Connecting the dots...

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Philip Mataranyika
Nyaradzo Group,
Chief Executive Officer

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Nothing sustains motivation more than belonging...

The African extended family is a good support system that helps bring out the best in us even when the stakes are heavily tilted against us. Staying with one's parents in childhood is the first prize. In my case when my parents went their separate ways, we stayed with either of them at different times. Staying with Mother was always a better option given it was only her expectations that we had to meet. Staying with Father came with the collateral burden of stepmothers, each of whom had their own expectations which in most cases were exacting and onerous.

The few years I stayed with my mother in my early childhood were priceless. They made me appreciate how hard-working and committed she was towards our upkeep, as her children.

In 1979 when she came to pick me up from Rusape after my injury, I was fifteen with my biological clock ticking fast towards adulthood. As such, I didn't find staying with her exciting. I needed a father figure especially at that point in my life. I was thankful for all my mother had done but I needed to belong to a new tribe, a tribe steeped in the culture of work, a tribe from which I could learn and grow. I would therefore make the conscious decision to move out of Mother's shared accommodation at Matererini Hostels.

I was thankful that Mother's childhood friend, Abigail Muropa, had been so generous as to allow us to share her two-bedroomed apartment, after the going got tough for my mother in Chitungwiza following the staff rationalisation at John Sisk and Son, which had a domino effect on her catering business. Isn't that what friends are for!

Once the pain in my injured left leg had become bearable, I had been up and about walking the short distance from Matererini Hostels to Mbare Musika where Sekuru had set up camp with his son, Edward, doing odds and ends. I needed no persuasion to move out of Mother's place of abode to the Mbare Musika Campsite and it was there that I found my tribe of men, in Sekuru Samson and his son.

Sekuru Samson invoked in me, memories of his last ditch attempts to save his sister, Mabel's marriage, losing his cool in the process. He would brawl it out with my father, giving us children, the clearest sign that our father's marriage to our mother had reached the end of the road.

Even though I had met Sekuru Samson on a few occasions thereafter, he had long earned my respect, not least for having my mother's back, especially when he, along with his brother Jivas, had taken her in as a shopkeeper for the family store in Nyatsanga, Mhondoro after the collapse of her marriage. Unfortunately, the war of liberation which was now at its zenith would take a toll on the family business, resulting in its collapse. This was, however, long after our mother, Mabel, had left Nyatsanga to try her luck in the big city.

Sekuru Samson's reputation at being skilled with his hands preceded him. I would experience his resourcefulness first-hand when he took me under his wings and tutelage. I was transformed from a teenager who was thin on life skills into a multi-talented young man with confidence and a zest for life.

I couldn't have wished for anything better and I credit Sekuru Samson for most of the skills that I acquired in my adolescence, as these were great years of learning and growth. Whereas in my case, it was a question of being sharpened by an iron, most of what Sekuru Samson had achieved from his youth, including earning a reputation for being a hardworking man, was through self-education.

A story was often told of how, as a young boy, Samson learnt to drive the family tractor way back in Bvumbe, Rusape, without his father knowing it. The cat was let out of the bag when the time came for his father, Samuel Musasa, to teach him how to drive, but soon realised that his son was well ahead of him as he was already good at it. Given the sheer size of my grandfather's fields in Bvumbe, the revelation raised neither resentment, nor regret, if anything, Grandfather Samuel was proud of his son, allowing him to do most of the work that required using the tractor when he was at home, including tilling the land.

It was also while in Bvumbe that Sekuru Samson learnt how to install and repair irrigation pumps after his father had built a small dam in the village from which they would draw water to irrigate their fields and grow crops all year round.

With time, Sekuru Samson was very knowledgeable with water pumps and most things mechanical and would in the years that followed make a business out of fixing broken pumps. Consequently, he adopted the technology at his rural home in Mubaira, Mhondoro, where he had relocated to after they were driven off their communal lands in Bvumbe to make way for the establishment of Tsanzaguru Township, which came hard on the heels of the construction of Rusape Dam between 1969 and 1972.

There was so much more Sekuru Samson could do using his hands; no mechanical job was too big for him. He had also learnt the craft of fixing cars. Even though he had no formal apprenticeship training in motor mechanics, my uncle had over time, perfected the art of stripping down vehicles and could repair the most complex of mechanical faults. Once he had diagnosed and fixed the problem, he was able to build it back up with precision, and make the vehicle roar again, much to my continued amazement.

His fame spread like a bush-fire in the harmattan, attracting motorists from Mbare and its hinterland who would bring their vehicles to him to overhaul the engines, replace worn rings, broken connecting rods and repair bent crankshafts, among other things.

His other love was that of building animal-drawn scotch carts from scratch to meet the demand from village folk who typically rely on animals such as cattle and donkeys to assist farmers in carrying loads, logging, pulling water from wells, earth moving for rural roadworks and carrying bricks.

This technology had been in use long before the arrival of the Europeans in the nineteenth century as one of the most practical modes of transport in the development of smallholder farming. It is estimated that to this day forty to eighty percent of communal farmers still use this technology.

Back then, the market for scotch carts was huge. Sekuru Samson would buy steel sheets from hardware stores in and around Mbare, and get them fabricated to make the body of the two-wheeled tip carts. For the axles, he would piece together angle irons and put stubs at each end to allow for the fitment of wheels. The das-born, he made out of either mild steel or gum poles.

Once the framework was complete, he bought new tyres and in no time, the scotch cart was complete and ready for the market. Whereas other scotch cart builders would call in graded professional painters to add a coat of paint, Sekuru Samson would do it himself, increasing his margins at each stage of the production chain. Even back then, Sekuru's workshop had enough sophistication to use a compressor for spray painting, instead of paint brushes.

Having moved in with Sekuru Samson, I would start off as his assistant or spanner boy – as it was called back then – running around to hand him tools, automated components and lifting heavy vehicle parts during the process of repairing, and rehabilitating vehicles. As Sekuru Samson would be busy diagnosing and fixing faults, I would be closely following each and every step, not wanting to miss a single detail. In time, his eldest son, Sekuru Edward, and I learnt to do most of the things he did and it was a glorious time of learning for me and acquiring new skillsets.

Through Sekuru Samson, I also got to learn the different types of arc welding rods as well as the variety of rods used in gas welding. I became conversant with industrial metals and their applications. As the days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, I fancied myself becoming a motor mechanic one day. Because Sekuru Samson didn't abandon his passion for water pumps gained in Bvumbe, he would repair a number of them in his workshop, passing on these skills to me and Sekuru Edward.

An opportunity to get behind the wheel of a vehicle would present itself when I least expected it. Like in present day Zimbabwe, in Rhodesia one could get a driver's licence at the age of sixteen. In my case, Sekuru Samson got me behind the wheel at fifteen. Unbeknown to him, however, history had repeated itself, as I had already started learning how to drive some time before his invitation.

Behind Sekuru Samson's back, his son Edward, had taught me how to drive using either my uncle's Fiat Van or his Ford Taunus. The van, manufactured by an Italian automobile maker by the same name, would turn heads in Mbare, making us feel very special and important. Named after the Taunus mountain range in Germany, the Ford Taunus was my favourite. I felt a sense of belonging.

With time, I would get the opportunity to take to the wheel with his full blessing on one of his month-end routine trips to the village to see his lovely wife, Mbuya Susan, whom he had left behind in Mhondoro, along with the rest of their children, when he moved to Mbare Musika. Even after losing most of his net worth in the retail business, he still had his Fiat van and Ford Taunus, and would not miss an opportunity to visit his family.

On these month-end trips, he preferred to use the Fiat Van which was very popular in the late 1970s on account of it being practical, stylish and incredibly spacious. This would allow him to carry an assortment of goods to the village as well as on his return trip.

Being month-end, we would have received considerable payments for work done and scotch carts sold. He would therefore be awash with cash and would thus be boozing all the way to the village in Mhondoro, and back.

It so happened one day, as we were on our way to the village, he needed to quench his thirst, of course with his favourite brew. Because he wanted to avoid courting the ire of the police at roadblocks along the highway, he challenged me to drive since the road was not that busy that day. I couldn't resist the offer and after giving me a few instructions, we were good to go, with me driving him all the way to the village and back.

So impressed with my driving was Sekuru Samson that he would henceforth allow me to chauffeur him each time we travelled together or whenever there was an assignment he could afford to delegate. This increased my confidence and I became determined to get my driver's licence as soon as I came of driving age.

While our living conditions at Mbare Musika left a lot to be desired, the progress achieved in my transformation from a boy to a man atoned for the discomfort. Workwise, Sekuru Edward and I were doing well, making and selling a number of scotch carts and repairing cars. Given that there were many food vendors in Mbare whose tools of trade were twelve-quart pots and extra-large frying pans that would need repairing, business was booming on that side of things too. There were also many squatters scattered around the periphery of Mbare Musika whose pots and pans we fixed as well.

Initially, we had a small area designated for cooking at our workshop where we would prepare our meals but with our workload steadily increasing, we decided against preparing our own food, choosing instead to get food from my Mother's kitchen so we could dedicate more time to our work.

At night we would retire to the back of our "little bedroom", the Volkswagen Microbus which had been stripped to a shell. It was actually a source of pride in our community where we were admired for being innovative. Besides, the comfort we lived in was not comparable to the discomfort of those who slept in plastic shacks, exposing themselves to all kinds of weather elements, including rain. To put the icing on the cake, we were also more technologically-advanced as we used torches at night while others used candles. Our disused motor vehicle home was like an oasis in a desert given the many plastic shacks around us. Nonetheless, I still believed that we deserved better.

While staying and working with Sekuru Samson at Mbare Musika brought opportunities for me to learn and grow, it was not lost on me why we were there in the first place. As a boy growing up in both the rural and urban areas of war torn Zimbabwe, I understood why our boys and girls were in the bush fighting. They were fighting so we could have the freedom to choose and independence to run the affairs of our God-given country. While we lived in plastic shacks in Mbare, our colonisers lived in comfort in leafy places such as Mabelreign, Alexandra Park, Emerald Hill, Waterfalls, Avondale and Borrowdale. This emboldened my support for the liberation struggle.

After a lot of dilly-dallying by the Ian Smith regime to accede to majority rule, we would hear from the Voice of Zimbabwe, which used to broadcast illegally into Rhodesia from Maputo, Mozambique, that the guerrilla fighters were advancing and gaining more ground. To save their skins, most white farmers were deserting their properties, as the war effort intensified.

Not even key installations in urban areas were spared as the guerrilla fighters pulled out all stops to get the Rhodesian forces to give in to their demands. The onslaught would eventually pay off, with Ian Smith, who had declared in 1976 that there would be no majority rule "not in a thousand years", being forced to the negotiating table at Lancaster House in London, resulting in Zimbabwe attaining her independence in 1980.

Two events would change my perspective on life for the better.

The first was when Prime Minister Robert Mugabe made a profound speech on the eve of independence celebrations, calling on his fellow countrymen to turn their swords into ploughshares. To wild cheers across the length and breadth of Zimbabwe, he had this to say:

"As we become a new people we are called to be constructive, progressive and forever forward looking, for we cannot afford to be men of yesterday, backward-looking, retrogressive and destructive. Our new nation requires every one of us to be a new man, with a new mind, a new heart and a new spirit. Our new mind must have a new vision and our new hearts a new love that spurns hate, and a new spirit that must unite and not divide...

The mineral resources lying beneath the surface of our country have hardly been scratched, nor have our agricultural and industrial resources yet fully harnessed. Now that we have peace, we must go fully out to exploit them. We already have a sophisticated infrastructure. Our expertise is bound to increase as more and more educational and technical institutions are established to transform our skilled manpower. The whole world is looking at us this day...".

These words by the incoming Prime Minister would make me realise that I needed to first equip myself with an education if I was to compete for opportunities that were to emerge in a society where blacks were no longer going to be discriminated against on the basis of the colour of their skin, race, creed or religion. I had this speech immediately etched on my mind and would later decide to follow through and make it practical.

The day after Prime Minister Mugabe's epoch-defining speech which was broadcast live across the country, I would join my cousin, Edward and nephew Leonard, along with hordes of jubilant crowds that thronged Rufaro Stadium to listen to Robert Nesta Marley, aka Bob Marley's historic show on the 18th of April 1980, to celebrate the dawn of a new era. I had just turned sixteen.

Mbare along with the rest of the country was buzzing at the time with conflicting reports as to who had invited Bob Marley to perform in Zimbabwe.

There were reports that the idea had been conceived by Job Kadengu and Gordon Muchanyuka who used to operate some of the hottest night clubs in town. It was said that they had flown to Jamaica a few weeks before independence to entice the Jamaican artist to perform.

Though Marley's manager was against the idea, Bob grabbed the opportunity with both hands as this historic event personified the message in his then latest album, Survival. On it was the popular track Zimbabwe, which he penned in support of the fight for our independence. It was widely believed that he had covered all the band's expenses, bearing testimony to the view that he was a pan-African.

Yet another account avers that the late maverick, Edgar Tekere, then secretary-general of the ruling Zanu PF party, had personally invited the Jamaican Maestro to perform at the independence celebration. The musician would come along with his entourage of more than twenty people including his wife, Rita, all of whom stayed with him during the tour.

I hadn't seen anything like this before. The atmosphere was electrifying as we chanted down Babylon after nearly a century of trying to "find a solution to this pollution", as Peter Tosh would have said. The key highlight for me was when the dreadlocked artist belted out his iconic song, Zimbabwe, which had been released in 1979 in support of the liberation struggle fighters. The crowd went into a frenzy, singing along.

More than 40,000 people attended the first show, including Prince Charles and the then Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. He played again the following day to a crowd of more than 100,000 fans and his performance at both shows was electrifying.

Bob Marley's magnetic effect across all generations would become the second event whose impact would wrestle with my conscience for several months that followed. Along with many other youths in the country, the singer's influence had planted a seed, inspiring us to embrace and take up the Rastafari Movement, a religion that embodies Protestant, Christianity, mysticism, and a pan-African political consciousness. I started to smoke ganja or mbanje and twisted my hair in the hope of growing dreadlocks.

The Rastafari movement has its roots in Jamaica where it began in the 1930s, before it gained the status of a pandemic in third world countries where there is a lot that connects Rastafarians and their brethren in Africa. Rastas believe that they are being tested by Jah or God through slavery and that the existence of economic injustice and racial oppression would precede their deliverance from captivity and their return to Zion, the symbolic name for Africa drawn from biblical traditions.

It was, therefore, heart breaking that about thirteen months after his trip to Zimbabwe, Bob Marley would succumb to cancer in May of 1981.

Looking back, the years I spent under the wings of Sekuru Samson were worth their weight in gold. My cousin, Sekuru Edward, was and has always been supportive of me. It was from both of them that I learnt the importance of the use of one's hands in providing answers to our every day problems. By moving in with and belonging to this tribe of men, I was able to find and sustain my motivation.

Later on, after we started Nyaradzo in March 2001, I would draw on the experience I had gained working with Sekuru Samson to introduce various innovative products to meet the needs of our clients, especially in the funeral services space.

For instance, the idea of the water bowser originated from the time I worked with Sekuru Samson, building scotch carts, only it is a different type of a scotch cart in that instead of a load tray, it has a tank. The body and frame is the same as any of the scotch carts we made, the only difference being that unlike the scotch carts used in the rural areas, which have no tail lights and reflectors, additional modifications are added for electrical fittings on the water bowser.

A few years after Nyaradzo had started operating, the country would be hit by a massive wave of cholera, first reported in January 2002, and would wreak havoc in provinces such as Manicaland, Mashonaland East and Masvingo. A total of three thousand one hundred and twenty five cases were reported, including one hundred and ninety two deaths.

After seeing so many people die from a disease passed on from person to person mainly as a result of poor sanitary facilities attributed to lack of water, I would once again fall back on my skills acquired from Sekuru Samson to find solutions to this national scourge. It was just as well, that a few years earlier, Tim and I had acquired Lane Engineering (Private) Limited along Portland Road in Workington Industrial Site in Harare, from a good friend of ours, Simba Armstrong Mangwende. I owned ten percent of it, while Tim controlled the rest.

I remember calling for a meeting with the engineering team at Lane Engineering so we could tweak the model of the scotch carts we made with Sekuru Samson, designing a prototype. In due course we tested and rolled it out to a market looking for answers to the cholera problem we faced as a country that came as a water bowser. Once we managed to get the first one out, we would make a lot more, deploying them to the funerals at which we provided services.

Once we had the water bowsers, a good number of organisations holding functions where there would be large numbers of people, came knocking at our doors so they could have us deploy the bowsers, which we were happy to do. This improved hygiene at gatherings and ultimately helped save lives. Today the water bowser is a common feature at funerals and other gatherings.

This and other innovations we have, would probably not have been possible had I not made the decision to move in with my Uncle Samson, and to learn as much as I could from his vast reservoir of skills and knowledge. I will eternally be grateful to him.