

A word or two with Thuli Madonsela

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

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It's been more than a century since Rudyard Kipling penned, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs..." in his iconic poem *If*, but in my humble opinion that sentiment rings true of Thuli Madonsela today.



Thuli Madonsela

At the risk of overmixing metaphors, I would say the former public protector has shown extreme grace under fire, even in the face of death threats when her office's State of Capture report blew the lid on the very rotten state of affairs in our government.

She told *Carte Blanche*'s Derek Watts at Momentum's Outcomes-based Investments launch in Cape Town recently, that when she took up the office of public protector, her predecessors warned her of the two worst things she could expect. "Someone was going to insult me, and that at a VIP function someone would refuse to sit next to me." She certainly didn't anticipate the "stormy waters that I eventually encountered".

Watts: "Was your life in danger?"

"It certainly was. My life was threatened. First I was told there was a bull's eye on my back. Last year was the worst. I started receiving SMSes that a hit man had been hired."

Madonsela said it was at the same time that her relationship with the security services had deteriorated. Yet, in typical style, her concerns were more for her children, although they were the ones trying to protect her. "My children tend to think they are the parents. But I was worried about their physical and emotional wellbeing."

Watts: "Did you mean to leave your office with such a bombshell?"

She explained that as the investigation into state capture progressed, it became more obvious that there was indeed a shadow government holding the reins of power in South Africa. "Everything is poisoned. My team realised we were in a chess game. Every time we made a move, it was countered."

"We felt strongly that the public had a right to know, hence the decision to publish the report."

Watts: "How do you deal with adversity?"

"The first thing is forgiveness. For the person and myself. We're all doing the best we can. When people strike out, it's

because they are afraid. I'm also very spiritual, and will pray and meditate about it," said Madonsela.

Her philosophy works well, as she exudes a sense of unflappability and quiet dignity that makes you instinctively trust her and that she will do the right thing. Madonsela is also quick to point out that she never was a lone crusader, but rather a team leader. "When the headwinds came, we faced them as an entity."

Watts: "What were the important lessons you learnt from being public prosecutor?"

Madonsela said it is the art of listening, and she's certainly got that skill nailed. When you talk to her, she locks into you with a fierce intensity. And it's not just your words, but also your expressions and gestures that she follows.

"You need to listen to the things that aren't being said and be able read between the lines," she said, adding that people have all sorts of reasons not to tell the whole truth, going back to fear.

"If you're not paying attention, don't be surprised if you end up walking alone."

Watts: "Are you confident the constitution will survive the current situation?"

Madonsela's answer comes with total conviction. "100% certain." This, from the woman who was part of the team that drafted the constitution, gives me a little hope.

"Leadership is all about character and skill set. A leader can learn competence, but if their character is to look after themselves... That's not going to change."

"Built into the architecture of the constitution are safeguard to overcome human failings. The mothers and fathers of the constitution had the foresight to give citizens access to the courts and other mechanisms to protect their rights. Don't feel guilty about using them."

What next for Thuli Madonsela?

On her return from completing a social justice course at Harvard University, Madonsela will take up the social justice chair at Stellenbosch University. Her job, she says is to "flesh out what social justice is".

Once this has been narrowed down, an app will be developed for decision makers to build the concept into their strategies. "Very often decisions are made with good intentions, but may unintentionally disadvantage those it is trying to help."

Madonsela said that the project will initially focus on certain sectors, namely law, education and health.

ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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