Connecting the dots...

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To create the future we want, we must master the art of decision-making

When I left my tribe of men in the communal lands of Mhondoro in December 1980, I had turned sixteen in March of the same year, marking the beginning of my adulthood.

Having walked in the shadows of larger-than-life characters such as my nephew, Leonard Basiyawo and my uncle, Sekuru Samson Musasa, I had very high expectations out of life. Chief among them was the intention to break the cycle of poverty that had been my portion up to this point in my life, sooner rather than later. As the days flew by, I came to the realisation that adulthood was not nearly as fun or as easy as I had thought it would be.

My first wake-up call came a month before my sixteenth birthday when much to my chagrin, I was turned away from casting my vote in Rhodesia's historic first general elections held in February 1980, in accordance with the Lancaster House Agreement of December 1979 marking the end of the protracted war between the liberation forces and the Rhodesian army. Eligibility to cast a vote was two years away for me in 1980.

Filled with high hopes for a brighter future, I had joined hordes of excited men and women who poured out of their homes early in the morning to join the long, winding queues, looking forward to casting their ballots in the momentous polls that would end white minority rule in our motherland.

At each polling station, there was a help desk where voters were screened, with only those aged eighteen and above being allowed to vote. If there were doubts about one's age, the presiding officers would insist on evidence in the form of documentation to prove their eligibility to vote.

Once they were satisfied, the polling officers would take the necessary steps to guard against double voting whereby the person was asked to dip their fingers into a bowl that was filled with indelible ink. Although the ink wasn't visible to the naked eye, it was detectable once subjected to a fluoroscope machine and these were at all polling stations across the country. This made it impossible for anyone to cast their vote more than once, a crime that comes with a hefty fine that may include jail time.

After hours of queuing at one of the polling stations in Mbare in the mistaken belief that I would be part of the history-makers, I was devastated when I was turned away from voting by polling officers who said I was still two years shy of the voting age of eighteen. The sight of some of my peers popping up from the polling station and engaging in animated discussions about their experiences, rubbed salt into my wound. Not participating in these historic elections was such an anti-climax for me. Regardless of the fact that I was only sixteen, I was very clear as to where I would have cast my vote, if I had been allowed to.

Without question – terrible experiences in Rukweza and Chiduku Tribal Trust Lands had opened my eyes to the ugly side of war that had led to lives and limbs being lost, families being displaced, and rural schools being forced to shut down.

Life in the city was also far from being a bed of roses as many villagers thought it to be. I would also experience first-hand, some of the colonial regime's excesses, which they did very little to hide. Painful images of black men getting drenched in soaking rain or baking in the scorching heat at the back of their masters' pick-up trucks, while dogs sat on the front seat next to the master, would leave me seething with anger.

Even though we were young, Johane, Thomas and I had tried in our very small way to contribute to the war effort by cheering up those who were fighting to overthrow the regime which treated us as second class citizens in the land of our forefathers. Whilst still in Chifuri Village, I would not miss any of the all-night vigils where we would dance the night away and sing ourselves hoarse as we cheered on the comrades who by participating in the war of liberation, had sworn to pay the ultimate price, if need be, for their fellow countrymen to be free.

After many nights of song and dance and ultimately gaining an appreciation of why it was necessary to take up arms to remove the colonial regime, I would become intensely sold on the values of the liberation struggle and the merits of it. That we needed to be independent was as clear to me as day, which made me hold in high regard those who made the sacrifice to abandon the comforts of their homes and spend a significant part of their lives in the bush, fighting to end colonial rule.

Whenever the liberation war fighters were withdrawn from their positions in Chiduku and they left their blankets for safe keeping at our house, Johane and I would take it upon ourselves to wash them in boiling water so as to rid them of lice and bed bugs.

Not being able to vote was therefore, more like a betrayal of that which I strongly believed in; it became one of several disappointments that weighed heavily on my shoulders.

With the pain of not being allowed to vote behind me, and having turned sixteen in March 1980, I turned my focus towards charting a new path. In spite of the generous support I had received from Sekuru Samson, his loving wife, Mbuya Susan, their son, Sekuru Edward and the rest of the family, I could not see the communal lands of Mhondoro giving me the break that I was longing for. I was afraid that the longer I stayed in Mhondoro, the more likely it would be that I would become comfortable with my new surroundings, which would have left me in the same position I was before my mother came to fetch me from Chifuri Village in Chiduku following the injury to my leg.

My choice to leave Mhondoro became one of many decisions I would never regret making. When I look back, it is amazing, that even as a teenager, I was already building a repertoire of rational decisions, even though at the time, some of them did not look like they amounted to much.

One of my earliest decisions of this nature was when I was given the assignment of selling oranges by my step-mother, Bertha Mlambo, during weekends. Instead of sticking to her instruction to go no further than our neighbourhood, I decided to sell them at Gwanzura Stadium, close to Machipisa Shopping Centre, excelling in the craft. I was able to watch my favourite football club play, whilst at the same time using the opportunity to sell oranges to a captive market that was quick to grab everything I had on offer before the full time whistle.

When Father took us back into his custody, we went to stay in Chiduku and I would make another choice to leave home to work for the Chikudo family, herding their cattle, until the unfortunate incident resulting in my injury.

When Mother brought me back to Harare where we stayed at Abigail Muropa's apartment in Mbare, I had to think on my feet once again, choosing to leave the hostel in order to stay in a disused Volkswagen (VW) Van along with Sekuru Edward, which we were only too happy to call home.

Leaving Sekuru Samson, his son Edward and the rest of the Musasa family in Mhondoro, as I retraced my footsteps back to the capital city, looked like it was just another ordinary turn of events. However, in time, it would turn out to be a masterstroke.

Embarking on my journey to Harare on a Masiyandaita Bus created some anxious moments for me as I was unsure where I would be able to find a roof over my head. At the time, Masiyandaita was one of the popular rural bus operators plying the Harare-Mhondoro route, along with Chivero, Nyamweda, and many others, the competition for passengers was fierce. Debates over which one of the bus operators ruled the roost in Mhondoro could go on for hours and they did not always end well.

On the day of my trip to Harare, however, none of these issues were of interest to me as my mind was racing as to where I would go to on arrival, after Sekuru Edward and I had long abandoned our disused VW van, having convinced ourselves that we no longer needed it. I also knew I could not go back to live with Mother after word had reached me that all was not well with her. After months, if not years of giving shelter to her childhood friend, Abigail Muropa must have grown weary of looking after an acquaintance whose baggage was as heavy as Mabel's. Whilst the circumstances that led to Mother opting out were never made clear to us, it must have really been a tall order for Abigail to continue sheltering my mother, who probably had her own way of doing things including food preferences, kitchen utensils and bedding, amongst other things that could have been at odds with her own.

To save their friendship from being strained, Mother must have opted to move out of Abigail's apartment at Matererini hostels, her next stop being Nenyere flats, in a place commonly referred to as Magaba – which was some distance away from where her friend stayed, but much closer to the city centre.

At that time, anyone who wanted accommodation had to submit their names to the Department of Housing under the City of Harare where they were recorded on a waiting list. Once a place became available, the recipient would be allocated, a house, council flat or a piece of land on which to build their own home.

Given my mother's situation, I believe she had applied to be allocated one of the big rooms at any of the hostels such as Matapi, Nenyere, Mbare, and Matererini, as they would have been in sinc with her budget. However, events unfolded fast before her turn to be allocated a place came up.

At the time she left Abigail's place, it must have been an emergency, as she could not afford to wait for the allocation of her own room or apartment. As a result, she had to move in with other families in similar circumstances to a hall in Block 4 Nenyere hostels, where she shared this one big room with them.

Having heard of her situation, I knew coming back to stay with her would cause her so much pressure and stress, so I decided against piling more misery on her by arriving at her place unannounced. As the Masiyandaita bus inched closer to Harare, I made the decision to go to Number 2195 Egypt in Highfield – being my Uncle Tongai Mataranyika's house – rather than go back to Mbare to stay with my mother.

My choice was influenced by another piece of information that had reached my ears while in Mhondoro. I had received news that my uncle, Tongai, had evicted some tenants from his house in Highfield so his son, Amos, could use some of the rooms while attending school in the suburb.

After retiring from Matambanadzo Bus Service where he had worked for several years as a driver, Tongai had rented his Highfield house out and had moved away to stay in Rukweza, along with the rest of the family, where he was running a general dealer's shop that he had acquired from his cousin, Matthew Chabarwachii Mataranyika, in 1979, located at Maworesa Shopping Centre.

Like most of us and others in his family, Amos had not been able to pursue his studies which had been disrupted as a result of the liberation war forcing schools in the rural areas to close.

Now that the war was over, those who wanted to resume their schooling had to pick up the pieces, with Amos being one of them. Consequently, he had enrolled at Highfield Community School where he was studying for his 'O' Levels. Whilst he was a year younger than me, we had enjoyed a good relationship throughout our childhood. That alone was enough to give me the confidence that I would not have problems sharing the few rooms in Egypt with him.

I did not need to reach out to my uncle Tongai, for permission to move in with Amos because I had no doubt in my mind that he was at peace with it, having held my parents' hands from the time they got married, and continued to do so, well after they had gone their separate ways. I knew that in his eyes I was part of his family, and so were my siblings. My choice and assumptions were vindicated when I arrived at Number 2195, Egypt in Highfield, where Amos received me with open arms. We carried on from where we had left off – growing up as cousins and indeed, friends.

I was immediately appraised about developments following my departure from Mbare Musika to Mhondoro. A few weeks after we had abandoned camp in Mbare destined for Mhondoro, my father had fancied his chances of getting a job in independent Zimbabwe.

The sweet scent of independence was everywhere. New companies were being founded while those already in existence identified new opportunities for growth and development. One of these companies was Modern Express Motorways a rural bus company owned by Myles Chanakira of the Mpamombe totem.

Once settled in Highfield, I had gone on to look for Father, who I was told had found a job as a bus driver working for Modern Express Motorways. Their garage and workshop was in Highfield, between Egypt and Lusaka. The purpose of me looking for my father was so I could let him know that I was in town. I was lucky to see him on my first attempt given that his duties required that he drive out of town to Seke Communal lands with passengers. When we parted company, Father would promise to come to 2195 so we could discuss my plans in detail. When he came after a few days, I suggested that it was time I got a driver's license and that I needed funding, which he agreed to provide.

Given this lifeline, I would get a provisional driving license so I could start my driving lessons. Having been taught to drive by Sekuru Edward when we lived in Mbare and later on by Sekuru Samson, I was fairly competent behind the wheel, thus I did not need to spend much to get to a stage where I could book for a road test.

Father would regularly drive by our place of residence on his way to his bus destination, to check on me and to inquire about my progress. Also to check if I needed additional funding for the driving course I was doing.

I would get to know that Father was staying in Engineering, one of the suburbs making Highfield together with Lusaka, New Canaan, Jerusalem, Egypt and others.

At no point during our interactions did my father invite me to where he was staying. Likewise, I never asked to be his guest, especially when I got to know that in Engineering where he lived, his accommodation was a room which he shared with his wife Victoria Mutizamhepo.

His job entailed plying the Harare-Makanyazingwa route in Seke Communal Lands, passing through Landos Business Centre and Nenguwo. At his final stop at Makanyazingwa Shopping Centre, he would put up for the night.

The following day he would drive back to Harare putting up at his one-roomed lodgings. His reasoning for having a one-room accommodation must have been that he didn't need more space as he would spend only one night in Harare at a time. On his off days, he would travel to the village.

Two months after my return to Harare, I acquired my first certificate – a driver's licence – on the 31st of January 1981, becoming a certified road user. For that, I owe a debt of gratitude to my father, who because he had a job working for Myles Chanakira's Modern Express Motorways, was able to provide the funding I needed. Were it not for Modern Express Motorways and indeed Myles Chanakira, Father would probably have remained holed up in Chiduku without a job and an income, and my life would have very likely taken a different trajectory.

When later on I was looking for inspiration in business, it was to the likes of Myles Chanakira, founder of Modern Express Motorways, that I turned to.

I would be inspired to learn more about Myles Chanakira who had the distinction of being Rhodesia's first indigenous bus company operator, with a fleet of more than fifty buses. He is widely believed to be the first black Zimbabwean to drive a brand new Mercedes Benz luxury saloon motor vehicle, which was unheard of at the time. To underline his status as a high-flying businessman, Myles was also big in real estate, having built several mansions, especially at his rural homestead in Seke Communal lands which is about forty five kilometres outside of Harare.

He built the biggest shopping centre at Gazaland in Highfield, in addition to the massive complex he built between Lusaka and Egypt, which was the depot of his Modern Express Motorways fleet of buses and owned several shops at Machipisa Shopping Centre, also in Highfield. Sadly, he succumbed to heart complications in 2010, in the same month that Nyaradzo was celebrating its ninth anniversary, leaving behind over twenty four children and about one hundred grandchildren.

Even as we continue to mourn his passing at the ripe age of ninety four and celebrate his life, we draw comfort from the fact that he left behind a rich legacy which we continue to draw inspiration from. It is particularly pleasing to note that those he left behind have kept the fire burning, with one of Myles' sons, Ellman Tigere Chanakira, being at the pinnacle of Twenty Third Century Systems (TTCS), as the company's chairman and founder. Since its formation in 1996, TTCS has been transformed by Ellman and his team into an award-winning pan-African business solutions provider, currently operating in over ten African countries.

Ellman's uncle, Elijah John Chanakira, was another torch bearer in the Chanakira family, before his death in June 2017. Elijah had distinguished himself as an extraordinary diplomat, educator and administrator. Uncle E-Jay's (as he was popularly known), career highlights included serving as deputy secretary in the Ministry of Education before becoming Zimbabwe's ambassador to Germany in the 1990s.

Father to journalist, Ngoni (now late), Fadzo and Teurai, Elijah was also famed for establishing the Peace, Leadership and Governance Programme at Africa University in Mutare and made headlines in the late 1990s after he was appointed chair of the commission that took charge of the affairs of the capital city following the dismissal of the then council over allegations of corruption.

Born in 1966 – two years after I had been ushered into this world, Nigel is another ace in the Chanakira family pack who has been flying the country's flag high. He is arguably one of the most charismatic entrepreneurs to emerge out of Zimbabwe, and has excelled in the field of banking, success coaching and philanthropy.

After obtaining my driver's licence, I thought being a taxi driver was a good starting point to earn a living and eventually build wealth. I immediately started job hunting.

My first port of call was Pfumo Taxis, which was in the same league as Minicabs (Rixi taxis), Minitaxis (Creamline), A1 Taxis, Pfumo Mini Cabs, Avondale Minifare Taxis, Dreamline and Streamline taxis. I was turned down by Pfumo Taxis on account of not having enough experience and also for being still too young at seventeen.

I quickly forgot about my disappointment, and turned my attention to Sharaude Noah Taxis which at the time, was the second largest metered taxi operator in the country and owned by Paul Mkondo the legendary insurance man who unfortunately died in May 2013. It soon became abundantly clear to me that I was banging my head against a solid wall and that I may not have been cut out for the job of taxi driver, when I was once again rejected, this time at Sharaude Taxis.

Down, but not out, it was back to the drawing board to rethink my situation and to make a decision which would take me closer to the future that I dreamed of.