Connecting the dots...

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Around midmorning on a Tuesday in April 1989, I received a call from security personnel manning the entrance to the Old Mutual head office building in the CBD, at the corner of Speke Avenue and Second Street. They wanted me to come down to the foyer located at the main entrance to the building. Each time there was a visitor wanting to see a member of staff, the guest would walk up to the granite stone facade where at least two members of the Old Mutual security team sat to attend to enquiries, including requests to see members of staff for either private or company business. Security would make a call to the relevant department through an extension requesting the member of staff in question to come down. The staff member concerned would seek the permission of their team leader or section manager before taking the lift, from in our case the 6th floor, all the way down to the ground floor to meet up with their visitors. Back then, a whole section shared an extension with one telephone handset.

It was common cause that we were expected to keep the number of our visitors to a minimum, which was such a tough call in view of the conflict that exists between our African culture and Western values. More often than not, visitors would come without prior arrangement because they wanted to deliver a parcel or an important message, while others in their wisdom or lack thereof, came by merely because they were in the CBD, popularly referred to as 'town' and thought they would pay a courtesy visit. Yet others came because they were stuck in town with no money for food or bus fare to go back home, having had a long day looking for jobs, running errands or for whatever reason. Due to the Christian teachings and moral values I subscribed to, I would come down to see most of the visitors that came looking for me, trying as much as I could to meet their needs and expectations. That I received a considerable number of visitors during working hours must have been one of the reasons why Garcia Viki, our department manager, thought I was the worst thing to walk on planet earth. I didn't think that these visits affected my performance at work that much as I always got good reviews each time I had a performance appraisal, which we had once every six months.

By 1989, I had been at Old Mutual for three years and most of my friends and relatives knew I was working for them, which was no mean feat since Old Mutual was counted among the best employers at the time and still is.

The other employers of choice were largely banks, amongst them Standard Chartered Bank, Barclays, now First Capital Bank, Zimbank now ZB Bank and Grindlays, now Stanbic Bank. In that group were also UDC Limited, Ral Merchant Bank and Bard Discount House, all of which would in 2000 become part of BancABC after their acquisition by the Douglas Munatsi led Heritage Merchant Bank after negotiations that lasted for 18 months. It was also every employee's dream at the time, to work for audit firms such as Ernest and Young, Peat Marwick, which merged with KPMG in 1987, and Coopers and Lybrand, now known as PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), following their merger with Price Waterhouse in 1998.

Most of us admired UDC whose employees would go to work in a staff bus which picked them up from designated points across the city. Their signature expensive suits and briefcase clad look resonated with their pay-off line – 'the money people'.

In Highfield where I lived, they would be picked up next to our local Zupco bus stop from where I boarded the Zupco bus on a daily basis. When their bus came, they would board one after another in an orderly fashion and without any pressure to vacant seats, while a few metres away from their orderly queue we would be pushing and shoving to get onto a Zupco bus with only a few places for standing passengers. We didn't have much choice if one wanted to be on time for work.

It was a badge of honour to be working for any one of these institutions back then. To this day, I remain grateful and privileged to have worked for Old Mutual. I was also growing and maturing spiritually.

In my youth, I was a very strong member of the United Methodist Youth Fellowship, (UMYF), at some point holding the elected position of Projects Chairperson among the many church leadership positions I held. From time to time, my faith would interfere with my work. Between meetings, it was not uncommon to be called downstairs to meet with members of the UMYF projects team that I led who would have popped up without notice to share some hot gossip or ideas which they felt could not wait until the next Sunday service, much to the chagrin of my bosses. Little did I know that one such casual visit would change my life for the better!

On this particular Tuesday I remember very well, I had been down to the foyer a few times already, the boss must have been counting and was definitely not amused. Regardless, I asked to be allowed to catch the lift to the ground floor one more time, and my immediate superior begrudgingly allowed me to go but with a look that said, there you go again, how dare you! When I got to the foyer waiting for me was George Mufandaedza, a cousin who was studying accounting and finance at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa.

My cousin, Chipo, was married to George's uncle, Cyril Mufandaedza, now late, (MHDSRIEP). A businessman of repute during his time, Cyril had a huge influence on me. After some pleasantries, George handed me a spiral-bound photocopy of a book titled, Think and Grow Rich by Napoleon Hill. He said, "Sekuru, this is a life changing book. Because I know you like reading, I have taken the trouble to photocopy this book and I know it will change your life". George knew, as he handed me that photocopied version of Napoleon Hill's book, that he was in breach of copyright laws, but it didn't matter to him as he was convinced he was sharing the gospel of mental development and growth which at the time he couldn't afford to buy from the bookstore given the high cost of books and the fact that he was a student.

All the same, I thanked him and we parted ways after I promised to do justice to his troubles by reading the book. With this assurance, he left to start on his journey back to Grahamstown.

After seeing George off, I took two things back to my work station on the 6th floor that day, the elevator and my spiral-bound book, Think and Grow Rich, without much thought about how reading this book would in fact change the way I think and ultimately change my life.

I would remember that it wasn't long after, that I had taken the lift down to the foyer, having been summoned by a primary schoolmate, Godfrey Mubaiwa, who had gone on to urge me to study marketing through IMM instead of the London Chamber of Commerce - LCI, that I was considering. Consequently, I did some cost comparisons and in the end settled to follow his advice. By the time Godfrey came to visit, he had become a relative after my cousin, Leonard Basiyawo, now late, (MHDSRIEP), had found love in the Mubaiwa family and married Godfrey's young sister, Sybil. In fact, Leonard is another person who had a huge influence on my entrepreneurial journey.

By the time George came to visit, to give me his own life-changing pill, I was already in a different place with regard to strengthening and developing my mental muscles. Following the advice I had been given by Godfrey whom we called Goddie, I had completed Part 1 and was studying towards Part 2 of the thirteen subjects of the IMM Diploma course. Even though I really wanted to read the book George gave me, I just couldn't strike a balance between my school work and poring over Napoleon Hill's masterpiece. When one night I picked the book up and started reading it, I could not put it down, reading it from cover to cover within a few days. I would read it a couple more times, learning and internalising all I could get out of it.

I can honestly say that Think and Grow Rich stands out as one of the books that changed my life, thanks to George. I will forever be grateful to Godfrey and George for exposing me to the tools that would help develop and shape my mind, going forward.

At church, I was elected the Highfield Circuit UMYF Projects Chairperson and I subsequently introduced a new way of fundraising. We designed and ordered hundreds of neck ties branded with the UMYF emblem, which was a first among church circuit youths. We raised a considerable amount of money for the youth projects during my tenure as the Circuit Projects Chairperson. Historically, it has been the Church's mission to empower youths, intellectually, as well as spiritually as they are viewed as leaders of today and tomorrow. Leading the circuit projects committee in raising funds through the selling of neck ties was one of the highlights of my tenure as Projects Chairperson. It was indeed a privilege and honour.

The United Methodist Church has over the years built on their tradition of raising additional funds outside of tithes and pledges. The church has successfully built and run schools, which have produced some of the brightest minds in our country, some of whom are making an impact locally and internationally. It has built hospitals to tend to the sick also, amongst many other projects that benefit humanity in various ways. Their men and women assemblies have been involved in many income-generating projects, helping raise funds for the church which inevitably help it to execute its mission. As church youths, we were encouraged to do the same so as to expand our minds and horizons for our sustenance in future, both as family men and women and leaders of tomorrow. I value this lesson very much.

After my successful tenure as Projects Chairperson, I shared my thoughts of starting out in business with nine of my friends, suggesting that we come up with a constitution that would govern our operations as a collective savings group which we named Syndicate. When I broached the subject with four of my friends, they liked the idea and they sold it to others they considered their close friends, making our initial group of ten. The group was made up of Gutsikanai Nyamupanda, who would become the best man at my wedding and today works in the internal audit department of Nyaradzo. Morgan Machikiti, a close friend who would be one of the groomsmen at my wedding as well as Tafadzwa Mazarura, a childhood friend who would also be one of my groomsmen. I also invited a close cousin of mine, Joseph Matarayika who had moved to Harare from Mutare when he got a job at Air Zimbabwe. Joseph would also be one of my groomsmen. Raphael Mujuru, now based in England and working for Nyaradzo would invite two of his close friends, Farai Mashonganyika and David Kapende. I invited Edmore Magara, another friend with whom I have remained close. Edmore invited Wonder Kanyimo, with whom he worshipped in Glen Norah. After Wonder became a close friend, I invited him and David Kapende to be groomsmen when I got married to Mavis.

One of the objectives we had as Syndicate was to mobilise our collective savings and invest so we could start and run a business of our own at some point in the future, although we didn't know what we would venture into. During our first Syndicate meeting, we held elections and decided to open a savings account with CABS. A subscription of ZW$50 a month each was quickly agreed upon and after twelve months of contributions we had ZW$6000 in our account, a huge amount of money in those days. We bought shares on the stock market so we could grow our capital through dividends and share price movements. We gave each other assignments, buying this and that so we could sell and grow our capital base.

Mr Brian Jonga, now late (MHDSRIEP), our Highfield Circuit UMYF Father Advisor who worked for Superior Footwear would recommend that we buy shoes from his workplace for resale, which we did. We would make sizeable margins buying and selling shoes from Superior Footwear and from our investments, we even bought a club car. We agreed that to celebrate some of our successes, we would treat ourselves to holidays with our partners and later wives.

One of the places we went to on holiday was Mazvikadei Resort in Banket. By this time, most of us were married, except for David Kapende who was still searching for a partner. Impressed by how organised we were, the wives would form their own group of ten naming it Ruvimbo, which survives to this day. When Edmore Magara was posted to Sweden on his tour of duty together with his wife Koleta, we would replace him with Webster Chikengezha and his wife Rose. Webster is now MD of Nyaradzo South Africa.

When Tafadzwa and his wife, Julie, left for England and later on Joseph and his wife, Lynn, also left for England, getting monthly subscriptions from them was problematic. We replaced them with Wesley Kaisi and his wife Messina and Chris Matimura and his wife, Jessina, all of whom now work for Nyaradzo with the exception of Wesley.

For wise counsel and direction we invited father advisors Ernest Mupfunya, (MHDSRIEP), and Never Chirokote to be our patrons, both of whom would play an important role in my life when I became a sales representative at Old Mutual's Trustee House Branch. Mr Mupfunya, as branch manager, while Mr Chirokote would be my District Manager. Although I didn't have the word mentor nor mentee in my vocabulary back then, with the benefit of hindsight, I realise these two were actually my mentors. After a few years, we chose Mr William Muzorewa to replace Mr Mupfunya so we could have fresh ideas and different leadership styles and guidance. William and his wife, Lillian, would be a couple we admired and looked up to them as role models for our marriages.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, I was already transforming into the business person I am today and these were all character building moments. My Syndicate colleagues must have thought I was going bonkers when I started talking about starting and running a funeral assurance and services business. I can't blame or fault them because it was unfashionable back then to think, let alone talk about owning and running a business that had funeral in it.

It was farfetched, it was unfathomable, almost enigmatic. But I was thinking it, and I intended to unmask it and unpack it, and so I continued, albeit subconsciously, to connect the dots....