

Tribute to Rashid: Your life and death

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Davao City's former mayor, Rodrigo Duterte, is running for election again in May 2013, despite being complicit in the extrajudicial killings that continue to haunt the city. One such killing was that of Rashid 'Jun' Manahan in 2004. Mayor at that time, Duterte had ordered the police to conclude its investigation into Manahan's death promptly, but the investigation never led to any prosecution or punishment of his killers.

Rashid, your death did not put an end to what you worked for in your time. Rather, it tested those who should have carried forward your kindness.

I can still remember clearly how we pledged solidarity with others at a beach resort in Davao City, now known as a violent place for beachgoers to go. There was where you, I and others signed a pact of our brotherhood. It was not in blood, as our ancestors' custom, but it was real.

Your thoughts about the denial of rights to construction workers in General Santos City—where you and I planned to do community organizing in assisting workers fight for their rights—left an imprint on my heart and mind. We were young, so inspired and so ambitious, and we often forgot to think of ourselves. While at the beach resort, it never occurred to me that a few months later would be the last time I saw you.

My last memory of you, the last time I saw you, was when you came to my office to speak to a colleague. I was lying in a corner under a table, exhausted, resting and trying to catch sleep after a long day's work. Your feet, your voice and footsteps while I was lying on the floor were my last memories of you. I regret not forcing my exhausted body to rise up to speak to you. I never saw you again.

Later on, I heard how you were shot in Davao City while you were organizing a meeting in August 2004 for the abolition of the death penalty in the Philippines. My mind froze. I was speechless, I could not think, and I struggled to find words that I wanted to say. I learned you were with a colleague when you were shot. She was an eyewitness of your murder. But even she was so frightened to talk openly about how you died; too scared to testify for the prosecution of your murder.

Just days after your death, after only a short-lived condemnation, it was 'business as usual' for the NGOs and groups in Davao City. It is not really so surprising though; extrajudicial killings in our city were routine, and you, like many others whose cases remain unsolved, were another body added to the ongoing killing phenomenon.

Your colleague, I learned later, could not even travel to the place of your killing, Davao City. Now, the place where we spent our university, where we conceived our sociopolitical ideas, where we shared our dreams, is the place most people outside Davao are too frightened to be in. When I was asked to carry her testimony from Manila to be given to the special investigating body, I could not understand why I was asked. I simply took the documents I was asked to give.

I was told it was her testimony regarding how you were killed in her presence. I had no idea what was written on it. I did not ask her why she could not give it herself to the police investigators. Probably, I was so ignorant or naïve as to what was happening then.

I did it for you, not for her. For other people to know what happened that day; what has happened and how they murdered you. Also, I never thought I would end up replacing you at your vacated post: advocacy officer against the death penalty. I was later told that no one applied for your post. They were apparently too frightened that what happened to you would also happen to them. Taking over your job made me understand you more; your aspirations and your dilemmas. It also let me know who was there for you, the real, kind people.

During my term, I saw how people-regardless of their commitment-could stoop to such low levels in their personal lives. I was there, trying to carry on what you had left, but politics and unprofessional behavior I could not stand. I regret that neither me nor your group, were able to continue pursuing your case, nor carry on the work you were doing.

To this day, I'm still wondering why people, even activists, sometimes make their personal interests a priority over truth, solidarity and rights protection.

Writing this tribute gives me some small comfort-to share my reflection on your life and death, so that at least some people would gain a different perspective from reading it. Nothing can alleviate the guilt and sadness I feel at the lack of progress and public interest in your case.

Years after your death, in May 2006, another person not close to me questioned your integrity and kindness, telling me that your death was personal, a 'love triangle (a crime of passion)', which was why they did not intervene in your case. Your death was personal, not political. Even at that time, I was helpless to defend you. My deepest apology, Jun.

How could I defend you when your colleague, an eyewitness to your death, did not openly talk about how you were killed? I was not even able to read her testimony that she asked me to give to the police. After I ceased working as your replacement-advocating against the death penalty-there was no possibility for me to understand more about your death. Until today, I continue asking the question, 'why did it happen?'

To the best of my knowledge, the investigation into your death never concluded whether your death was of personal or political reasons. However, to justify their reluctance, unwillingness and refusal to intervene in your murder, people have already made their own conclusion. I know someday I would know what really happened to you. When the time comes, I will speak for you-whether your death was for personal or political reasons does not matter to me. The fact is that no one was punished and no justice was done.

You were like many other humans who perish in Davao, never seeing their day in court. Somebody just decided to take their life away. They die in broad daylight, in public and crowded places and even in their own homes. They were called menace of the society, bad eggs, drug addicts and trouble makers. You were also portrayed as such.

If being an activist like you is a menace, as perceived in our society, this kind of society doesn't deserve to have your kindness as a person. Kind and good hearted individuals like you, and the hundreds of other human rights and political activists who have perished in our country in the recent past. I know their deaths did not go in vain, but I hope our people will some day recognize their contribution. You suffered, in your time and in your death, because you and other people like you wanted to have a better society for us to live.