

# A POEM FOR TROUBLED TIMES

*by Alexander McCall Smith*



'My predominant emotion on the outset of this closing down of the country was a feeling of sadness' (Photo: Oli Scarff)

“People want to believe that something better will come from what we are going through. I think we need to believe they are right, because believing in something is a powerful way of making it happen. It doesn’t always work that way, but sometimes it does.

“I have written a poem especially for this moment, and the text is below. It comes to you with my warmest wishes, and my hope that you are keeping well.” AMcS

*The unexpected always happens in the way  
The unexpected has always occurred:  
While we are doing something else,  
While we are thinking of altogether  
Different things – matters that events  
Then show to be every bit as unimportant  
As our human concerns so often are;  
And then, with the unexpected upon us,  
We look at one another with a sort of surprise;  
How could things possibly turn out this way  
When we are so competent, so pleased  
With the elaborate systems we’ve created –  
Networks and satellites, intelligent machines,  
Pills for every eventuality – except this one?  
And so we turn again to face one another*

*And discover those things  
We had almost forgotten,  
But that, mercifully, are still there:  
Love and friendship, not just for those  
To whom we are closest, but also for those  
Whom we do not know and of whom  
Perhaps we have in the past been frightened;  
The words brother and sister, powerful still,  
Are brought out, dusted down,  
Found to be still capable of expressing  
What we feel for others, that precise concern;  
Joined together in adversity  
We discover things we had put aside:  
Old board games with obscure rules,  
Books we had been meaning to read,  
Letters we had intended to write,  
Things we had thought we might say  
But for which we never found the time;  
And from these discoveries of self, of time,  
There comes a new realisation  
That we have been in too much of hurry,  
That we have misused our fragile world,  
That we have forgotten the claims of others  
Who have been left behind;  
We find that out in our seclusion,  
In our silence; we commit ourselves afresh,  
We look for a few bars of song  
That we used to sing together,  
A long time ago; we give what we can,  
We wait, knowing that when this is over  
A lot of us – not all perhaps – but most,  
Will be slightly different people,  
And our world, though diminished,  
Will be much bigger, its beauty revealed afresh.*



Alexander McCall Smith is a British-Zimbabwean writer and Emeritus Professor of Medical Law at the University of Edinburgh. In the late 20th century, McCall Smith became a respected expert on medical law and bioethics and served on British and international committees concerned with these issues.

He has since become internationally known as a writer of fiction, with sales of English-language versions exceeding 40 million by 2010 and translations into 46 languages. He is most widely known as the creator of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series.<sup>1</sup>