Connecting the dots...

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Parental blessing: a destiny verdict

My father's sudden passing on the 31st August, 1982 would create a huge void in our lives, at the same time revealing another side of him, which had been successfully hidden from us, his children.

Growing up, we had always been uncertain, and had never-ending questions about where we belonged in Father's life, given his web of relationships. The days that followed his death would provide answers that would make my heart ache even more about his sudden departure from us.

I discovered that Father would always talk fondly to anyone who cared to listen, about us, especially to his sister, Calista Mberi (nee Mataranyika), with whom he was very close.

Father and Tete Calista – the last born in their family – shared a special bond that remained unbreakable until he was taken away from us at a time when we were still green behind the ears. It was Tete's doing to begin with, for my parents' union to come about, and resulted in our subsequent existence. For my siblings and I to be thrown into this dog-eat-dog world, it was Tete Calista who had hooked him up with the lively and high-spirited Mabel, way back in Bvumbe Village. Tete therefore knew Father better than anyone. It was Tete who helped us after his promotion to glory, get a sneak-peak into his thoughts and feelings about us, his children.

Throughout Father's working life which took him to Clan Transport, the then Harare United Omnibus and Umtali Omnibus Companies, (both of which became ZUPCO) and Modern Express Motorways, him and Mother shared custody of us children, pretty much like what other divorced parents do. When we were in our father's care, we still never had much time to talk to him in a relaxed environment as he always came home late and exhausted from work, and left very early in the morning before daybreak.

However, the most glorious period of our relationship with him was when we moved with him and his new wife Victoria Mutizamhepo to Chifuri Village in 1978 after he had lost his job. From then until mid 1979, when we were separated again after my injury, we did spent a lot of quality time with him.

To this day, I still have fond memories of those priceless moments we had together, at the back of beyond. Father enjoyed spending time with Johanne, Thomas and I – sharing stories about his upbringing when he stayed with Tete Masodzi in Nyatwe, Nyanga. This was after his father, Kurauone Kurai Mazikana Mataranyika's untimely death in 1940, due to poisoning at a village shebeen (ndari).

Just like our paternal grandfather who loved his African beer, Father used to enjoy his traditional brew and would drift from one neighbourhood to another in search of the thick, tan-coloured, gritty brew, which he would consume gleefully, together with his friends, like there was no tomorrow.

The most popular type of the traditional brew in Chiduku Tribal Trust Lands was prepared over seven days and the locals aptly called it "chiseven days" or "doro rematanda." It is also commonly referred to as "muchaiwa." "Chikokiyana" was the other one, though less popular. In terms of brewing time, Chikokiyana took only hours before it was ready. Somehow, Father and others didn't find it tasty enough.

The production of these brews was generally artisanal, and is a traditional family skill passed down from one generation to another. In the village, these brews play an important socio-cultural and economic function, invoking joyful moods at functions such as ritual ceremonies, enthronements, initiations, marriage ceremonies, festivals, funerals and memorial services.

Preparing the brew does not require much. The brewer crushes corn with a large grinding stone called a "guyo" and adds sorghum, yeast and water to the pulped maize-meal. The mixture is then cooked on an open fire in a clay pot, "hari" – with the hari specifically dedicated to beer brewing being referred to as a "gate." It is then left to cool and allowed to ferment within seven days, which is where it gets its name.

This seven-day-brew must have been Father's favourite because of its look, aroma, and taste which he found irresistible. The smooth, thick and milky rich one that frothed as one brought their mug towards their mouth was the best version, and on a good day, Father and his peers would be lucky enough to have it served.

On occasion, Johanne and I would accompany Father to the village shebeen where he would invite us to partake of his favourite drink. I did try it a few times, before deciding it definitely wasn't for me!

Whenever we had an opportunity to talk to him, we would touch on every subject, uncensored, including the abuse we suffered at the hands of our first step-mother, Bertha Mlambo. Father commiserated with us for going through such hell and would share words of wisdom as to how we could ensure that the same fate did not befall us in our interactions with Victoria Mutizamhepo, whom he had taken as his wife after Bertha deserted him whilst we lived in Highfield.

His guidance was helpful. I was the inquisitive one and would ask him intriguing questions and argue my way out of sticky situations when caught. There were times we would argue fiercely amongst ourselves as siblings, but we never crossed the boundaries of respect and decency, unlike what we would witness in other families.

Each time we engaged in ferocious, animated debates, Father would observe intensely without comment or question. Unknown to us, as we spent those glorious moments with him, and made scenes in his presence, Father was taking the opportunity to get to know us better since he had barely had the time and chance to do so in the city, as he was chasing the elusive dollar to keep the family going.

Having abandoned the hustle and bustle of life in the city, there wasn't much to occupy Father in Chifuri village other than doing one or two chores a day and making up for the time we grew up without him. With minimal interruption, he would listen to us talking and sometimes exposing the little skeletons that were in our own cupboards, allowing us to freely express ourselves.

What we didn't realise was that the information Father got from those conversations and his assessment thereof, was the fodder he used to celebrate his children on the occasions he talked to Tete Calista or other members of the extended family.

After his death, when Tete Calista shared with me what they discussed during the times they spent together, I was surprised to learn that Father had taken such a keen interest in what I was doing at a very early age and that he would marvel at the many firsts I had achieved as well as the small battles that I had fought and won. One of these being when I decided to take my driver's licence at the young age of sixteen, ahead of my elder brother, Johanne. Father would give his seal of approval by paying for my driving lessons, but kept his thoughts and feelings to himself.

I was heartened to know that when I had made the decision to work as a herd boy for the Chikudos in Chifuri, looking after their cattle for a small wage, Father had been watching with quiet admiration and taking stock of everything. While he may not have shown emotion, or even perhaps disapproved, he appreciated the effort.

Much earlier in Egypt, Highfield, we were all under the impression that Father did not care about us, given the abuse we had endured at the hands of our step-mother, Bertha, and yet his silence was calculated and deliberately done to avoid inflaming the situation.

Even as I went about selling oranges in the employment of Mainini Bertha, Father had been watching and updating his chronicles, watching my every step. Whenever he needed to download or offload his inner thoughts, Tete Calista was his go-to-person. Initially, I doubted Tete's anecdotes, which contradicted our assumptions and the conclusions we had reached about Father.

I later learnt that even with his drinking partners in Chifuri Village, Father would not miss the opportunity to speak glowingly and with pride about my life struggles and small victories in particular – validating the accounts by Tete Calista.

While the encounters I had with Father did not mean much to me then, I was glad to know I had made a lasting impression on him. After all, it is every son's wish to please his father.

Although he may not have achieved much himself in terms of material things, Father had long seen something in me which convinced him that I could one day hoist the family flag up high and raise the bar to inspire others to do much more.

The night we argued over his decision for me to leave House Number 2195 in Egypt, Highfield to work for him in the village, must have been the ultimate litmus test to validate his assumptions and predictions.

After our heated argument that Friday afternoon, which ended in a deadlock, I was convinced that I was done. Father was never one to move an inch once he had taken a stand. Rather than offer any compromise, the best Father could do was declare a deadlock and agree to disagree with whomever it was he was arguing. This, however, never applied to those he thought should be taking orders from him: It was either his way or the highway!

As Father pronounced his verdict that Friday afternoon, it left me with a shiver running down my spine, thinking this was the end of the road for me and my studies. I was troubled that night and through the weekend, so I was pleasantly surprised when Father came back on the Monday, smiling from ear-to-ear.

He went on to deliver the news I least expected to hear, that I should carry on with my schooling. They were not empty words, but he went further by giving me more than adequate funds to complete my Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC). He even pledged to provide me with more funding so I would be able to proceed to “O” Levels.

In hindsight, Father must have had a premonition that his time was up. For the longest time, he must have had a feeling that there would be one amongst us children who would act as the bridge upon which his other children and those of the extended family would cross over to the greener side.

He must, however, have been troubled about the choice of who would be the one to lead the family in the inevitable event that he would be called for his heavenly rewards.

The ferocious debate and argument we had on that Friday preceding his death must have convinced him as I proved my mettle beyond reasonable doubt that I was the man. As I lay awake that Friday night, worried about the demise of my schooling, he must have had some sleepless nights too, all the way into the weekend, prompting him to come back to our confrontation table with a white flag, marking not only peace between us but placing a blessing on my life.

Over the years, I have looked back to the events of that Friday and what transpired on the Monday with mixed feelings. I am surprised about the guts I exhibited confronting Father, because knowing him, the fact that I stood my ground could well have been reason for him to disown me. But I had done so with so much conviction because it was as clear as day to me, what the wealth of the future was, even at that young age to the point that I managed to convince Father. Instead of disowning me, he returned on the Monday, showering me with more money than I needed, as well as bringing me the much needed blessing of a father to his son and giving me the all-clear that would bury the hatchet of our heated and ugliest of arguments.

Having smoked the peace pipe, embraced and said our goodbyes, it would be the last time I was to see him alive. It turned out to be that I was the last person in the family to see him in person besides his wife, Victoria, before his sudden death from an Intracranial Hemorrhage – a silent killer disease which claims thousands of lives annually.

I sometimes feel that Father might have drawn parallels between my reaction and the biblical Jacob, narrated in Genesis 32 verses 22 through 31, who despite being injured, fighting an unknown man the whole night, did not let go. Towards the end of the long fight, at daybreak, Jacob realised he was fighting an Angel. Once he knew this, he fought even harder, demanding that the Angel bless him. The Angel not only blessed him, but gave him a new name and identity before he left. Standing firm even at that tricky age and seeing myself figuratively wrestling my Father without backing down, I probably gained a new identity in his eyes, even if unlike Jacob, I didn't get a new name.

That evening, I became an adult, ready to face new challenges.

Over and above the blessing given by the angel, this very Jacob story started when he received the blessing of a first born son, from his father Isaac, in spite of him being his second son, in Genesis 27 verses 25 through 27. Later on, in Genesis 48 verses 13 and 14, history repeated itself, when Jacob also passed the same blessing to Joseph's children in the foreign lands of Egypt, crossing his hands and giving a younger son the blessings of the first.

I am grateful Father put me through such a grilling that Friday afternoon; pretty much like what is done when purifying gold before the yellow metal is processed into expensive items such as jewellery, coins, electronics and other items of high value.

The clarity with which I was able to argue my case about my future must have left Father convinced that I had the courage of my convictions. My experiences while working for John Sisk and Son at the University of Zimbabwe had made me appreciate that education was the wealth that was scalable and could never diminish with time, therefore my certainty was rock solid.

It would have troubled me all my life had my father departed this world without us reaching a settlement and without his blessings for the course I had taken. Having honoured him in his living years, I am relieved that the feud did not become the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back as, in the words of Mike and The Mechanics in his famous 1988 song, "The Living Years", that would have left me "a prisoner to all my Father held so dear."

He must have known that life blessings can only be bestowed upon a child by a parent and if not, whatever prospects and hope of a better or brighter future they may have had would be diminished and dimmed for life. A parental blessing is most certainly a destiny verdict reposed by a parent onto their child, and I remain eternally thankful and grateful to my father for meeting me right at my point of need and showering me with tons of them.