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## A YEAR TO USE YOUR OWN AGENCY



It's often easy to feel helpless in the face of immense odds, but taking responsibility for change is the only answer

I'm sure many of us will remember 2018 as the best of the past few years. Yes, it was a year of contradictions and paradoxes, but as Charles Dickens put it so eloquently in *A Tale of Two Cities*, we had the best of times, and the worst of times.

Last year began on a crest of hope, mostly because we had a new president, who had taken the reins of the ruling party. At the time, the state capture commission promised to reveal the truth, and the rand was finally recovering. But as the year unfolded, some of

of South Africans across race are poor. The official unemployment rate didn't budge, closing the year at more than 27%. It was also a year of violent protests, strikes and racial strife.

So what does 2019 hold for us? Will we ride on the crest of hope or wallow in despair? The answer lies in us: the year will bring whatever we collectively make it bring.

As humans, we are not hapless victims of forces outside our control. A lot of what happens anywhere is due to what humans do or fail to do. It's the reason for two world wars, and for the non-action in the face of suffering that made rebellion and demagoguery attractive. This is why Eleanor Roosevelt and her colleagues 70 years ago gave the Universal Declaration of Human Rights a heavy social justice leaning.

But as soon as the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the commitment of global leaders to ensure no-one would be left behind declined significantly. This is despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights giving the same weight to socioeconomic rights and the active improvement of human lives as it does to political rights, such as property rights.

We have similar agency when it comes to the environment. Science tells us that many natural disasters, such as droughts and floods, are due to global warming, created largely by man-made carbon emissions and deforestation. Indeed, some cancers are thought to be due to our environmental actions, such as polluting seas with plastics, which are then eaten by fish.

Of course, at an individual level things tend to be confusing, and it's easy to be overwhelmed by the

extent of external challenges. It's also easy to succumb to doing nothing and instead blame whoever put you in that awful position.

However, even then, when the odds seem immense, I believe you could take a lesson from a terrapin we saw in the wild in December.

Having wandered away from its companions, the terrapin crossed paths with us as it was trying to make its way past a lion's den. It managed to crawl without incident past a lioness, who was sprawled out near the den. But as it tried to pass the den, occupied by four young cubs, two leapt at it.

The terrapin immediately shrank into her shell. The lions tried to crack the shell, but failed.

As soon as she thought the coast was clear, the terrapin emerged and proceeded in the same direction. But again, as soon as the cubs spotted her, they attacked and the terrapin crawled back into her shell. The cubs tried all angles to crack the shell, without success.

Again, once the coast was clear, the terrapin resumed her journey – but this time she changed her direction. The cubs spotted her, but backed off. They must have realised there was no point.

The lesson was clear: understanding our strengths is the way out of adversity. Sometimes we wander away from our path and end up in trouble, but there is always a way out.

This doesn't mean we won't have to deal with paradoxical times – but, like the terrapin, we can use our strengths to pull ourselves clear. ✕

Madonsela is the Law Trust chair of social justice at Stellenbosch University



the ministers implicated in state capture and corruption refused to leave. The Vrede dairy investigation hit one speed bump after another. Then the state capture commission struggled to get co-operation, especially around the vetting of its staff by the State Security Agency – which, itself, is implicated in state capture.

All the while, the stark realities of the country weren't improving. Stats SA announced that 64.2% of black people are poor while 55.5 %

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