

# WISDOM FROM FAR AWAY AND LONG AGO

*Prince Charles's confidant and spiritual guru Sir Laurens van der Post, tells Caroline Phillips about passion, plants and his extraordinary past*

**C**LOSE FRIEND and guru to Prince Charles, Sir Laurens van der Post, makes it a condition of interviews that he is not asked questions about the Prince of Wales. He has always refused to talk about him. So it is a bit like being Cinderella with the fairy godmother when Sir Laurens, 89, says he will allow me one question about the prince.

He has already talked to me about everything from nonagenarian sex and his marital infidelity to being the thirteenth of 15 children and his brutal experiences in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. Now I want to turn the fairytale pumpkin into a glittering coach. So I put my question, about which more later, then pushily ask even more: What does he think of Princess Diana? What did he teach Prince Charles to say to plants?

Sir Laurens — soldier, scholar, philosopher, intrepid explorer, conservationist, author, mystic, godfather to Prince William — has longish silver hair, a kindly face and eyes memorably pale blue and piercing. He wears a corduroy jacket, brown trousers and Hush Puppies and walks hunched over two walking sticks, the result of a fall in a hotel room 13 years ago. Despite his skills at the Japanese martial arts discipline ninjutsu, which teaches its students how to fall without injuring themselves, he broke six ribs and fractured a vertebra.

It is said that he taught Charles to speak to plants. "A lot of us talk to plants," he replies with the traces of an Afrikaans accent. "I know the greatest rhododendron grower in this country says 'Goodnight' to his flowers." What does Sir Laurens, or indeed a prince, say to them? "I might take somebody round with me to point out which ones are flourishing. I might say, 'My dear chap, you are doing well, aren't you? That's fine, keep it up'."

Sir Laurens was recently in the news because Lord Runcie, the former Archbishop of

Canterbury, told his biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, that Prince Charles had given up on the Church to follow a Laurens-style spirituality, defending faith rather than the Faith.

"I haven't read what the Archbishop said, darling, so don't let's talk about it," says Sir Laurens. "Runcie has got me wrong. I don't want to get drawn into arguments with those sort of..." He stops. "Every Christmas I go to New York to take the service and communion in an Episcopalian, Church of England, church there. I identify totally with the Herbraic, Roman, Greek evolution of the human spirit."

Sir Laurens is charming, interspersing his words with endearments, but abruptly choleric to the woman who rings his doorbell mistaking it for the porter's as I arrive, making me ques-

tion his sincerity. He is also astute and adores to talk. But he is hard of hearing — particularly on rather-not-answer questions — owing to the pills he's taking. He is also still recovering from a cataract operation last year.

We're in the top-floor, tower-block flat in London's Chelsea which Sir Laurens shares with Ingalet, his wife of 48 years. We start our interview in his study, amidst tribal art, Jung books, and a signed photo of Charles. We move to the shabby drawing room with ancient paint, frayed carpet, more photos of royal males and lovely eclectic pictures, including a wistful, contemplative portrait of Prince Charles. Sir Laurens says: "I like it because it has that pulling-back look that he has when he's thinking and inside himself. When you see him photographed in a group with Di, they manage to make him look so bad."

We're talking now because Sir Laurens has written a new book, *The Admiral's Baby*, his reflective sequel to *Night Of The New Moon*, about his time as a prisoner of war in Java. He was freed "half dead" in 1945. *The Admiral's Baby* is part history, part self-discovery: about his remaining in Java to oversee the Japanese and the British liberation of Java. With its spiritually illuminating incidents, such as a full moon after the Hiroshima atom bomb, and Sir Laurens's faith in his hunches (choosing the Derby winner, for example) we get an insight into the Jungian training of our future King.

Sir Laurens was born on his parents' farm in South Africa on December 13, 1906. "It was an extraordinarily happy childhood. On that scale we were almost a model community — it taught us about not being in conflict with communities and gave one a degree of tolerance."

His father was a barrister and statesman. "I think I was my father's least favourite child," he says, adding crossly: "I don't think he liked me. I don't know why. There was something about me that irritated him. Maybe that I talked too much." He died of pneumonia when Sir Laurens was seven. "So I didn't know him >



Sir Laurens van der Post, behind Charles at the christening of Prince William in 1982, plays a key background role in the heir's life

< well. I was there when he died and I went to say goodbye to him before his coffin was sealed. In our part of the world, I was often woken in the middle of the night to be with friends or family when they were dying."

He didn't find this traumatic. "Children are great realists. The feeble ones are the grown-ups who diminish everything for children by trying to make it nice." What effect did his father's death have? "How can I know what my life otherwise would have been like? Perhaps my sense of male order was never sufficiently developed, so it encouraged the feminine in me."

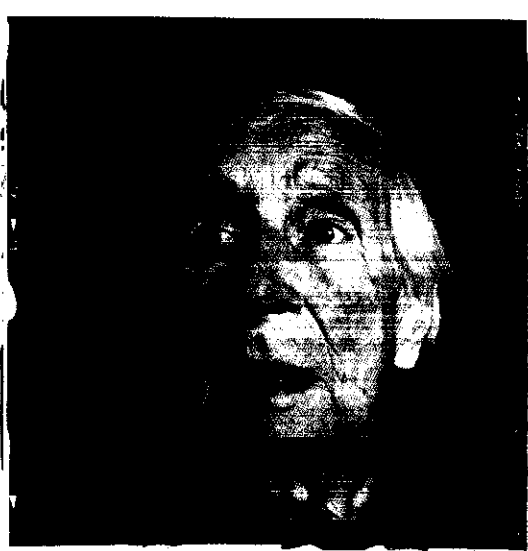
Sir Laurens was the only one of the children not to go to university. He came to London and married Marjorie Wendt in 1928. There he wrote his first book, *In A Province*, which was published in 1934 by Virginia and Leonard Woolf. He recalls Virginia as a "formidable" lady.

He joined the British Army in 1939, was captured by the Japanese in Java and held prisoner for three-and-a-half years. "They'd often take me outside and say I was going to be killed and then make me watch other people being killed before taking me back for questioning."

"I was terrified, but I developed a preference for the way I wanted to be killed. I didn't want to have my head cut off, be strangled, bayoneted to death or buried alive – all things that I'd seen. I wanted to be shot." How did he cope with such horrors? "You don't come into life inert and unarmed, you have millions of years of experience of life in you to help you confront anything that imperils your life."

He lived in the prison camp in a way that ensured he "wasn't scarred" afterwards. "I wrote a letter to 3,000 prisoners and had it pinned on the trees. It said they must not regard the interruption in the continuity of their lives as final, that there was another kind of continuity that could be discovered. We had a marvellous underground education system, using everyone from an Oxford classics don to someone who'd taught Australian illiterates. We wrote our own

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textbooks on lavatory paper, which was too precious for anything else."

After the war, Sir Laurens separated from Marjorie. "I hadn't seen her for 10 years because I'd sent the family to Africa when I saw the conflict coming. She had become a different person. It didn't seem right to go on. But I was devoted to her until she died of cancer last year."

They had two children, John and Laurie. "When I came back, they were grown up. I'd missed the vital period of their lives. I said, 'It's too late, I'm too old to be your father. So we must try to be friends'. And we were, I think." John a "brilliant" research scientist, died of cancer 11 years ago. "He died in such a way that I felt it was the right thing. I felt we owed it to him to be on his way again. He went in such a way that he also gave."

Sir Laurens married Ingaret Giffard, a former stage actress, in 1949. "She also wrote plays,

including *Because We Must*, which made Vivienne Leigh's reputation in London."

After the war, Ingaret became an analyst. "Jung said she was the finest, and had more understanding of dreams than almost anyone he knew." What's the secret of their marital longevity? How do they make it work? "If you have got to 'Make It Work' it's not much of a goer," he replies.

"I don't know if they ever work if you've got to make them work. A good marriage is like a good friendship, you don't have to work at it. We have so much in common and she's self-contained and not dependent on me. I'm more dependent on her."

He is less forthcoming about sex. "Sex?" he says, his voice rising indignantly. "Why must we talk about that?" He falls silent for the first time during our talk. Then he says "It's only part of something greater than itself. I don't see why one has to talk about it separately. You don't ask which is more important, the nose, ears or eyes. It's the whole face that's important."

Sex is still important to him? "Of course it is," he says emphatically. Does he believe in fidelity? "I think it's all right if you try but you can carry perfection to such a point that it becomes anti life." So was he faithful? "Well, I didn't do too badly," he says with a twinkle.

Which brings us to the earlier, promised, one royal question. The problem is that Sir Laurens refuses to answer it. Or any of my subsequent royal inquiries. He withstood the interrogations of his Japanese captors, so it is hardly surprising.

In December, he'll be 90. He doesn't fear death. Would he like to live to be 100?

"Oooh, I wouldn't mind at all. It's so interesting being alive. Such a joy." **5**

*The Admiral's Baby*, by Sir Laurens van der Post, was published this week by John Murray, price £19.99.

## THE SHAPING OF SIR LAURENS



Sir Laurens van der Post, pictured above far left, aged five, dressed for a dancing lesson with his brother Kuno and sisters Ella and Emma. He admits he was his father's 'least favourite child'. Right, Sir Laurens enjoys the only rose in Tobruk, Libya, in 1941, before his capture by the Japanese

