Connecting the dots...

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The darkest hour comes before dawn...

Growing up poor, I believed that getting a driver's licence would be my one-way ticket to success and ultimately to a good life. I constantly dreamed that all my troubles would be washed away like tears in the rain once I had secured a job as a driver.

Having spent my boyhood searching for an opportunity to make that elusive quantum-leap, I envisioned myself earning lots of money from driving and becoming my own man. From an early age, I had held dearly the view that getting a job was the launchpad on which I would get the experience and skills I needed to establish and run my own business.

There weren't many job opportunities I knew of at the time. The few I was aware of were not available to job hunters with little education, like myself and many others, whose studies had been cut short by the liberation struggle that had brought about our independence in 1980. To get into teaching or nursing, for instance, one needed to have passed their Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) with good grades. Having five "O" Level subjects, including English, Science and Mathematics, was an added advantage. The same would largely apply for white collar jobs, although very few people would go beyond clerical work.

Knowing that I didn't have that many options, I even thought of taking up a job as a milkman or postman, only I didn't know where or how to go about it. I was also not averse to blue-collar jobs involving hard manual labour, typically in agriculture, mining and construction, which made it easier for me to accept the invitation to become a builder's assistant when the opportunity arose.

The burning desire to become a cab driver, however, did not diminish. I saw it as a stepping stone to running my own flourishing taxi business one day, that would compete with some of the big names at the time, amongst them, Rixi, Creamline, Dreamline and A1 taxis.

Apart from earning an income, the other attraction was that it would give me access to a vehicle, which was every young man's dream. Merely being seen driving around the so-called "locations" would get one's adrenaline pumping - never mind whether the vehicle was theirs or not!

At the time, not many black Zimbabweans could drive, let alone own a car, so all eyes were therefore on the few that were fortunate enough to drive like taxi drivers. Motorists would maximise on their elevated status by opening their car windows all the way down in order to give onlookers a full view of the occupants, while resting their right arm against the window. Having a powerful car radio was a huge bonus, and depending on one's age, the volume would be turned-up full blast to capture onlookers' attention. It was also every girl's dream to have a boyfriend who drove a vehicle. If you didn't have a car, it certainly was not advisable to chase after the same girl against a competitor on wheels!

My desire to be a cab driver and eventually, own a fleet of taxis, was also influenced to some degree by the flexible working hours that came with the territory. I figured that the flexitime would allow me to do side hustles, while presenting me with opportunities to meet new faces and strike up conversations that could potentially open doors for me.

Thoughts that the heavens would magically smile on me when I added a driver's licence to my wallet were quickly dispelled by the reality on the ground. To start with, I realised that merely having a driver's licence was not a free passage to driving a public vehicle. In truth, due to my naivety, it had completely escaped me that one needed to have at least twelve months of driving experience to become a taxi driver. Taxi drivers were also required to go through a series of skills assessments and checks – including a medical – to see if they were fit for the job.

With the ink still wet on my duplicate driving certificate, clearly I had a long way to go before I could qualify for the job. In all honesty, the only thing I did have, were excellent customer service skills, learnt from my previous menial jobs as an orange vendor when doing hustles for my step-mother Bertha Mlambo in Highfield and as a spanner boy for Sekuru Samson Musasa in Mbare. I had also been a waiter when I assisted my mother with her catering business in Chitungwiza.

After years of building castles in the air, not being hired as a taxi driver at Pfumo or Sharaude taxis, left a sour taste in my mouth. Like a deck of cards, the dream that had kept my hopes alive for a better future collapsed within a matter of days.

Besides not securing a job and being able to earn an honest living, it was also the end of the road to my dream of launching my own taxi service, once I had grasped the business fundamentals. In the days that followed my rejection, I would come to accept, that at seventeen, I was still a rookie not to be entrusted with the responsibility of being behind the wheel of a passenger vehicle, taking into account the unpredictability and menaces on the roads.

In hindsight, the fact that I did not get a job at Pfumo or Sharaude was a blessing in disguise as I could very well have got lost in the fad of the time. Moving on, I buried the past behind me – choosing to keep my head high, instead of crying over what could have been. I shifted my attention to gaining any kind of employment - wherever it took me.

In 1981, having turned his back on the monotonous life in Chifuri Village in Chiduku where he had earned a reputation for being a proficient fisherman, my elder brother, Johane, decided to join me in job hunting. The dawn of a new era that had come with the attainment of independence a year earlier, had lifted his hopes to try out new things in the capital city.

We would wake up early in the morning and join scores of job seekers who would swarm to the entrances of companies that were known to hire casual laborers. It helped that Highfield, where we lived, was not very far from most industrial sites in Harare, thus New Ardbennie, Workington and Lytton were all industrial hubs we could literally walk to and from without breaking much sweat. We would spend hours there with our fingers crossed that the gods would one day smile on us with a job opportunity.

Days turned into weeks without any light at the end of the tunnel, until another false sense of hope came in the form of information filtering through that the government, led by Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, was discouraging employers from engaging job seekers who were literally laying siege to their offices. It was explained to us that the new government was enforcing existing labour laws that required that job seekers go through the employment exchange system so as to bring in efficiencies and transparency in the recruitment processes. The recruitment of job seekers through the employment exchange also helped government keep record of the hires and thus know how many new jobs were being created in the country.

The employment exchange concept had originated in the United Kingdom – the former colonial master – where one Henry Robinson was credited for mulling the oldest reference to a public employment agency in 1650. Since then, the concept would go through progressive improvements from Robinson's original idea of an office of addresses and encounters where employers would be matched with employees to streamline the labour markets and record statistics.

Under the then Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, the incoming government had created a whole department to offer assistance to job seekers on the basis of their qualifications and experience – giving the authorities access to live data on employment related trends.

At the exchange, job seekers registered for potential vacancies, stating their qualifications and the jobs they were looking for, while employers submitted their labour requests to the officers manning the employment exchange offices. Several employment exchanges were established across the country, where job seekers would come daily to check if there were any opportunities suitable for them.

During those days when Zimbabwe's economy was firing on all cylinders, people with skills that were in high demand, such as those who had gone through formal apprenticeship training, would find placements in no time. As for the rest of us, the process was painfully slow – like watching grass grow!

The situation across all the employment exchanges would worsen from the 1990s onwards as the country's economic performance declined, rendering them unreliable.

At the time, the Harare Employment Exchange was situated along Sinoia Street, now Chinhoyi Street. The man in charge of recruitment was a tall, jovial chap called Mr Kaseke, who always looked immaculately splendid in his khaki uniform. He was actually more like the resident comedian there, cracking jokes throughout the day. This would drown our miseries, lift our spirits and keep us entertained even when we failed to get what we had gone there for in the first place.

On several occasions, we would be two or three places away on the list for our turn to be selected, yet it would somehow end the same way - so near yet so far! The journey to the industrial areas was never stressful as every trip would hold aspirations for a change in one's fortunes but on failing to secure a position, the trip back would painstakingly remind us of our unenviable situation.

On the occasion that we did have a bit of cash, Johane and I would buy something to eat – usually a half loaf of bread which we shared equally. If there was sugar at home, we would carry some in our pockets so we could mix it with water which we had as a drink, together with the bread. Quite often though, we would go the whole day without any sustenance.

After weeks of job hunting without success, we bumped into a long lost acquaintance, Phineas, for whom, back then, we used to serve generous portions of meals while helping our Mother with her catering business in Chitungwiza - before Johane, Thomas and I were taken by Father to Chifuri Village in Chiduku and Mother's business went belly up.

Phineas worked as a general hand for John Sisk and Son when Johane and I were still going to school at Farai Primary School in Chitungwiza. By the time of our chance meeting, Phineas had risen through the ranks to a position with additional responsibilities. After exchanging pleasantries, Phineas informed us that he was now in charge of recruitment at John Sisk and Son. He had been elevated to the position of wages clerk, giving him influence over whom to employ and whom to discharge. He told us that there were a few posts available for general labourers and that if we came over to the University of Zimbabwe where John Sisk and Son had a new contract, he would be able to organise employment for both of us if we didn't mind working as general workers.

Of course, we didn't mind!

It would also transpire that the construction giant, whose history stretches as far back as 1900 had been awarded a lucrative contract to build a new Maths and Computers Department at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ), the country's oldest institution of higher learning.

At the time, the new government had adopted the Marxist-socialist doctrine on account of its fraternal ties with the Communist Party of China, which had been supportive of the liberation struggle. The ideology meant widening the education net to cover previously marginalised groups who had been shut out of a discriminatory system which looked down upon the black majority.

To maintain their dominance over the natives, the colonists had operated an elitist education system that created opportunities for only a few, academically gifted black children who would proceed to the University of Rhodesia before it became the University of Zimbabwe at independence in 1980.

To get to the apex institution, black pupils had to negotiate a litany of examinations at primary and secondary school levels, and only a handful of them would pass the litmus test.

Statistics at that time told a sad story. Out of every one hundred black pupils who enrolled for Grade One, it is said that only five of them proceeded to Form Four, with even fewer getting to Mt Pleasant - home to UZ. Put in another way, only eighty percent of black children in Rhodesia reached Standard Two level and approximately thirty-six percent attained Standard Four. Shockingly, only eighteen percent of the thirty-six percent were eligible for full primary education and of these, only four percent got to Form Four, while only one percent of the three percent reached Form Six.

To dismantle what was commonly referred to as the “bottleneck system”, Mugabe and his Cabinet had pushed the envelope, resulting in the student intake at the university skyrocketing beyond the institution’s handling capacity. To avoid a catastrophe, the government had to balance the influx by expanding the facilities at the campus, from accommodation to faculties. It also rung in several other reforms, including ending the age-old colonial practice of discriminating against blacks in the amounts of per capita grants allocated; doing away with the payment of tuition in all primary schools; rebuilding schools that had been destroyed in rural areas during the armed struggle, as well as building new schools to cater for the increased enrolments as the government pressed ahead with its vision of providing “education for all.”

Enrolment for secondary schools had shot up from sixty six thousand in 1980 to four hundred and eighty two thousand by 1985. Against such a background, it was a no-brainer that facilities at the UZ had to be increased, with the country's first black vice-chancellor, Professor Walter Kamba obliging, by ensuring that the university was well positioned to meet the country's needs for high level manpower.

The vast and rapid expansion that followed would contribute to the high literacy rates that Zimbabwe is renowned for today. Statistics show that undergraduate enrolments rose from two thousand two hundred and forty in 1980 to just under six thousand by 1986.

This also meant that new academic programmes had to be introduced. As a result, John Sisk and Son were asked to construct a new Maths and Computers Department. In that same year the Faculty of Veterinary Science and other new academic departments such as nursing science, rural and urban planning, mining engineering, metallurgy and surveying were established. New degree programmes such as Economic History, Theatre Arts, and Masters in Business Administration were also introduced.

John Sisk and Son were amongst behemoths in the construction sector that benefited from the growth in the education sector. Other competing giants in the industry included Murray and Roberts (M&R), Costain, and Gulliver Consolidated.

Founded in South Africa in 1934 by Douglas George Murray, who was a civil engineer, M&R entered the Rhodesian market in 1951 after securing a listing on the Rhodesia Stock Exchange (now the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange) in 1974. This had followed its merger with Roberts Construction which was founded by Murray's friend, Douglas Roberts, to form M&R.

At independence in 1980, Murray & Roberts would rebrand to International Holdings Limited. Hard on the heels of its revitalisation, another rebrand would follow in 1997 to M&R. In 2013, the business would change its name to Masimba Holdings, led by prominent Chartered Accountant and my very good friend, Canada Malunga, who has been at the helm since March 2013.

Another construction giant of the time was Costain, formed by Richard Costain in the United Kingdom in 1865. Costain began operations in Zambia in 1947, before moving to establish a head office for Africa operations in Zimbabwe in 1954.

Gulliver Consolidated, which is tipped to bounce back after restructuring, is another major construction company that got a large chunk of the construction work before and after independence, with the rest of the market being shared between several informal contractors.

After Phineas invited us to join John Sisk and Son in 1982, Johane and I found ourselves at the university's construction site the very next day, where everything went according to plan. In no time, we were hired as builders' assistants, with Johane getting assigned to Mr Kanyangarara, while I was attached to Mr Mauyakufa. Once at John Sisk, I believed they would at some point consider me for a job as a driver, but there weren't such opportunities.

Working as a builder's assistant was the last thing I had hoped to do in my life but it was a start. Earning was something I truly valued, so I was happy to finally at least have a job. The work was hard and I was constantly distracted by the sight of students, some of them my age-mates, shuttling between the university's residential halls and their faculties. Clutching their books and walking with a spring in their step, they were a marvel to watch and clearly worlds apart from my reality.

Every time I eavesdropped into their conversations, the scholarly discussions they had impressed me to no end. I would hide from their sight, not wanting them to see me in my overalls, which were not really a perfect match, given that I am vertically challenged. There were many a time I wished the ground would swallow me up rather than unexpectedly run into the exuberant students.

Because not many people qualified to get into the country's only university, students at the UZ were held in high esteem by society, for drinking from a well that was considered to be the citadel for advanced western education. Their influence extended beyond their communities, into the sub-region and the rest of the world, where their influence and prestige combined to make them demi-gods.

The peer pressure brought to bear on me would drive me to start looking for a place to resume my education, now that I had a steady flow of income to pay for my school fees. I decided to study through correspondence, with my immediate aim being to rise through the ranks at John Sisk and Son in order to escape laborious work in the same way that Phineas, who had emerged as our knight in shining armour had done. This led me to the Central Africa Correspondence College (CACC), where I enrolled for my Junior Certificate at the beginning of 1982.

CACC was situated on Harare Drive, near the Kopje area. I had come across an old copy of the African Parade of May 1956, in which CACC's advert had caught my attention. It said: "Education is essential if you wish to progress. Every examination you pass means higher pay and a more respected position in society. With CACC to help you, it is easy to pass your examination quickly and become more highly qualified. Don't let others get ahead of you. Fill in the coupon today and send it to us. We will give you free advice on your career. If you live near Salisbury, come in and see us today."

CACC focused its courses on primary and secondary education whereupon it provided facilities for older literate students who wanted to complete their schooling by correspondence. It initially provided for upper primary grades five, six and seven. In the early 1960s, this was expanded to provide two-year courses leading to a national examination. Subsequent expansion was into General Certificate of Education (GCE) "O" and "A" levels. In later years, CACC diversified its courses to help unskilled workers already in employment in a variety of fields including a course in agriculture.

While at CACC, I asked if they offered tutorials, upon which I was directed to a study group at Nyandoro Primary School, in Highfield, whose location was convenient for me since it was within walking distance from where I stayed in Egypt lines. There was, however, a lot of stigmatisation at the time, deriding those who were attending night school.

We were made the butt of jokes for ostensibly failing to meet the grade at formal schools even though this was not the case. Because our ages were not consistent with the grades that we were studying towards, we were labelled as misfits who risked reaching retirement age whilst still in school.

I would dread passing through places where intoxicated ghetto youths would be whiling away time. Insults would be hurled at us for wasting our time, with some calling us, “mazizi” or night owls because our studies would stretch into the late hours of the evening. I was not bothered by the name-calling and crude jokes. During the day, I would be at work, continuing with my studies in the evenings.

A job in the construction industry usually lasts until the project is completed. Unfortunately, for myself and other contract workers, the completion of the Maths and Computers department naturally also meant the end of our jobs at John Sisk and Son.
That Johane and I were working had been a big relief for Mother as we would chip in with financial support for her and our three young brothers, Thomas, Donald and Garikayi.

My being out of a job meant that only Johane’s wage was now supporting the family with the additional income on which they relied. Johane had only been spared the rod of disengagement because his boss, Mr Kanyangarara, was a rare breed of bricklayers who did his work extremely well and would stay on so he could do the finishing touches, after which, he would also be asked to leave.

So it was, that I found myself without a job and an income at the beginning of 1983, yet I still needed funding for my education and for my everyday up-keep. It is always difficult for someone who has been working and earning to suddenly have to start asking for handouts from family members. Sadly for me, it was back to complete dependency.

As much as the space I found myself in felt gloomy and hopeless, in the depths of my gut I knew that I had to continue to push forward, constantly reminding myself that the darkest hour comes just before a new dawn aris-es.