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The future is shaped in your mind

AS I drove to work listening to the car radio, I could hardly believe my ears. The president had issued a special statement on the death of a teenager, Leigh somebody. But so did the office of former president Nelson Mandela and a host of other organisations.

While driving home that evening to the soothing sound of classical tunes, the show's host interrupted the programme to bid condolences to the parents of Leigh. I was irritated because I was wondering how the parents of the hundreds of young people who get killed every year feel about this special attention.

Why this woman? My conditioned racial antennae relayed familiar answers: it is a white, blond woman from Sandton, stupid! I entertained this easy answer for a moment, but I sought rival explanations.

Then the repeated media images of Baby Tshepang came to mind, the little kid who was brutally raped and killed. So did the images of the police dogs being set on suspected illegal immigrants.

And I remembered: no, this was not simply an obsession with the violation of a white woman. It had everything to do with the obsession of South Africans with the most vile, outrageous and provocative stories of crime and violence. The media here has a dual role: it creates the angst which has come to define our state of being, and it feeds that angst, night after night, day after day, with the most vicious atrocities or thoughtless images imaginable.

It would be easy to blame only the media for this dumbing down of the public, but we also need to take a good look at ourselves as consumers of this relentless onslaught on our senses. Drive along any major roadway in South Africa and watch the billboards advertising the main

Professor **Jonathan Jansen** looks at the effects of the murder of Leigh Matthews on the South African mindset

news of the day.

I keep a mental record of some of these: "Leopard eats Dog" or "Women Rape Man" or "Nude Springboks: Pictures" or "Woman's Unexplained Itchy Bum". I did not make this up; these are actual billboard advertisements by newspapers reaching record sales.

As South Africans, we talk ourselves into a collective social depression. We hunger for bad news, vile stories and vicious behaviour.

I recently spoke at a meeting of school principals, but before I took the stage, one of their number read from the book of Lamentations and then prayed. He beseeched the Almighty to save our country from its evils and from the terrible state of our education system.

I was horrified that his personal state of mind was what the children in his school have to face every day. To be sure, there is much that can be improved in our society and our schools. But I do not believe that our country is falling apart. Yet this state of mind is what creates the doom and gloom of our society.

I believe we have a young, tested but resilient democracy. I enjoy a country in which for the first time I

can live without fear of the state. I do not believe the economy could do better at this time. I sense incredible optimism outside the country about our potential as a developing economy. And I witness

daily the spontaneous vitality and hopefulness among our youth. And it is our youth who deserve better stories about our future than what the media and adults bequeath to them. I recently spoke to hundreds of youngsters from neighbouring schools at two ATKV camps. I shared with them lessons of life that, I argued, they were unlikely to learn at school and which were vital to their survival in a new SA and a

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global economy. Most of all, I spoke about their untapped potential, bright futures and about hope.

At one of these camps, scores of youngsters stood in line to talk excitedly about the positive messages they heard about their future. God forbid that these young people inherit the negativism of adults and the media; for it is in their orientation to the future that the future of our country can be secured.

For this to happen, we have to stop behaving as if we are victims. White people believe they are vic-

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tims, that everything they once enjoyed has been delivered into the hands of blacks. It is impossible, in this mindset, to believe that the black candidate in a job interview could ever be the better candidate - it could only be affirmative action.

Africans believe they are still victims and that whites still control the economy and hold the best jobs; the fact that the public sector is almost entirely black is not visible to such claims. Coloureds think they have the best argument for victimhood: "Not white enough under the old order, not black enough under the new order."

Yet when I visit Cape Town, where I grew up, I find to my horror that the frontline employees in shops, banks and businesses remain occupied by, yes, coloured men and women. Yet we are all victims. I saw a healthy 20-something white man on a street with a board that said in Afrikaans that he was jobless because of affirmative action. Next to him was a healthy 20-something black man selling cheap children's toys. But the opposing images they represented were powerful: the one man sought sympathy for his imagined state, the other tried to make the best of his equally miserable situation.

How we see the future, is all in the mind.