



## **Terry Waite interviewed by Tony Gallienne**

Interviewer

T: Well, hello, Terry.

TW: Hello, good morning, Tony, and very nice to speak with you.

T: And you too. Last time I saw you was just about a year ago at the last Guernsey Literary Festival.

TW: Yes, and it's a great pity that I can't be over in Guernsey this year. But I'm speaking this morning now from our home in Suffolk in the east of England and it's a lovely spring morning.

T: Yes, we're very lucky with the weather during the lockdown. Just to tell our viewers that you're the patron of the Guernsey Literary Festival and you have been for the last two, three years. And you come over every year. And this year you were due to come over and do a series of poems interspersed with some music, which we were greatly looking forward to. But perhaps next year we can achieve that.

Today we're going to talk about two of your books, *Solitude* and *Out of the Silence*. Your book *Solitude* is a series of sketches with meetings you've had with a number of people who have ... or who live in solitary situations whether they've chosen to or not. And for some, solitude is a positive experience and for others perhaps not so much. And *Out of the Silence* is a series of reflections, but mostly poems, that you've written regarding different aspects of the human condition.



And more than most, I guess, you've experienced and explored solitude and silence to an extreme degree. And in our western culture I guess most of us since ... certainly up to the lockdown have considered solitude and silence to be something to be avoided, something that's not part of our busy and social lives. Would you agree with that? And in writing these books was your intention to try, as it were, to champion the cause of solitude and silence as vital parts of what we are as humans?

TW: Well, both these books, Tony, came out of my own experience of prolonged and unusual solitude. A number of years ago I worked as a hostage negotiator and negotiated with some very difficult people beginning, I suppose, with General Amin, and going on to Gaddafi and Revolutionary Guards in Iraq. You know, if you do that sort of work you always recognise that something might go wrong and it went wrong for me in Beirut, and I spent almost five years in complete solitary confinement. Now this was very strict solitary confinement. It was the type where I had no books and papers for almost five years – about four and a half years. I was in the dark, I was chained to the wall, I had no companionship, I had nothing. And that was an extreme situation through which, you know, one hopes not too many people have to go.

But it's from extreme situations that I think we can take some understandings that are applicable to normal life or so-called normal life. Today we're living in isolation many of us and it's not the sort of life that we normally lead. Now when I was first taken and put into solitary I was concerned, very worried, because I felt that, I'd read, that prolonged solitary confinement can lead to mental deterioration and mental illness, and I wondered if that would happen to me. Would I decline mentally?

There was not much I could do about my physical condition because I was chained to the wall. I did what little exercise I could but it wasn't a great hardship because I've never been particularly fond of exercise. But mental exercise was open to me and I recognised, I suppose, fairly early on that one had to keep mentally alive and, in a sense, exercise the brain. You know, if we think of the brain as a muscle; in some ways unless you exercise it it



dies on you, and I just didn't want that to happen. And so in those years I began to write in my head. And the books you've mentioned, although they were written – I had no pencil and paper in those years – although they were written subsequent to my captivity they had their genesis, they had their beginning in that particular experience.

And I suppose just to elaborate a little bit: when I was first put into that situation, the first thing I had to cope with was anger. I was angry and there was a short poem. It's the only one I can remember of the book off-by-heart:

Anger is  
Like a consuming fire  
Seeking all whom it may devour.  
Do not extinguish  
The flames totally.  
But warm yourself  
By the gentle glow  
Of the embers.

And by that I was saying [anger is] quite natural for anyone. We all feel anger, it's a natural human force. But if it gets the better of you it destroys you, it does more harm to you than against all of whom it's held. And I recognised that I had to come to terms with anger to, in a sense, not get rid of it completely because you can't, but you can take the force and use it creatively. And I tried to turn it by keeping myself mentally alive and by exercising my brain by writing in my head. My first book actually, *Taken on Trust*, was written entirely in my head in those years.

And the second thing one had to face was acute anxiety because I didn't know whether I was going to see the end of the day or not. I was tortured and I did have a mock execution. But fortunately, I survived the experience, and the way I had to deal with that was to learn to live for the now, for the moment – not to think too much about what might be but to say,



'Now I have life and now I can live life as fully as possible in the moment,' and that is how I began to cope with anxiety.

And there are many people today who'll be facing anxiety because perhaps they will be saying, 'I haven't got a job or I'm not sure I'm going to have sufficient funds,' and they'll be in a state of anxiety. It's very, very understandable. And somehow one has to take the situation and say, 'Okay, I'm still alive, I'm here, I have my life, and even in these limited circumstances something creative can come from it'. And that's what I attempted to work on – rather a long answer to your question but it gives sufficient background.

T: Yes, thank you. You talked about the approach to ... the need to approach solitude in the right sort of way: gradually and calmly. Obviously in the circumstances you found yourself in, in captivity, perhaps that wasn't the ideal way to approach solitude and silence. But I guess what you're saying through your books is that solitude and silence can be a very positive thing for people. And if they approach it in the right way it's something to be treasured.

TW: It is. And again the question is approaching it in the right way. I mean, loneliness in part it's a state of mind. We are at the moment – we're speaking through this medium, this virtual medium – but we're very fortunate we have lots of ability to be in contact with people through the internet and a variety of ways even though we are living an isolated life. It's not real solitude.

In the book about solitude I look at solitude in different ways from people who've embraced it. And I suppose the most memorable experience of that was in the journey I made across Australia. I went up to the road up to Alice Springs, which is generally thought of as being rather a remote spot. But then at Alice Springs I turned left and went along the Tanami Highway [the Tanami Road] for 400 miles and across this desert [Tanami Desert], and then you come across a little roadhouse [the Rabbit Flat Roadhouse] right in this middle of this vast wilderness run by a chap called Bruce Shotgun-Farrands and his wife.



I mean, I've used the analogy of myself: you know, primitive man walked the earth barefooted; he then put on shoes or sandals and the next step was to cover the earth with concrete. And I suppose what I'm saying there is you know, gradually as civilisation develops we begin to divorce ourselves from our natural environment and we alienate it – almost enter into battle with it and misuse it. And when you do that there's a terrible price to pay for that as we're seeing in pollution and all that's taking place at the moment. The world is choking to death.

I've regarded it myself these last weeks when the pandemic has hit the world in a remarkable way – it's a tragedy, I've no doubt about it and I have deepest sympathy for everyone who suffers from that. But on the other hand, if you look at it in a slightly different way and you say, 'Well, it's given the earth, the world, an opportunity to breathe; and now for the first time, you know, the Himalayas can be seen from India, the air is clearer'. And you begin to say to yourself, 'What price are we paying for so-called advancement? Is it really an advancement?'

And that can lead you back, I think, to facing the questions about life itself. What is life for? What is our purpose? Should we not be in life to make it full and enjoyable rather than just this endless chase for greater, better and bigger? And I think there are good things that can come from this particular experience through which we're passing – very good things, if we'll allow them.

The big danger, the big difficulty is we have the wit, we have the knowledge to create a different way of life; on the other hand, we have to cope with human nature as it is. And we know human nature far too well if we know our own nature, and we know there's a dark side to it. And one feels that once it's over, gradually we'll revert back to the old ways, the old ways of polluting. And yet perhaps there will be more and more people who will say, 'Yes, we've covered the earth with concrete but let's hold on for a minute, let's just see



what it does mean to – if we can possibly lead a different way of life and have different goals in life'.

T: Yes, I mean, most of us in the world now do live in urban conurbations, enormous urban conurbations, and one of your visits in your book *Solitude* took you to Chicago, and there you met a friend of yours, a Dutch medical doctor, who you'd met in Africa and now she lived in Chicago, and you did paint Chicago as a fairly alienating place, and your friend really, I think, felt quite lonely in Chicago.

TW: I was making the contrast there, Tony, between, on the one hand, the isolation in Australia – seeming isolation from people – and on the other hand, being in a big city surrounded by thousands of people. It was my friend who took me and introduced me to someone who lived in a block of flats, an apartment building, surrounded by people and I went to see him and he was deeply, deeply isolated, deeply lonely, very depressed. Now he may have had, of course, some pre-existing mental frailty but he was so typical of so many people in the big cities of our world who say, 'Well, we live next door to people; we don't even know their names'. And he was like that, he was isolated from people. There was no sense really for him, of community.

And again another positive thing that's emerged from this crisis through which we're passing is that it's restored in many people the view and the necessity for community. I mean, I live in a small village and although we've always had quite a good community life here, nevertheless that's been enhanced in recent weeks and people have come round and done shopping and so on and so forth. And so solitude: you can be; you can be in a big city like Chicago and be totally isolated.

The first thing to do, of course, though is to begin to develop that relationship with yourself. Be more at ease with yourself. Know yourself better. And those who do that, in my view, are much [more] able to be able to communicate with others and build community and build society.



T: Yes, and your friend had developed a connection with God. I think she'd had that connection, lost it and then reconnected again. And can you talk about the importance of God in solitude and loneliness?

TW: Well, yes, I will – if I could just bear one further illustration? Some people have solitude forced on them. And I think particularly of Svetlana, Stalin's daughter. Years ago – Svetlana's dead now – she came to the UK and she lived with us for a while while she was getting settled and we were helping, with other people, to get her settled in the UK.

And one Christmas she said to me, 'I'd love to go to the church, to the [Russian] Orthodox Church'. I said, 'Right, I'll take you,' because it was in Princes Gate in London and I'd been there, I knew it very well, I knew the bishop who was there, Bishop Anthony Bloom. And she thought about it, and when we were preparing to go she said, 'I can't go'. I said, 'Why not?'. She said, 'The people in that church, the majority of them, will have been exiled by my father; they will recognise me'. And since then she'd had, you know, by the terrible actions of her father had solitude forced on her, and she was in a ... in a trap. She eventually went back to Georgia, didn't last there, came back to the UK and then went to the States.

But then you asked ... that leads naturally into your question about God. In captivity I never felt the close presence of God. Some people claim to feel it, I didn't, I never felt that. I felt often quite alone and quite isolated but I don't believe that if you have faith it necessarily means that you feel good. And feelings can vary so much: they can be affected by illness; they can be affected by circumstances. If you're going to make your faith dependent on feeling, the chances are that you're going to be led astray by that. And I suppose a way of coping with it and dealing with that is to recognise also that if you have faith it doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to receive special protection. I think it would be a terrible belief and doctrine to think because A. believes in God therefore God is going to say, 'You are going to be specially protected; and the rest can go their own way'. And that doesn't seem to me to be just or fair or reasonable at all.



What I think faith does is enable you to have a greater ... enable you to have resources which you can draw on in times of crisis, and in other times too. I think it gives you that. But more than anything else it enables you to maintain hope.

And I would say to myself in the face of my captives: 'You have the power to break my body and you've tried: because I was beaten; you have the power to bend my mind and you've tried: because I was interrogated; but my soul is not yours to possess'. Now I'd be very hard put to define 'soul'. In that context I would say soul is the total person that I am, the complete person. And even if you kill me you will never capture me completely. And that particular little affirmation – very simple, I agree: not very profound – was enough to enable me to maintain hope. And that's what I think faith can do.

I think other ... also faith is, well let me put it this way: I think God is a great mystery we can never know and fully comprehend. Many people claim to know and this, that and the other; I don't think we do really at the end of the day. We know that there is a great mystery about God, a great mystery about the universe, and also there's a great mystery within each one of us. Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? What is the purpose? All those questions that come up.

I think part of the journey of faith is to get to know yourself better; to get to know the mystery within yourself: to begin to explore that, and also to try and explore the mystery that lies beyond. And I think if you take that approach you discover that you're not a million miles away from the quest that is pursued by scientists. A scientist will make a discovery and he will, or she will, then go on and say beyond that, 'There lies a further question, a further set of discoveries to be made,' and it's endless; it goes on and on and on. And I think the journey of faith is like that, and I am not belonging to the school of those who believe that we have all the answers and everything is resolved simply by saying 'I have faith'. I think it is ... that is not my understanding of what it means to have faith or what it means to have religious belief.



T: Just leading on from that: you, of course, these days are a Quaker. And can I link that with a point you made in *Out of the Silence* where you say that Christ himself was not really a religious man? Can you sort of talk about those two ideas?

TW: Yeah, I think any belief, religious belief or other beliefs, they need a structure, they need a framework. And we have within the Christian tradition we have a framework, or we have a variety of frameworks ... call the church and it provides us with guidelines, it provides us with stories which stimulate the imagination and also probably encourage greater reflection and so on and so forth. It's all a part of the framework. But it is not the essence, the essence lies beyond that. It is merely the mechanism in my view which leads us towards the greater goal, the greater understanding.

And I think the difficulty for many people is that they put their total faith in the framework, in the religion, in the practice, which if you look at the teaching of Christ he didn't do that. He didn't despise it. He didn't despise the fact that there were religious observance to be followed. He didn't do that at all. But that was not the essence of it. The essence if you want to sum it up in a very short sentence it is really: 'To love God and your neighbour as yourself'. There in part lies the essence and often you find that the framework, where it's adhered to with absolute religious fervour becomes the barrier and becomes the block rather than actually getting to the essence of the issue.

And I have written about that also in one of the poems in the book, which I don't know if you want me to quote.

T: Yes, please, Terry.

TW: Well, this is called *The Kingdom* and I think it tries to express what I've just said to you:

There is a realm



Beyond time,  
Immune to the rigours  
Of inquiry  
That formulate,  
Measure  
And categorise.

Familiar tools  
Fail to illuminate  
The highways  
Of this kingdom.  
A kingdom  
Without height,  
Breadth,  
Depth.  
A kingdom  
Infinite.  
Not of this world,  
But embedded  
In the depths  
of soul.

How can we know  
Such a mystery?  
How can we touch  
The intangible?  
How can we prove  
That which cannot be captured  
In scientific tables?  
Be still.  
Listen to the inner voice.  
Learn to love.  
Let compassion



Guide your actions.

Walk calmly

Through the mists

Of unknowing.

The kingdom is yours.

And that I think was a way of trying to express something which is very difficult to express.

T: Yeah. I'd like to move on to talking about the loneliness of death. I guess in recent weeks we've all had to think about death a bit more, and most of the time we don't do that, most people don't do that. They don't think it's part of their life. But I guess you'd say it is part of life, something that's difficult but it's very much part of what we are as human beings. And to quote somebody you met, Margaret, a retired nurse: 'It is very difficult to be with someone who's dying and to try and accompany them'. And to quote from a poem that you wrote: 'Death is just a gateway through which we pass alone'. Can you talk about the loneliness of dying and the support we can give people at that time?

TW: Well, in the book *Solitude* as you've already said I meet very many different people, you know, from Australia, secret agents who had to develop a certain form of solitude and then, towards the end, a meeting with a lady who was a matron of a hospice and had been so for very many years, and had accompanied – oh, 1,800 people perhaps on their last journey out of life, and she'd been with them at that time.

Now I just would relate my own, part of my own experience for that. Towards the end of my captivity I became very ill. I couldn't breathe properly, I had a bronchial infection and I had to sit up, I was chained. I had to sit up on the floor with my back to the wall day and night. And at that point, in the final few weeks, I was put to be with other people, other hostages. And it was a trial for them because they thought I was going to die.



And at night, one of the hostages, Terry Anderson, the American journalist who was chained next to me about ... not very far away – about just that, about that far away but ... He leaned across as far as he could extend himself with the chain and he just put his hand on mine, and he didn't say anything; he just put his hand there, and I found that tremendously reassuring. And I realised, you know afterwards, because I'd often like many people been to see people who were ill, very ill, and probably at the point of death and sometimes wondered what should I say; and I realised at that point it doesn't really matter. What really matters at a time like that is actually the comforting presence of another person if you can have that. And beyond that you take the journey which you have to take alone and no one goes with you. You go on that journey and where you go, what happens, well, we don't know.

But the way to approach it I think is to recognise that death is not something to be afraid of. I mean, understandably anyone would be afraid of 'How am I going to die?' and that's what made me afraid. I actually went, I was taken for what turned out to be a mock execution and I yes, I was, I was, I was scared. But it wasn't so much scared of death itself. What really scared me was: 'Would it hurt? Would it hurt if they shot me or beheaded me or so on?' That's what, that's what scared me.

But death itself no because death is a part of the natural process of life and I think we should, and can, face it optimistically. It's going to happen to us sooner or later. We live life fully up to that point and when it comes we accept it, as that is the end, that is it, that is the end of this period in our existence. So again it's a question of your own mental attitude and the way in which you approach life will be the way in which you approach death.

Terry: Just picking up on that mock execution, and as well as that you experienced torture at various times during your captivity and ... At one point you write about that and you say that when you were returned to your cell, at one point after one episode you had an overwhelming sense of pity for the person who had administered your, the beating, and I found that quite a profound and unusual act of human empathy. I would have thought



certainly immediately after you've experienced a beating the last thing you'd be thinking about would be pity for your, for your torturer.

TW: Well, I thought at that point: this man probably goes home, he probably has a wife and children and yet he can go away from home and he can treat others – not just myself – but other people with such seeming callous indifference and hurt and pain. And then I thought to myself yes, but ach, that's human nature and that's my human nature too. You know, I'm not that I would torture people but there is that capacity within me because I'm not a complete and full and whole person. And somehow one could say yes, I have a deep sorrow for that man for the fact he's somehow allowed the negative side of his life to take him over and to control his actions.

And one of the things one has to do I think in, in solitude – solitude can and does mean for many people for the first time you are forced into a deeper introspection, and when you have that introspection you, anybody who is honest with themselves will discover, will discover the two sides of the character, two sides of the personality, call it what you will. You know, the negative and the positive, some call it good and evil and whatever. It's within all of us and all we can do about that is to try and reconcile ourselves within, try and be a little more whole within. And there are various ways of doing that. I mean, I have often said that good music like good language has the capacity to breathe harmony into the soul. And that's what I was seeking: harmony, inner harmony; and that's what I think is one of the goals of, of life – to be able to find that greater harmony within yourself.

T: Yes, you talk about at one point about tensions within yourself, and you quote a Freudian, Philip Rieff, who talks about desire and limitation, eros and authority intimately being connected – sort of lightness and darkness. And you wrote a poem about that called Self-examination. And you talk about the need to balance those tensions, those lights and darks within yourself.



TW: Yeah. It's not an easy process but I did it in part through – progressed along the road – I have never completed my journey by any means. But I mean I did it in part by, by writing, by words. I mean, I have the belief that good language like good music has the capacity to breathe harmony into the soul and that's what I was seeking. And although I don't claim in any way and I don't think anyone would say that I'm a great poet – not at all – but in some ways by attempting to condense in a few words something of what I was feeling, what I was expressing, was a way of also enabling me to find that inner, greater inner harmony within myself.

And the same about music, which has always been something that's been quite close to my heart, that too had the capacity to breathe harmony into the soul. There's just one little story about that: right towards the end of my captivity, the last weeks I got a small radio and I was terrified because I thought that when the batteries run down they're going to take it away. But they didn't, and I had this small radio.

And on the first night that I got it I balanced it on the metal bar to which my chain was attached and switched it on and it was, I got, I could get the BBC actually, the World Service of the BBC, which I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude. They were playing the First Night of the Proms and it was the music of Elgar and it was the Dream of Gerontius and I just sat there. And it wasn't so much the words, Newman's words, it wasn't the words at all. It was just the music of Elgar and somehow, you know, Elgar had that ability through his music to somehow remind me and bring me in touch with my home country, with my own situation, where I have my roots, and somehow again convey to me a little of the inner harmony that I was seeking. So I go back, you know ... Good music like good language has that capacity to breathe harmony into the soul.

T: Yes, and perhaps this might be a point, a nice point to sort of finish up. You're the President of the Llangollen Eisteddfod Music Festival and also, of course, when you were due to come over to the Guernsey Literary Festival this year you were going to do an hour



of music and your poems. And you've written a poem called Eisteddfod and perhaps that might be a nice way to finish off.

TW: Yes, it's not a, it's not particularly brilliant, it's just a little descriptive piece. Eisteddfod means a gathering and many people when they hear the word 'eisteddfod' immediately think of a Welsh-speaking assembly. Well, the International Eisteddfod of which I'm President brings together people from all over the world and it's been going since 1945 – oh, 1947, I beg your pardon – 1947 after World War Two when the people of this little village, Llangollen in Wales, decided that they were going to try and work for peace using that which was natural to them, the language of music. And so they started the Eisteddfod and it's now been taking place every year. It's severely threatened now, of course, like so many institutions, by the, the, the latest problems – cash problems and so on but then along with the rest.

Anyway, the poem reads:

Not land but sun:

My first introduction to the language of the bards.

The language where music

Resounds through the valleys,

Transforming the grimy realities

Of a workaday world.

Warming those who are caught

In the melody of the ages.

The field is a symphony of colour,

An unrehearsed cacophony of nations

Waiting with excitement,

When in song and dance

They reveal the soul of their homeland.



Now in the great pavilion they march  
Drummers, dancers, singers,  
National flags borne proudly aloft  
Ready to blend together through the language  
In which they are all one.

The river flows onwards through the town.  
Young boys dive into its cooling waters.  
People throng the streets.  
In the near distance the gentle strains of music  
Reach out into the world.

Be healed, be at peace.  
Let the harmony of nations enter your soul.  
Sing with joy.  
Today we are one.

T: Thank you very much, Terry.

TW: Thank you, Tony. And thanks to everybody who's taken the time and the trouble to listen to this little book festival. We hope it's ... It's a new experience for me and I hope it's been a positive one.