Leading Causes of Life Initiative

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LCLI Chronicle

PASSING OF OUR FIRST FELLOW

Francis Wilson

With great sadness, we say farewell to Francis, the first of our Fellows to leave us. Although his contributions are largely invisible to Fellows who did not know him personally, those who did are aware of what an extraordinary friend and person he was. Not least myself, influenced by Francis in one crucial way or another for over 40 years now.

Immensely human and personal, son of the famous anthropologist Monica Wilson and of her colleague and partner, Godfrey, in dark times and otherwise Francis sought always to live up to the highest of which he was capable. Capable of a great deal, he made all of us who knew him feel that we, too, could fulfil far more of our potential than we might otherwise believe, not just for our own sakes but for the sake of all. If he was special, he never stopped making everyone who encountered him feel special. Life was his friend. And so it should be.

Jim Cochrane

'We've Lost a Bit of Ourselves ....'

Tony Heard, an old friend of Francis and well-known one-time Editor of the Cape Times, writing on hearing of Francis's death [*News24*, 28th April], puts it perfectly:

"When a figure of the calibre of Professor Francis Wilson, who fought poverty and injustice through applied research, dies, we South Africans lose a bit of ourselves."

Seeing Francis as one of the great 'thought-changers in South African history', Tony believes

"He personified what we should really be, one nation. And he told us how. ... His impact was felt, for instance, in reforming an appalling migratory labour system, providing sound new ideas to alleviate poverty, and the setting up special university units to help bring about a more just society.

He wrote and spoke from a vantage of careful and systematic research. This came from a respected academic with a rigorous mind trained in economic history, physics, and other disciplines. Unlike some others, he listened as well as lectured.

[He] could deftly connect with ordinary people, for example, titling his very popular 'short, short history of SA' Dinosaurs, Diamonds and Democracy. *[His] vision was the very opposite to the gruggy, greedy, corrupt and criminal politics that, in time, dogged too much of our democratic history ....."*

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Mamphela Ramphele, who was banished to Tzaneen after Steve Biko's death in detention, tells that Wilson would visit her regularly at the village of Leyenye where she had started another clinic. *"He'd come with his big smile and arms that would wrap around you bringing joy.... [He was a] real Motho Motho (a Sepedi expression). You could see here is a person with a heart."*

In one of his final messages to students when he was awarded an honorary doctorate by UCT in 2016, he called for "a radical creative vision beyond the gods that have failed both on the left and the right." It was their task to forge that new vision. "What is needed are hearts on fire and heads on ice."

[*Daily Maverick*, 28 April]

LCLI short bio for Francis: *http://www.leading-causes.com/lcl-fellows.html*

Daily Maverick piece: *click here*