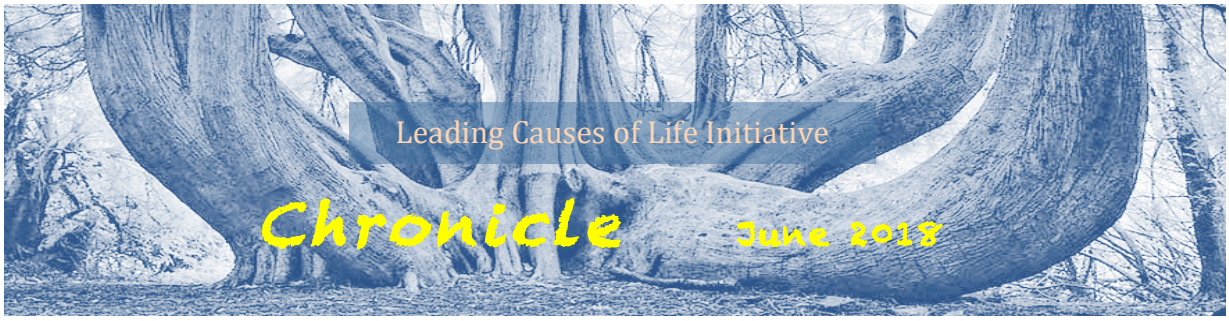


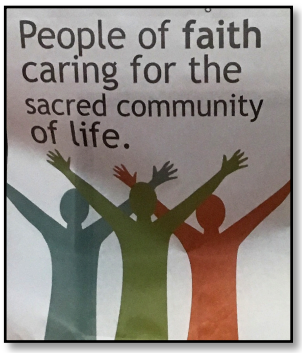
Life breaks through … some pretty tough ground

Perhaps, like me, you feel a growing sense of ill-ease, even low-grade depression, at the many disturbing developments around us. I don't mean the overarching challenges like climate change, rising inequality, the threat of microplastics, the increasing and invisible role of AI, or the like. We have seen these coming and many people are paying attention. Each of them will require us to invent innovative transgenerational ways of connecting and finding coherence with each other across the divisions that otherwise thwart an adequate response. But the hope is real.

I'm really thinking more of the rise of certain socially destructive patterns that *undo the very nature of the public sphere* within which we engage with each other. The normalization of authoritarian tendencies. Of the lie as acceptable in public discourse. Of fear and division as politically fertile. Of self-interest as the standard of our life together. Each represents a veneration of that which harms us as a whole — "death" rather than life — and much of it is not infrequently, in Orwellian fashion, cynically carried out in the name of life.

The opposite is what I presume we who are part of the LCLI Fellows group pursue in our own way, time and place. So here's something to encourage us all.

This week I attended a meeting of some interesting folks where a potent story was shared. We met in Salt River, which used to be a "mixed race" part of Cape Town in Apartheid days. It also once housed the now-closed clothing factories that drove the local economy. Now they have been replaced by an up-scale gentrified market, by new attempts at small enterprise, and by the offices of various non-profit organizations working for a different future. It was in one of the latter that we met.



An innocuous event at one level, especially if you unexpectedly happened to walk in, noticed the simple hall, and took in this small and motley group of people, it was the 2018 Annual General Meeting of SAFCEI (the South African Faith Communities Environmental Initiative). At another level not yet visible it was also far more significant than you might think. The occasion celebrated a moment in 2017 that can genuinely be called historic. It was then that SAFCEI, together with Earthlife Africa, a well-respected group focused on environmental justice, took on a challenge that few knew how to address and did what far more powerful bodies had failed to do.

Through court action they stopped the South African Government under ex-President Zuma from entering into a secret intergovernmental deal with Russia for multiple nuclear power stations that would be owned and operated by its state corporation, Rosatom, in South Africa. The provisional agreement, as reported by the South African investigative news source Daily Maverick, would have given Russia "a veto over South Africa's nuclear co-operation with any other country, enabled Russia to withhold any data it wishes from public scrutiny, exempted Russia from any accident liability and promised Russia favourable tax and financial treatment." It would also have placed a massive $70 billion dollar bill at the doors of taxpayers in a country with the highest Gini coefficient of inequality in the world, rates of unemployment that would spark revolutions in many other places, and levels of state corruption that would make many others blush.*

Makoma Lekalakala from Earthlife Africa and Liz McDaid from SAFCEI, with support from others, were the two women who led this court action. For it they have been awarded the 2018 Goldman Prize for environmental justice.

But it was not just about the environment. These two women from two smallish non-profits (NGOs) were taking on not only a powerhouse industry but also two very powerful men, both of whom have been far from shy, by hook and by crook, in using their might and that of the states they control (or controlled in the case of Zuma, now longer President) in their and their cronies' self-interest.

It is hard to underestimate how important it was that the threat of by far the largest procurement in the history of South Africa was stopped in its tracks. It was an action not just for environmental justice but against what in South Africa has come to be known, notoriously, as "state capture." The relief at their victory in court was palpable across the nation. It was massive, and it energized all sorts of initiatives that were otherwise sinking into despair and depression at the depth of corruption in our society. New life was born in the aftermath.

So here I sat at the SAFCEI meeting to celebrate this. And here, too, was Makoma Lekalakala, invited to share her understanding and vision of what she and Liz McDaid had achieved.

A woman who had grown up in the ghetto of Soweto, who had personally faced all the intentionally disabling policies and practices of the Apartheid state ranged against her and her

community, she made no attempt to take the limelight.

The first thing she said in a quiet, gentle voice is that the prize was neither hers nor Liz's. It belonged to all. There is nothing special about her or Liz, she said. All that they had done was to commit themselves to doing what is right and to do it with a principled stance against what is wrong, no matter who or what stood against them, and whatever the consequences. That's how she was brought up. That is what she learned in Soweto. She was no heroine but simply a person who felt herself accountable, and held herself accountable, for living up to what she is capable of as a human being. For that she thanked her parents, her community, and those who had encouraged and accompanied her along the way.

That's what Doug McGaughey and I call Spirit. That is life as we know it as human beings. Nothing complicated about it but everything profound about it. It's her testimony to this that made Makoma's sharing so deeply moving.

There's a side-bar also worth sharing, one that in its own way is not unrelated to Spirit. The SAFCEI Chair had during the course of the meeting noted that though individuals could join SAFCEI, in terms of its constitution only people who formally represent a specified 'faith community' had voting rights. Now a roughly middle-aged man wearing a Mid-Eastern scarf around his shoulders stood up on a point of order. "I am a Jew," he said. "To be sure, you have a representative from the Jewish Board of Deputies in SAFCEI. But I am *not* represented by them because I am a secular humanist Jew. How then do I, who believes in what you are trying to do, nonetheless find a place in SAFCEI with the right to vote?"

To this the SAFCEI chair, a practicing Anglican (Episcopalian) Christian, replied: "We are open to all who believe in doing what is right simply because it is right. Should you be able to bring together a community of secular humanist Jews who wish you to represent them on SAFCEI then you would be more than welcome. We would treat you as a faith community, and you would have voting rights."

At a time in too many parts of our world when those with contrary sentiments proudly, and increasingly boldly, stake a narrow claim for their own interests against the interests of the whole — anything but the moral high ground — I felt myself to be in the presence of people of spirit, people who, metaphorically but also literally, bet on life rather than death. SAFCEI's position was again profoundly encouraging. May you be similarly encouraged and strengthened in your own journey.

Jim Cochrane

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* This is not hyperbole. The raw scale and depth of "state capture" is devastatingly exposed in the book by investigative journalist Jacques Pauw, *The President's Keepers: Those Keeping Zuma in Power and Out of Prison* (Tafelberg Publishers, 2017).