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Henry Olonga interview: *“You can feel joy in the midst of pain”*

Posted on August 22, 2011 – 2:20 pm



Kay Parris meets exiled Zimbabwean cricketer turned singer and preacher, Henry Olonga

In 1995, Henry Olonga became the first black cricketer ever to play for Zimbabwe and, at 18, the youngest to do so. But, while these feats have secured him a place in world sporting history, he is better known for an event on the pitch that had little to do with his notoriously unpredictable fast-bowling action.

Together with team-mate Andy Flower (now England coach) he caught the attention of the world's media during the 2003 cricket World Cup, when he risked his life by wearing a black armband to protest against the human rights abuses being committed by Robert Mugabe's regime.

His courageous action was emboldened, he says, by his Christian convictions; but his life changed immediately and forever. Dismissed from the squad, he went into hiding from threatened reprisals before finding sanctuary in England with an offer to join the Lashings World XI club of former Test cricketers. He has not returned to Zimbabwe and, since 2006 when his Zimbabwean passport expired, he has been unable to travel outside the UK.

When we meet, in a crowded London café on a wet summer's day, he is upbeat despite his difficulties, continually

referencing his faith and speaking of looking forward. Since being in the UK, he has married and developed a new life, which, on top of his ongoing work for Lashings, has involved throwing himself into an eclectic mix of sports and political commentary, public speaking, lay preaching, fundraising (for a Zimbabwean orphanage project) and singing – his rich tenor voice was first spotted during his teenage years by talent scouts who lost out to the Zimbabwe cricket selectors.

Our Zimbabwe – an anthem for unity which Olonga wrote, sang and produced with friends two years before his black armband protest, in response to escalating racial and political tensions in the country – has just been re-released to mark a decade since it reached number one in the Zimbabwean charts. He also has two albums – of gospel and opera tracks – due for release in the next few months.

Meanwhile his autobiography, Blood, Sweat and Treason, published last year, has gone into paperback. And he and his Australian wife Tara now have a baby daughter who, he says, has helped him make sense of life. Still it is clear that his love and concern for Zimbabwe are never far from his mind.

It is clear too that, through all the dramas of his life, his faith has been, and continues to be, his driving force.

When you were planning your black armband protest in 2003, you were such a young man. Did you fully understand the danger of what you were doing, and how that gesture would impact on the rest of your life?

Absolutely. We weighed it up. I think, because of my traveling around the world, I was very much aware of world issues and political structures. I knew what was happening was wrong, and to this day it is still wrong. Whatever your age, if you hear what's happened to people, it should make your stomach churn.

I just felt I had to do something. I knew it was right to stand up to the tyranny. We had to look at the worst case scenario, which was ultimate death. I didn't want to die, but I was willing, I think, to consider that as a possible consequence. I still had that childlike belief: God is with me, and this is part of God's will – in this situation, God wants me to do this.

Once you had made your protest it soon became clear you would have to get out of Zimbabwe. The critical game was against Pakistan – you had to beat them or tie, both of which looked unlikely, if you were to get to South Africa for the next stage of the competition. When a cyclone came from nowhere and the game had to be tied, you felt it was a miracle – do you still see it that way?

Absolutely. People come to me and say, but what about all the animals that were killed in the cyclone? And I'm not going to try and deal with that theologically. All I will say is, I know my life was in danger. I needed a miracle. I prayed to the God that I had believed in since I was 16 and a miracle came. I can't explain why the cyclone came on that day. All I know is, it was the most unlikely thing to happen and it happened.

You've had other scrapes too, haven't you, nearly drowning, being carjacked and held at knife-point?

Yes. You can live a life that's focused on the temporary, the trivial, the materialistic, then something comes along that makes you realise – actually I could be gone in a second, I've got to make the most of it.

On days like that, you're glad you got through it, but the thing is – if I had gone then, though I would have had unfulfilled ambitions and desires, I think I would have been ready; because I know the Lord, I'm saved, born again, call it what you wish.

You seem like you are less afraid of death because of your faith. Is that true, even at moments where your life has been in grave danger?

I actually don't fear the concept of death, because of course it is just a passing through the veil, if you can call it that, from one realm to another.

The only thing for me is, if I were to die today, I still think things have been set aside for me, written in heaven, and if I don't do them I'll be living with regret. But obviously I have made some major decisions in my life – I began as a cricketer, I played as a professional, and for the national team. I can't say I have any regrets in that arena because I did something that a lot of people dream of doing.

You were a very quiet and serious little boy who really flourished as a teenager. You could have made a career from athletics, rugby, or opera. Were you right to choose cricket do you think?

I think I was led into cricket if I'm honest, I don't think I would have chosen it. I wouldn't call myself a righteous man, but Psalms does say the steps of a righteous man are ordered by the Lord, and in a way I think that's what

happened. It's hard, international cricket. Music would have been so much easier. But in the end, with all that came out of it, I think it was the right way.

Anyway, I don't think I would have made it in music from the age of 18 or 19. I think I had raw talent, but now I am much more mature. I know what my voice can do, what it can't do, and I think my voice is peaking now.

How important is it to you that you were the first black cricketer to play for Zimbabwe?

It was a tremendous privilege, of course, to be able to lead the way for so many who came after. But it also meant that, for a couple of reasons – first the fact that I was a Christian, and the fact I was the first black player – it meant I couldn't have fun.

I had so many eyeballs looking at me; I was always reminded that I was an example to all the other black faces that were going to come. There was always this extra impetus on me to behave in a way that was becoming of the first black player playing for the country. Other players came along, black players who misbehaved – I didn't have that luxury.

Maybe you weren't the kind of person to misbehave?

Well no, the lifestyle of sportsmen is often hardly desirable. Look at all the footballers who have been involved in scandals. These guys obviously don't have a moral barometer in their lives – something that says: this is right, this is wrong.

If you have decided to live a lifestyle that pleases God, it does mean you have to say no to a lot of things. As far as drink goes, I never liked the taste of booze, so that was an easy one to say no to. As far as sleeping around goes, I didn't do it. If we are taking drugs, sleeping around, swearing, getting drunk all the time, lying, stealing, doing all the things that are fairly clear in the Bible are not to be done by Christians, we are deceiving ourselves. I didn't want to deceive myself. I tried. I'm not suggesting I was a goody two shoes and I never slipped up – I did. But I always tried

How many of your team-mates in the Zimbabwe squad were Christians?

There was a guy called Raymond Price, who I believe to this day still believes, and there was a guy called Gavin Rennie. I think that was it. I had a different experience from a lot of the guys. One of the bonding things that happens in teams is you get drunk together; it's a way people break down barriers – they blurt out jokes, they lose their inhibitions and they feel closer as a result. I never did that; I never went out and got drunk with the guys. If that was the inner circle, I was always on the fringes, just because of that.

There must have been a loneliness attached to being part of the team then?

I always felt I was called to it, so my overbearing emotion was: This is what I was called to be, this is what I am.

You did miss it when you left though didn't you? You talk about the wasted years when you could have been playing – there's a sadness that comes across in your autobiography.

I don't know. I haven't read the book in ages, so I can't remember what I said about it, but in myself I am at peace with the fact that I believe I gave everything in my short career. I'm also aware of the fact that my career would probably have ended anyway, with the purging [due to strife with the Zimbabwean cricket authorities] of all the senior players a year later. So if ever I allude to wasted years, it's more that I took a long time to mature as a cricketer, related to the problems I had with my bowling action; then there were the injuries and my loss of form. Given the choice between a longer career and the black armband stance I wouldn't change a thing.

Things kind of turned in the team didn't they; as the political situation became worse, racism in the team became worse – the cricket team reflected what was going on in the country?

Of course, the political climate spilled into the cricket administration. The political climate revolved around the farm invasions of 2000, the complications of the government's new position on how they viewed white people. They started to view them as enemies of the state – not all white people, just people they thought were a threat. So it polarised people, it forced people into camps.

The white players could tell borderline jokes – mostly, people would laugh it off because they had the majority. But it all came to a head on one occasion in the dressing rooms at Headingly, when for the first time, probably ever, I challenged one of the guys and said, hey that's a bit over the top.

In Africa, the line between your neo-modern cosmopolitan view, where all people are equal, and the old subservient colonial south view, it is very thin. I grew up after independence, so I went to integrated schools. I always saw

myself as equal to my white peers, and that's a big thing, because a lot of Zimbabweans cannot see themselves as equal to the white man.

It must have helped that you were from a middle class family?

Yes, and I don't want to dwell on it, but it is important, because now, here I am in a team where, without being unkind to my former teammates, some of them had probably never been able to view a black man as equal to them – capable of having a stimulating conversation, where you can debate and disagree and be ok with that. It's only when they come to England, say, on tour and they deal with very different kinds of Afro-Caribbeans – they probably feel, ok, I can spar with this one, but not the Zimbabwean one who's grown up on a farm.

And that was the attitude I was trying to deal with when I said, come on guys, some of us find this comment you have made offensive. And in a funny way their reaction confirmed their inward prejudice and bias, because they ganged up as a team, as a majority.

That then led to an inquiry to investigate whether racism existed and of course the inquiry found overwhelmingly in favour of the fact – the attitudes were there for anyone to see.

But you were also uncomfortable with some of the black anti-racist activity, weren't you, which was becoming hostile to white people?

Yes, I know a racist attitude when I see one, whether it is coming from a black person or a white person. Anyway it all led to an overhauling of the traditional structure of cricket in Zimbabwe as we knew it. The balance of power moved to a more equitable distribution of power between black and white. I don't think colour comes into it now – we have a new white captain, Brendan Taylor, who's just been selected.

Would you say it is almost as though the cricket team has gotten ahead of the political climate?

Well some would argue the political climate has changed too with the power sharing agreement. It does at least show the government, or the Mugabe regime, is vying for legitimacy.

You used to do some commentating for the BBC and other channels, why did you stop?

Cricket commentating long term was just not my cup of tea and I have other interests. With regards to political commentary – after nearly nine years of talking about change in Zimbabwe, I have realised the political will is lacking to bring wholesale change to the country.

How optimistic are you for the next few years?

Mr Mugabe is 87 – he's not going to go on for ever; one day his heart will stop, and that will be a turning point. When you've had a leader for 31 years, when he goes it's going to change things.

How do you view the prospect of fresh elections next year?

They are going to use the same tactics again. Forgive me if I sound like a broken record, but he is going to use violence, he's going to use intimidation, they're going to rig it. They're going to find votes stuffed in ballot boxes, they're going to find votes given by people who are long dead. So I foresee the next election being won by Zanu PF.

Are you going to wait for Mugabe to die before you go back?

The longer I live outside the country the harder it is for me to go back. I would visit if they invited me in an official capacity, then the government would have all the liability. I wouldn't go as a tourist.

When you look back to the serious little boy growing up in Zimbabwe, who found it hard to make friends, is there any of him still in you?

No, that's all gone. The truth of the matter is, I discovered the Lord, and when you do... The little kid that I was, who was insulated and introspective, he heard a message, and it changed his life. My family say to me now, you weren't that sad as a child! But I did have a problem with just smiling. Now I'm a totally different person – and I reckon it's because I've had an encounter with the true living God; I think he does that to you.

Every human being is asking three fundamental questions – whether you're born in the Indian slums or into some aristocratic family. You're asking: Where did everything come from? Why am I here? What happens when I die?

In spite of where you come from, no matter what your journey has been, he can mend a broken heart, he can give you a reason to dance and leap for joy, because of how he answers those three questions.

If you try and take God out of the equation and answer those questions in any other way, it's a pretty hopeless existence if you think about it.

You say you have found contentment now, but you wouldn't describe yourself as happy; what would it take to make you happy?

I think the western concept of happiness is about personal fulfilment, material security. I think that's what people think is happiness. But I tend to want spiritual fulfilment.

Christians say we feel joy. We don't necessarily feel happy, we feel joy, which I think is different, because you can feel joy in the midst of deep pain. Happiness for me is an illusion, because wherever I turn I see so much sadness in other human being's lives. I look at myself as one of the lucky ones. People say to me, you must be so sad living away from your home. Well yes, but I wasn't a victim of political violence. I think of this poor guy, an MDC [opposition] guy, who was abused by the government – they beat him up, tortured him for days; his body was found in the bush. I think of 30,000 people who lost their lives in Zimbabwe in the early 80s, and the man who killed them is still at large, still running the place.

So what would make me happy? I am now spending a lot of my life trying to raise money for my charity, the Mumvuri Project for orphans of parents who have died of AIDS in Zimbabwe. If I can put a couple more kids through school, I think that would make me happy, because it's the antithesis of what makes me unhappy. If Zimbabweans could get along without all the nonsense, that would make me happy.

In my own life, it will be great if we are able to raise a child who loves the Lord and is committed to him all the days of her life; and I think we all want to be happily married, and I am.

When you break it down, happiness is peace with your creator, peace with your family – simple things, as long as you are not starving, and you have got a roof over your head.

It makes me extremely sad to hear about the people in the Horn of Africa who are starving. True Christian religion is to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. In blessing other people, God will bless you.

For more details of the Mumvuri Project Trust visit www.ausdenonline.co.uk

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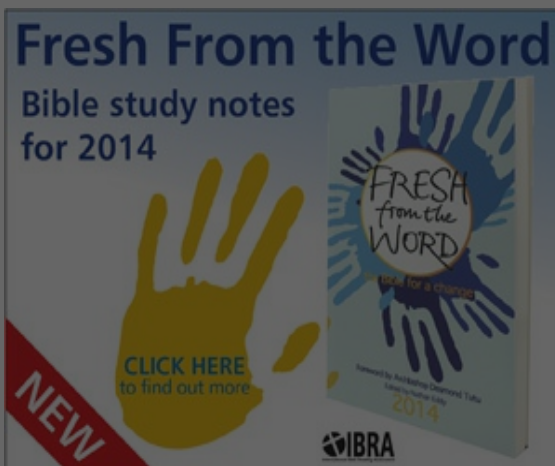
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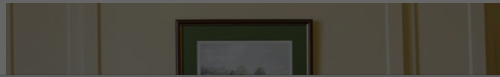
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