Connecting the dots...

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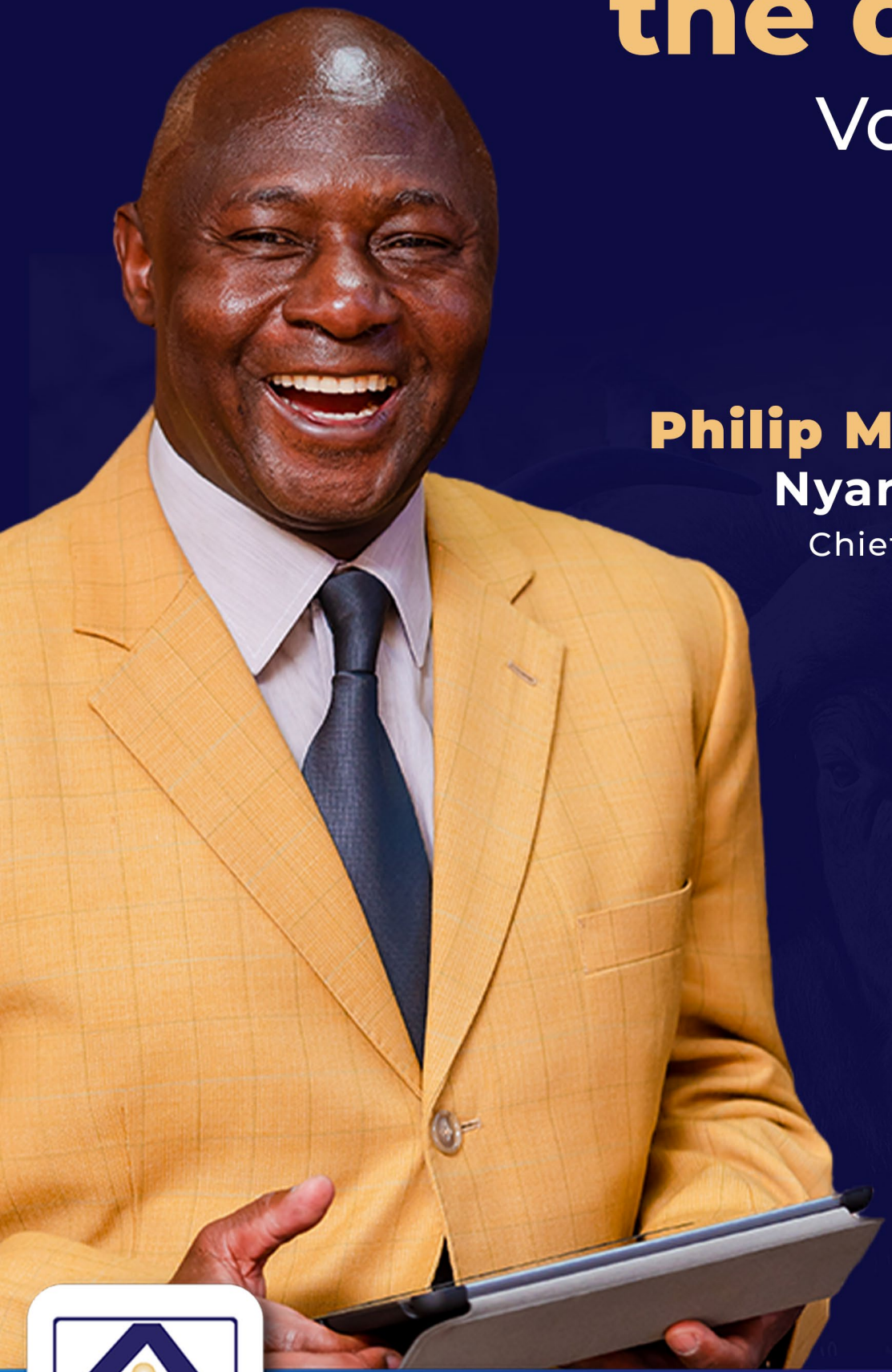

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When opportunity meets preparedness...

Having been kept on the edge by Headmaster Mahaja for two weeks that seemed like eternity, my D-Day to know whether my application for a Form Three place at Rukweza Secondary School had been successful or not eventually came.

However, by the time I went back to the headmaster's office for the eagerly-awaited feedback on a Monday, my strong gut feeling was that I was a shoo-in for placement in one of the Form Three classes. Despite being a Johnny-come-lately to the school, I was pleasantly surprised to see that I had already accumulated a lot of goodwill amongst fellow Form Three students who were anxious to have me as their classmate.

These student well-wishers made it their business to snoop around for any slightest hint about my prospects of joining them once a perceived vacancy prompted by the possibility of a permanent withdrawal – for whatever reason – by any of their classmates from the previous Form Two classes. One of my strongest advocates was village-mate, Mickson Matsokotere, whose ears were always on the ground and would constantly feed me with vital information about any Form Three absentees, which helped keep my hopes alive. Because my informants relied on the grapevine for developments at the school, their leads were not always on point. More often than not, they would erroneously assume that any prolonged absence from class by a student was either a transfer to another school or a dropout. This turned out not to be the case, as some of the students had skipped lessons due to special circumstances sanctioned by the school authorities.

As my deep-throat sources fell over each other to give me juicy updates, it helped lift my hopes, especially when word reached my ears that there could be up to five places that had arisen due to absenteeism by students who had gone for days without showing up. I kept my fingers crossed, hoping that the cumulative days of absence would add up to the mandatory number of days that led to the automatic reallocation of their place. Back then, any unexplained absence of a consecutive fourteen days was enough to give the school authorities carte-blanche to declare a vacancy and bring onboard a new face almost immediately.

And so it was that at the expiry of the fourteen-day window, I dressed up for the occasion, looking elegant in my new school uniform as I had done two weeks earlier. I then joined hordes of other students who made the beeline to Rukweza Secondary School every week day for their lessons, even though my mission was different from theirs – to show up for my appointment with destiny.

Being stricter for time, the school headmaster made himself available at the appointed time, bearing good news that left me smiling from ear to ear. My application had been successful, and it was all systems go from thereon. The headmaster asked that I pay school fees so I could start school immediately.

In the heat of the moment, I bolted out of his office without even asking if I could be allowed to start classes before paying for my school fees since my guardian angels were still to put it together. On second thoughts, I felt I had done the right thing by letting sleeping dogs lie, fearing I could have fluffed my chances of getting a Form Three place had I asked for a special waiver too early into my association with the school.

I rushed back home – making quick work of the almost four-kilometre trip to Gwangwara so I could break the good news to Maikuru Mai Chipo while at the same time sussing her out for the school fees, even when I knew she had spent her last dollar buying me part of the school uniform. Maikuru Mai Chipo received the positive news with excitement, advising me to immediately catch the next ride to Maworesa, along the Rukweza-Dorowa Road, where her husband ran a thriving retail shop. She was convinced Babamukuru would find it in his heart to squeeze a few dollars for my school fees from its proceeds.

In no time, I was by the roadside, flagging lifts. Back then, the Nyazura-Dorowa Road was busy all week with trucks carrying phosphate, the raw material used to manufacture the fertiliser Compound D. On Fridays and during weekends, the workers at Dorowa Mine and from the nearby Dorowa village would be out and about, doing their private business going to either Rusape or Mutare.

The opencast mine owned by Chemplex Corporation – a subsidiary of the Industrial Development Corporation – gave rise to Dorowa village, located about three kilometres south of the Save River in the Upper Save valley, 130 kilometres west of Mutare. The phosphate mine, discovered in 1945, would go through difficult times with power cuts disrupting production and old machinery becoming obsolete with maintenance costs becoming unsustainable, resulting in reduced traffic along the Rukweza-Dorowa route. It has been heartening recently to see the mine showing signs of revival.

On the fateful day, it didn't take long for a private vehicle to pull over and take me straight to Maworesa, where on arrival and after narrating my story, I was promptly handed the money for my school fees by Uncle Tongai. With my prayers answered, I had no reason to stay there any longer.

I caught the next lift home and headed straight back to school to expunge my school fees obligation upon my arrival. By the time I completed the fees payment process, it was almost time for students to knock off for the day, which meant I had lost another day of learning. It didn't bother me much as I was safe in the knowledge that I now had a Form Three place.

Nonetheless, I was shown the classroom from where I would be attending school starting the following day, spending a few minutes in my new classroom environment in Form Three C, where I was introduced to my classmates. Before long, the bell rang, signalling the end of the day, whereupon I packed my bags and joined students from my village and those from places further on our way home.

This completed my comeback into formal education. Unlike in Highfield where I dreaded walking to Nyandoro Primary School for my night school studies due to the ridicule I suffered along the way, there was no such embarrassment in my new environment. It was also reassuring to reconnect with my former classmates whom I had last met in the nineteen-seventies. I had last been with them when I did Grade One to Grade Three at Rukweza Primary School before my siblings Johane and Thomas and I moved to stay with our step-mother, Bertha Mlambo, in Mutare, whereupon I was enrolled at Sakubva Primary School for Grade Four. This was after Father had secured a new job as a bus driver at Umtali Omnibus Company.

It also didn't take long for me to fit into my Form Three C class, where I met a mixed bag of people, some of whom were new to me while a good number of them were familiar faces from our village as well as from neighbouring villages such as Kashiri, Giyayi, Mbiriri, Handina, and Denzva. Because of the closure of schools that followed the intensification of the war of our independence, some of my former classmates at Rukweza Primary School had been away from school and were not so lucky to be taken in by relatives in urban areas for them to continue with their schooling.

I was, therefore, in familiar territory. From our village, I joined a group of boys and girls, that included Gamu Chikwanha, Tracy Kaisi, Norman Matsokotere the School Headboy, his cousin Mickson, Egenia, Rosemary and Hilda Gwangwara, Emma, Dorcas and Tambu Matsokotere and Biggie Nesongano, all of whom I had known growing up.

All in all, we did eight subjects in Form Three, namely English Language, English Literature, Mathematics, Geography, Science, Shona, History and Agriculture. Mr Kawara taught us English Language and English Literature while Mr Nenge took us through Science and Mathematics. Ms Mutseiwa and Mr Mushanawani taught us Geography and History, respectively, while Mr Magoche taught our mother's language, Shona. Mr Magoche now works for Nyaradzo at our Branch in Rusape. Completing the cast of teachers we had in Form Three was Ms Machiri, our Agriculture teacher.

It was then that I learnt of the differences in how learning is organised at primary and secondary schools; whilst at the former, we had one class teacher for all our subjects while we had a different teacher for each subject at the latter. In between classes, we would stay in our classroom in secondary school, while each teacher came only for thirty minutes or an hour before leaving for the next class.

After the exit of one teacher from our class, another one would walk in and take over, and this process would be repeated throughout the day. In between some lessons, we had time for prep, which referred to work done by students on their own after classes or lessons had finished. Initially, I didn't know what prep was for or meant but would with time.

Getting a Form Three place was only but the first hurdle I had to overcome. Once my application went through, the next was catching up with the two-week lag on lessons and notes that had been given by teachers to fellow classmates while I was awaiting feedback from Mr Mahaja. I knew I had a lot to catch up with, if not the actual lessons done, then the notes that had been written.

To help me pull through, I struck an understanding with Cephas Mukwawaya whose writing was clear and legible, with him lending me his notebooks so I could take down notes on the material they had covered in my absence, which he was happy to do. I had known Cephas from the seventies when I was in the same class as his brother Gideon at Rukweza Primary School. Cephas wrote his notes very well to his credit, which made life easy for me. Our reconnection in high school would help build a long lasting relationship between him and I which subsists to this day.

Still, I had to balance between catching up with notes, reading current work and writing and submitting assignments within set timelines. Doing school through correspondence came in handy again as I had learnt to cope with large volumes of work and had the discipline to prioritise and focus on what had to be done without much trouble.

Despite my best efforts, I couldn't clear the backlog within the first week of starting Form Three and had to take advantage of my first weekend as a formal student to catch up with all outstanding work. Fortunately, I had caught up with the other students when Mr Mushanawani, our History teacher, gave us our first assignment, which we were supposed to submit within a few days. I had to put my all into reading about the subject matter to submit work that was up to standard. Just as well, I enjoyed history and had absolutely no qualms with European history, where we were learning about the First World War, its immediate as well as its distant causes.

Initially, I wasn't sure about the teacher's preferred format for the assignment. I decided to take the risk of using the format I was familiar with, learnt while studying through night school at Nyandoro Primary School, comforting myself from the thought that if Mr Mushanawani was not happy with the format, he would say so. That I could be asked to rewrite and resubmit crossed my mind.

I therefore did my assignment using my study group format submitting it on time. At our study group at Nyandoro Primary School, Ted Chifamba, our English Language teacher, had taught us to start with the date and topic of discussion, after which we were to put subheads or sub-topics for each new paragraph, numbering each of them from the introduction right down to the conclusion.

The number of subheadings determined the number of paragraphs in the essay. This, Ted had said, was to indicate to the examiner or marker of the assignment that you understood the discussion topic. Including subheadings in the summary showed intent or seriousness and understanding of the subject matter. To conform with the set word count for each assignment or essay, Ted had taught us that we must cross the framework out neatly in pencil, indicating that it was not to be included in the word count. This he said ensured that we didn't lose marks unnecessarily.

Mr Mushanawani, as I subsequently realised with all our other teachers at Rukweza Secondary School, didn't take much time marking assignments. Usually, he would do it overnight, bringing back our books marked and with comments included.

On the day Mr Mushanawani brought back our marked books, I worried and cringed, thinking I had crossed the line after he distributed all the books back to students but kept mine. He then started by lecturing us on what his expectations were when it came to writing assignments, which made me develop goosebumps, thinking I had landed myself in hot soup with how I had handled and submitted my first assignment.

But lo and behold! At the end of his tirade, Mr Mushanawani took my history assignment book and proudly displayed it to the class while expressing how happy he had been reading through my assignment book. He ended by endorsing the format I had used, giving me a pat on the back.

After the history lesson, Mr Mushanawani said he was taking my book with him to the other Form Three classes, promising to bring it back to me either by the end of the day or the following day. Relieved and happy that my gamble had paid off, I grew a few inches taller that day!

After the endorsement by Mr Mushanawani, my confidence went sky-high. I was enthusiastic and enjoyed school more.

A few days later, Ms Machiri would give us an assignment in Agriculture which I did using the same format as in my History assignment. Similarly, when she brought our marked books back, the same thing happened, with her showing the whole class how well I had done my assignment and reading it out loud to the whole class.

She also kept my book until the end of her lesson, again taking it to other classes to showcase it as an example of what she expected all her students to do when given assignments. I became a celebrity overnight.

In no time, I was the poster boy for excellence and a hot favourite of most teachers, including Mr Kawara, our English Language and English Literature teacher. Mr Nenge, our Mathematics and Science teacher, was also impressed with the quality of my work. Having turned into our teachers' pet overnight, I enjoyed school and thrived on my comeback to formal education.

For English Literature, we did "The Merchant of Venice" by William Shakespeare, whose central theme is the conflict between self-interest and love.

Thomas Hardy's "Far From The Madding Crowd" was another of our set books whose storyline is based on the life and relationship of Bathsheba Everdene with her lonely neighbour, William Boldwood, the faithful shepherd Gabriel Oak and the thrifty soldier, Sergeant Troy.

I thoroughly enjoyed both masterpieces. I also enjoyed Agriculture, especially when it came time for practicals. We would have time out of the classroom where Ms Machiri took time to demonstrate modern farming methods. It also helped that the school had a functional garden worked on by students as part of their lessons.

Mr Nenge was equally good and knowledgeable in both Mathematics and Science. Because the school didn't have a laboratory, we did Zim Science, which gave us a basic understanding of science, without going into depth of core science subjects such as physics, chemistry, and biology.

I always thought doing each of the subjects as a core subject would have given me a better understanding, especially with physics and chemistry. My appetite for better understanding of chemistry would lead me to establish a laboratory within the Nyaradzo Group, which currently helps us manufacture chemicals used by the group, resulting in us cutting costs. The lab would also come in handy at the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020 when we started manufacturing in-house most of the chemicals we need, such as detergents and sanitisers.

Despite having not done physics as a core subject at school, I have always been fascinated by particularly theoretical physics, popularised in the modern day by a Briton, the late Stephen Hawking, who, despite being disabled for most of his life, bequeathed so much to us in terms of understanding how the universe may have come about billions of years ago starting with the big bang. More than that, Stephen Hawking proved that one can still live a full life making enormous contributions even when the scales are tilted heavily against them.

Having moved from the ghetto to the village, I found certain habits challenging to unlearn. For example, before I went back to formal school, I enjoyed reading newspapers to catch up with current news, be it soccer, economics, politics or any other.

Now that I was living in the village where we had neither a television, nor radio, the only time I got to catch up with current news was when someone came visiting from Harare and they brought with them a newspaper. I would ask them to leave it with me so I could read and catch up.

To quench my appetite for news, I soon discovered that at the Mukada Service Station in Nyazura, by Mutare Road, they received deliveries of newspapers that were sold to locals. They usually would have all the previous week's newspapers, selling them at a discount. To keep up-to-date with the news, I decided I would run the more than ten kilometre distance from home to the service station once a week on Sunday to buy the week's newspapers. Right up to this day, I love running this distance whenever I am back at the village, which is often.

I paid the full price only for the Sunday paper, with the rest being sold to me at a reasonable discount. Once I got all the newspapers, I would run back home so I wouldn't lose time to catch up with the news.

Once back home, I would spend part of the day going through all my newspapers. I did that every Sunday right up to when I finished my "O" Levels because I didn't want to miss out on any noteworthy new developments around the world.

I would also rekindle my fellowship as a member of the United Methodist Church (UMC) once in Rukweza, having briefly tried out Rastafarianism when I lived at Mbare Musika. By the time I went back to school, I had become a full member of UMC's Youth Fellowship (UMYF).

The local service of the UMC was located slightly over three kilometres from home at Rukweza Primary School. I would join those within the neighbourhood that fellowshipped at the same church, walking the almost seven-kilometre trip to and from church. Before long, I was elected the circuit youth president, succeeding Biggie Nesongano, with Monica Chibayambuya, who was my senior doing Form Four at Rukweza Secondary School, coming in as my deputy. At school, Monica was the Head girl.

The added responsibility meant that I had to strike a delicate balance between my studies at school and my duties as president of the Rukweza Youth Fellowship. Once again, I would lean on my experience from the two years I had studied as a non-formal student.

Growing in confidence in my new environment as a full time formal student and being recognised by almost all the teachers as one of the top students and getting elected as president of the United Methodist Church Youth Fellowship required that I up my game in the way I carried myself. I had to watch my every step at all times. It felt like I had a bell tied to my neck; any false move or mistake would trigger it, blowing my cover. I had to behave myself, or I would be blown out of the water, losing all I had worked hard to build up to that point.

Besides the pressure that all this brought, when I look back to this period in my life, I don't wish it to have been any different.