

Benjamin Zephaniah

Poet, 51, of Lincolnshire

If there is one word I live my life by, it is compassion.

I completely failed in formal education. I was kicked out of school when I was 13, unable to read and write. So I have learnt everything from the real world.

You only live once and you have to travel as much as you can. I have learnt about life by travelling, meeting people and seeing how they live.

There is a part of me which would have loved to have studied theology at university. I am fascinated by why people believe what they believe.

You should only have regrets if you don't learn from your mistakes.

Media commentators sometimes suggest that black people are inner-city people. No we're not. We are country people who ended up in inner-cities working in factories.

As soon as I am in Jamaica time seems to slow down. I open up in a way that you would only do in Britain with a therapist.

My grandmother didn't know how old she was. She would sit and tell me stories. It wasn't romantic, it was down to earth.

I talked to my grandmother about organic farming once and she asked, 'What's that?' She practised organic farming but didn't think of it as a trendy alternative. It was a necessity as she couldn't afford sprays and fertilisers.

I'm not sure why but there is something about Britain which makes it difficult to leave. I could be in India and I'll be looking forward to having a curry at home.

People say, 'I've done India', but it's impossible. Not even Indians can do India. It is such a vast country.

All the provinces in India are different; communist, capitalist, Maoist, full of gays or drag queens or party people. You can find anything you want.

Sometimes I'm critical of the news in Britain, but it is good. A lot of countries don't have the same sort of cross-examination of politicians.

I remember one year when England got kicked out of the World Cup, a newspaper said we should hold our heads in shame. That year we had done so well in terms of culture, I thought we should be holding our heads up in pride.

When we do give ourselves credit, it can be for the wrong things like 'military might'.

Benjamin Zephaniah should be an interesting person who is healthy and grounded and has a good spiritual aspect.

Rasta has had a great influence on me but it is not something which I preach. I try to be a good example.

Rastafarians tried to throw off the identity which was forced upon them by white colonialists. It was very important for black pride. Like most movements it has its pros and cons.

I want people to think for themselves and engage.

If someone asks me at a bus stop what my religion is, it depends how much time I have. If the bus is going to come in five minutes, I'd say Christian. If I have 15 minutes, I would say Rastafarian. If I have an hour, I would say I believe in God without religion.

I used to be scared of the word politics. But it means caring about how much tax you pay, the quality of the air you breathe, the quality of the water you drink, about equality in education and how women are treated. I would like people to care about each other.



A friend of mine who served in Afghanistan said to me, 'I don't like politics.' I replied that a lot of politicians would be happy about that because when they send soldiers to deal with their problems, they don't want them to think too much.

I get frustrated when I see musicians who just do politics in their music but who won't back organisations. I think it goes side by side which is why I am patron of 30 organisations. I can't be on the front line of all of them but can put my name to them.

The reason why activists stand out is because a lot of people are not activists. We should all be activists.

I'm going to have a tree instead of a headstone. But if I had a headstone it would say: 'He tried to love every body'.

* Benjamin Zephaniah appears at the Queen's Hall Arts Centre as part of the Hexham Book Festival on May 3, www.hexhambookfestival.co.uk. Box office (01434) 652477.