

Freedom is a Killer

President Jacob Zuma recently said that he “couldn’t sleep peacefully as a leader when there were people who still live in squalid conditions”.

Turning and tossing in his bed, he is tormented by the poverty and pain of his people.

I know how it feels.

But my burden is much lighter, by comparison.

I am tormented by the death of one individual.

Since I read [Sabelo Skiti’s story](#) (City Press, June 24), Andile Matshaya has not left my mind.

Why did he have to die?

No, I should rather ask: why did he have to be killed and why was he killed?

I ask these two questions because they express the graphic detail that my tormented mind had to contend with since I read about the killing of a fellow citizen I never knew.

The questions help me to ponder specific moments in a chain of events.

First, someone wanted to have Andile Matshaya killed.

Then that person or his agent went on to kill him.

The killing was thoroughly thought through and expertly executed.

The prevalence of death in our country may very well have become a generalised state of affairs.

As we become habituated to this prevalence, we may lose a sense of the - specificity of death.

It increasingly evokes niggling worries instead of fear, deep concern or outrage.

So bear with me in this instance of my torment as I reconstruct the - concreteness of one of the causes of death: killing.

Killing is "to put to death". It is "the act of terminating a life", usually by intention.

To kill is to "end or extinguish by forceful means".

It is to obliterate, to wipe out, a life.

The killing may be part of a process of removing or obliterating evidence by the one who requires that a person be killed.

Killing may facilitate the evasion of discovery in the aftermath of intentional wrongdoing.

Human life then becomes the equivalent of a record to be destroyed.

This is the point at which inhumanity is normalised and it is the frequency with which this point is reached that consolidates inhumanity into a social condition.

According to the report of a state pathologist, Andile Matshaya was strangled on the night of May 24 2012.

Did he trustingly respond to "room mervice" when he opened the door of his room at EasyStay Hotel in Pietermaritzburg?

We cannot tell.

But he did let in an assassin.

The news report does not specify the object used to strangle him, but I can imagine the terrors that seized him when the assassin grabbed him, pressed him down in swift movements that culminated in the coiling of something around his neck.

In that most desperate moment he must have made instant connections

that confirmed his worst fears.

Hadn't he received death threats?

Hadn't a colleague's car been recently torched?

Hadn't a transport forensic investigator who was "investigating graft in the department" also received death threats and even had his vehicle set on fire a year earlier?

Andile Matshaya must have made such connections in microseconds of realisation as the painful pressure tightened around his neck, blocking air to his lungs and giving way to the more physical struggle of his body in its instinctive effort to protect itself.

I pray that his brain, deprived of air, shut down quickly enough for him not to feel the desperate thrashing of his body. I pray that he was no longer aware of the assassin tightening and then waiting, and waiting, in his grip of death for the struggling body to finally go limp.

The assassin must have left the scene to report to his waiting client: The deed has been done.

But the import of what Andile Matshaya realised in his final moments continued to play out afterwards.

A few days after his killing, his internal audit colleague, who was on duty with him in Pietermaritzburg, had her home burgled.

"Matshaya's work laptop, a camera used during his trip to Pietermaritzburg and a cellphone were stolen," Skiti records.

The department head had instructed Matshaya's colleague to "remove and keep" his laptop.

Matshaya's brother tells us that "the page in Matshaya's diary recording details of his last day alive was torn out".

So, the assassin had enough time to take stock of his work and even eliminate evidence.

I typed "Andile Matshaya" into the search field of the department of transport's website.

"Sorry, no results were found for Andile Matshaya."

"Funeral" also yielded nothing, as did "corruption".

Frustrated, I thought a little harder.

I typed "memorial service".

This yielded two results.

A "statement by (Transport) Minister Ben Martins regarding bus accident that killed 19 people" and "Transport news remarks by the deputy minister of transport on the occasion of the mass memorial service of the bus crash victims".

The minister and his deputy were responding with dutiful care to a public tragedy.

This is as it should be.

But to what extent does this dramatised public concern come from a culture of care within the department itself?

While the impact of a public tragedy is immediate, the impact of internal tragedy is less visible, yet its effect may be long term.

Public tragedies do not occur frequently, but people working in a department meet daily to do public work.

How they relate to one another may define the impact of the department on public life.

How did the department respond to fear and anxiety among its staff who may wonder who will be next after Andile Matshaya?

What measures of protection and care within the department did the minister and his deputy take?

Without such internally focused measures, public statements of concern may be no more than posture.

Soon, such posture may begin to be read as a substitute for efficiency in the rendering of public service.

The internal audit assignment in the department of transport that Matshaya and his colleagues were undertaking had taken them to the Northern Cape, North West, Free State, East London and KwaZulu-Natal, where he met his death.

“They were inspecting road construction projects at provincial and local government level, and were due to visit the country’s other provinces.”

They were clearly on to something.

The death threats, house burglaries, and the torching of cars sent a strong message to people who were doing legitimate work on behalf of the state.

Who hired Matshaya’s assassin?

Is he part of a small operation involving a few individuals, or could he be part of a syndicate?

What could be his position in the group?

Was he empowered to pronounce a death sentence or did it come from a higher authority?

What is the extent of the syndicate?

Could it have a base inside the department?

Is it national, with a specialist focus on transport?

Or could a national syndicate structure exercise criminal jurisdiction beyond transport with a supra-departmental capability that approximates the power of the state itself?

What connections, if any, could this have to the e-toll debacle?

These questions are speculative.

But I feel certain that hundreds of thousands of South Africans are asking similar ones.

They speak to the probable extent of proximity to state authority, of syndicates prepared to kill to achieve their objectives.

But the real thrust behind such questions is to give specificity to the probable workings of corruption and criminality in the various tiers of government and beyond, in the same way I sought to visualise the dreadful end of Andile Matshaya as a specific death and not just one more statistic.

Meanwhile, what is the department of transport doing to find answers to an internal tragedy that has the capacity to paralyse it?

“We are staying only because we have not secured other positions elsewhere,” says one of Matshaya’s colleagues.

The syndicate and its assassins are succeeding.

The department will soon be in a position to be plundered at will.

Why did the department’s spokesman not respond to journalist Skiti’s requests for comment?

Such avoidance makes the department appear either negligent, or embarrassingly obliging to the corrupt.

We wait to see the same passion reflected on the department’s website in which the minister announced his shock at the loss of lives in a bus accident.

He went on to say: “No effort should be spared in determining the cause of this horrific incident.”

Public servants who love their work, as Andila Matshaya did, should be protected.

There is a vast armoury of constitutional state power to achieve that.

But there should be leadership willing and able to deploy it.

Such public servants then become the ultimate bulwark against corruption.

The bulwark will be in the very condition of a professional institution's immune system that will reject corrupt, viral incursions.

Andile Matshaya, a trained and dedicated professional, died in the line of duty.

He died in the process of unearthing information and knowledge affecting an aspect of state infrastructure at the heart of the economic and social life of South Africa.

Without transport a country can only stagnate.

The killers of Matshaya and those who ordered his death want only money.

They do not care for the capability and efficiency of the country's transport network.

This is what makes Matshaya's murder an attack on a national strategic asset.

There is a related strategic implication.

President Zuma's call for job creation has resounded throughout the public and private sectors.

He must certainly be aware that by protecting the life of Andile Matshaya and his colleagues, he enables them not only to keep their jobs, but also for more jobs to be created through benefits cascading from the positive effects of a clean, well audited state.

This makes us focus on the historic significance of those who will congregate in Mangaung to vote in new leaders.

Their historical sense will surely tell them: there was a time when people died for freedom.

Now we have the freedom.

But there are serious threats to it.

That is why we, as a people, are now deeply engaged in a struggle for the quality of our freedom.

That is what Andile Matshaya died for.

Ayi Kwei Armah writes about a Ghanaian mythical bird, the chichidodo, which hates excrement "with all its soul" but cannot resist the maggots that come out of it.

Think of those "squalid conditions" that keep our president awake at night.

Then think of the maggots bred by those conditions: squirming masses of worms of money crawling and wriggling out of undeserved tenders, and the intrigues that create jobs for assassins.

The nation that allows this to happen dies.

Think further: how many chichidodos will be circling the skies of Mangaung in December waiting to be chosen as, or willing to choose, leaders who will decry and condemn "squalid conditions" yet can't resist eating the maggots of corruption bred by such conditions?

Why should they be willing to eradicate such beneficial conditions?

This must mean that every single person who goes to Mangaung bears an obligation to remember what Andile Matshaya died for: freedom for us to be the best we can be, for the common good.

The gathering in Mangaung will deliver either our hopes or our nightmares.

Matshaya was not Jan Palach of Czechoslovakia who sacrificed his life

through self-immolation in protest against the Soviet invasion of his country.

Andile Matshaya chose to hold on to his life and do good.

But his life was taken from him.

That makes him no less heroic than Jan Palach.

The crucial difference is Matshaya's times demand we all hold on to our lives and make them bloom.

Therein lies our heroism.

Perhaps that is why I continue to mourn the death of someone I never knew.

He makes concrete for me the notion of "the unknown soldier": an ordinary citizen who grew his personal gifts for the good of all.

There are hundreds of thousands of South Africans like him.

Their responsibility to their own future and that of their country is no longer to wait for leaders to emerge, or to have leaders given to them.

They have to go out there and find them, or be them.

AyiKweiArmah writes the following about the type of unknown soldier we will need to fill the history-making halls of Mangaung this December: "Let us mix the long memories of a people destroyed with new narratives of our own making, as we move into space of our own choosing, as we dream in images woven from our people's best desires, as we plan on designs drawn from our own reflection, then make again the universe that might have been but was not, here in this place, now in this time freed for our new creation."