined, that also provided him with a unique opportunity to affect change:

The doctors at the clinic were so impressed by our enthusiasm they asked me to write a play to help persuade people to get tested. Over several days, I prepared a great production—more in my mind than on paper—which I titled: *Maonekedwe apusitsa*. Or simply: *Don't Judge the Book by Its Cover*. [...] I won't say our little play inspired loads

of people to be tested right away, but it did help change attitudes. These days, with the help of government programs and new VCT centers, more people are being educated and tested and AIDS isn't such a taboo (Kamkwamba 99).

With his own words, immediately after, Kamkwamba refers to himself as an activist for the first time (98-99). This shows, just as with his windmill, how he's able to find ways to do something good and useful in a time of great distress. However, it's also the first time he's shown to be successful at getting others to see things similarly to himself.

Even after this time of turbulence in his life concluded, Kamkwamba's activism has not only continued, but expanded, and others are indeed taking notice. Not mentioned in *TBWHTW*, but certainly important to its ending, is that Kamkwamba founded the Moving Windmills Project in 2008. On their website he explains this organization's purpose:

We do projects such as percussion drilling—teaching people how to drill their own water well, we support a soccer team, and we also install solar panels at schools, community centers. Overall, our project will focus on inspiring people to create their own solution towards the problem that they are facing (MWP 2022).

Faith Karimi of CNN would later write an article on Kamkwamba's life, activism, and memoir. Significantly, it ends with the following lines, featuring a quote from Bryan Mealer, co-author of *TBWHTW*:

Kamkwamba is part of a generation of Africans who are not waiting for their governments or aid groups to come to their rescue, according to the author. 'They are seizing opportunities and technology, and finding solutions to their own problems,'

Mealer said. ‘One of the keys of his success is ... he's never wanted to rest on his laurels.’ (Karimi 2009).

What these things represent is monumental; not only is Kamkwamba successfully dedicating his life to the betterment of Malawi, but also, the like-minded have seen this, and gathered together to help further the same cause.

The publication of *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, just like the outreach of the Moving Windmills Project, is a success of William Kamkwamba’s in broadcasting his message, and inspiring others in poor situations to be just as constructively resilient. And it is a message that’s being heard. Right now, an entire people are working to uplift themselves from meagerness, not in spite of, but because of the challenges that lay before them, and all because a young boy from rural Malawi proved that anyone could do it.



(Figure 1: A rendering of the Moving Windmills Innovation Center)

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