



In conversation with Albie Sachs on Human Rights & Active Citizenry

by Roze Phillips

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We have the country we want, now its up to all of us to build the society we want.”

Albie Sachs (renowned Human Rights activist and former Judge of the Constitutional Court of South Africa).



Active citizenry is about learning in, even when times are tough. Leaning out is not the answer. Pragmatic optimism and civic agency is.

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E is on the Whatsapp group of Monarchies and Entertainment Royalty.

Recently he participated in a docuseries called Live to Lead which was a reflection on his leadership lessons, produced by Harry and Meghan, Duke and Duchess of Sussex. He also recently had the George and Amal Clooney Foundation for Justice inaugural award named after him, called the Albie Award.

Imagine my excitement at getting to meet him at Constitution Hill. For those who don't know, Constitution Hill in Braamfontein, Johannesburg was a Prison for prisoners (including Political prisoners) where human rights were horribly violated. You hear some really harrowing stories from the past. Now it is the seat of South Africa's Constitutional Court, there to ensure the protection of our Human Rights.

Albie on current-day South Africa almost 30 years into our democracy

Sometimes the best place to learn is at the feet of elders – especially when you are descending into pessimism. And I must admit, Justice Albie caught me at a low. It is difficult to remain optimistic in the face of corruption and service delivery failures.

Justice Albie acknowledged that he himself was deeply disappointed that today our Human Rights enshrined in the Constitution are still being violated – for example, many of our children don't have the world class education they deserve to prepare them for the world. Having said that, he reminded me that leaning out is not the answer. Leaning in is. So in fact, I received a healthy dose of pragmatic optimism. And I paraphrase what he said that really helped me change my mindset and see things differently. He said: It may not feel like it, and it is little consolation to many who continue to suffer, but: we have the country we want, now it is up to all of us to build the society we want.

Recently Albie made the same comment, but more nuanced to award-winning journalist Lukhanyo Calata during a keynote lecture at Stellenbosch University. The theme of his lecture was "Social Justice and the Constitution: Is this the country we were fighting for?". His response in a nutshell was: "Yes, this is the country I was fighting for. But no, it's not the society we were fighting for."

The Country we want, but not the Society we want

In reflecting on this comment, for me it demonstrates an appreciation that the Long Road to Freedom is still being walked.

Shared value businesses support their employees to develop mindsets of abundance to unlock dignity at work and in the communities, they operate in/



Some are driving down that road (potholes notwithstanding), some are walking with pebbles in their shoes causing terrible blisters, many of our citizens are walking bare feet carrying each other on their backs, while others have stopped walking and are abandoning the road in search of a different road to the same freedoms (whether it is through handing in their passports and exiting, or taking to the streets to protest, or even lawlessness). I wanted to understand directly from Albie, why he used these specific words. To him and I guess in our hearts of hearts we all know this: South Africa, is undoubtedly one of the Natural wonders of the world. And our open society was hard-won. But now that we live in the most beautiful country in the world, the envy of tourists the world over, we cannot give that up – the job now is to double down on building the society we want.

How do we double down?

Justice Albie said “I believed freedom was possible, even when it seemed impossible. I wasn’t alone. Others like Oliver Tambo and Ruth Mompati and Aziz Pahad and Joe Slovo and so many more shared this dream. We all believed we could get a democratic South Africa and we did, against all the odds, there are not many of us left anymore, we need to share our stories”. I don’t disagree with that BUT, and this is the crux of the matter... we cannot keep relying on the old stories to carry us through.

Those stories served that time. Now that we have the country we want, we need to create our own Good News stories. And there are many people and stories we should be celebrating, supporting, enabling, amplifying. Stories like the [Gift of the Givers](#) and other philanthropic and most importantly community led endeavors across South Africa, often done by those who have very little, but dedicate their lives to the service of others.

How am I leaning in to build the society we want?

I am involved with other South Africans working on creating what we call SPACES FOR DIGNITY. My own business, Abundance at Work and its intent to solve for dignity, unlock people’s abundance and improve how the world works, is actually directly tied to one of the statements from the Preamble of the Constitution that reads as follows: “Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person”.

Which is why my business is partnering with Constitution Hill in Johannesburg as a venue for [immersive experiences for Corporates](#). These immersions are for leaders interested in understanding how they more directly and deliberately make active citizenship and corporate social responsibility a part of their business imperative so that we do justice to the intent and free the potential of each person in their company to help unlock the potential of communities as they strive to be ‘shared value’ businesses.

Does our constitution need review?

Our constitution definitely needs a review and as I understand Justice Albie is part of a team of different minded people coming together to unpack the constitution and review if it is still fit for purpose and what needs to change. That is important. We must make more inroads in addressing inequities and inequalities and address our Foundational Human Rights.

What is still to be done on our Road to Freedom and more specifically how we all lean in?

Let me quote another Nobel Peace Laureate, Elie Wiesel who survived the holocaust but lost his entire family at the hands of genocide. “The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference. Only one enemy is worse than despair: indifference. Indifference of evil is worse than evil, because it is also sterile. To remain silent and indifferent, is the greatest sin of all.”

But I have to end with Madiba who together with many, some having lost their lives to give us a Country to work with... he said: “What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.”

Written by Roze Phillips