Connecting the dots...

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When you shake off the baggage of denial, anger and bitterness...

Having taken the initiative of screening their Form Three students by academic prowess, the authorities at Rukweza Senior School knew they had set in motion a dog-eat-dog contest for places into the top class. The whole school and surrounding communities eagerly awaited the mid-year examination results.

The anxiety was palpable and so thick you could cut it with a knife! The enthusiasm, which had kept us, students, on edge, would end when the results were announced in two stages. The first was for class positions for each of the form three classes from the first to the last. Once that was done, each of the form three students had to have an overall position, which list was to be used for screening. The school had not gone through such a roots-and-branch shake-up from Form One.

To my delight, I came out tops in our class, Form Three C, a result that breathed wind beneath my sails and got me thinking, with some luck, I could make it to the top three after the consolidation of all the form three classes results. The competition for places into the soon-to-be reconstituted Form Three A was so vicious, not even your experienced punters would have correctly predicted the top five, let alone the top ten.

Surprise, surprise, the outcome was one of those light bulb moments throwing into disarray the old order when I emerged the top student overall, relegating favourites such as Christopher Haadivamwe and Trueness Matamisa into second and third positions, respectively.

For honours, I headlined the list of the first forty-five students placed in Form Three A, with the next batch of forty-five positions making up Form Three B. The batch of forty-five that followed constituted Form Three C, while the last batch was bandied into the unfashionable Form Three D.

From then on, the die had been cast. The ultimate battle for me became defending my turf right up to our final exams in Form Four the following year. While our teachers were good at their craft, I realised that their efforts alone would count for nothing if I did not put in more hours outside of the classroom to grasp the concepts and catch up on new stuff that may not have been clear during lessons.

Having clearly separated students by their intellect, the teachers could now tailor their lessons, in the case of the A class, for speed to complete the syllabus, at the same time leaving enough time for revision. To keep up to speed and do well in my final "O" level exams at the end of the year, it became clear that I needed to make friends with other high-flyers, so I could learn from them as much as I could, especially in areas where I needed help and clarity.

As there would be no further screening until our final Form Four examinations the following year, we had to work together for the common good. We had to appreciate the fact that two or three heads are better than one if we were going to tackle the next big thing for us, which was, passing our "O" Levels with good grades given that, as rural school students, the odds were heavily stacked against us.

We knew that researchers in education seeking to understand the best study methods had long established that collaborative learning was the way to go, either through peer-to-peer learning or studying in larger groups. This enabled students to exchange diverse perspectives, clarify misconceptions, and address misunderstandings. They also established that studying together enabled deeper understanding, helping students develop higher-level thinking, improved oral communication, and enhanced self-management and leadership skills.

Collaborative learning is also believed to promote student-faculty interaction, which is crucial in developing academic self-concepts, enhanced motivation and achievement, and increased retention, self-esteem, and responsibility to prepare them for real-life social and employment situations.

Alive to the fact that iron sharpens iron, I reached out to Christopher, becoming good friends. I found him to be as sharp as a razor and methodical in his approach to problem-solving. I also found Trueness to be naturally intelligent and hardworking, which explained why she was a perennial campaigner for a place at the top of the class.

Studying with Christopher, Trueness, and other students who had made it into the top ten broadened my understanding of the eight subjects we did at Rukweza Secondary, namely English Language, English Literature, Mathematics, Geography, Science, Shona, History, and Agriculture.

Like sand through an hourglass, so were the days that followed our mid-year exams. A few weeks after the exams, school closed for the holidays, marking the end of an eventful second term. We were a mixed bag of emotions as we went our separate ways, with excitement and celebration amongst those who had excelled in their exams, denial and envy for those who felt hard done by the outcome. We went for the holidays with a bucketful of takeaways that would occupy our minds over the four-week break.

When we returned for the final term of our Form Three year, news quickly spread that Christopher had scored a double, impregnating two girls from the school. The rumour mill had it that the two girls were both Form One students from near his village, which basically meant that my good friend had stirred a hornet's nest in his own backyard! Such developments were typically known to ruffle feathers in rural or urban settings, depending on how the offending party handled them.

After coming to school for a few weeks during the third term, Christopher suddenly stopped attending classes even without the school authorities getting involved in the imbroglio. This saddened me because not only had I struck a good rapport with him, I also saw him as an exceptional youth with a bright future ahead of him. Christopher's debacle would reinforce my earlier view that without a firewall that harnessed my biological clock from being tempted into moral hazards that other students and I were at risk of, it was going to be only a matter of time before we were entrapped into our own Delilah moments. I, therefore, became even more cautious about how I interacted with those of the fairer sex, lest I fell into the same pit as Christopher.

While it helped that I had become more assertive in my Christian faith as the Rukweza United Methodist Church Youth Fellowship leader, I had also learned valuable lessons from my difficult upbringing that inflicted deep emotional scars that were still to heal. As such, I couldn't be cruel to myself by rubbing salt into the wounds.

A bit of background to help drive the point home!

While still in primary school, my struggle until I wrote my Grade Seven exams at Farai Primary School in Chitungwiza was to not come last in class. My definition of success was limited to avoiding the wooden spoon.

And so, when I wrote my final Grade Seven exams in 1977 and failed dismally, it was one of my lowest points as I could not proceed to Form One at any of the competitive schools in and around Chitungwiza.

By the time I was twenty, I had come to appreciate that being at the bottom of the pile wasn't the best place to be; it came with humiliation and embarrassment that eroded one's confidence and pride. Having grown wiser with age and experience, I realised that success had to do with attitude towards life in general and that there was no permanent situation in life.

While my recollections of the life we lived when our parents were happy together were vibrant and cheerful, things had taken a dramatic turn for the worst when their relationship broke down, leading to their acrimonious separation. For most of my childhood after that, I recalled being bitter and angry about why life had been cruel to us.

That bitterness would almost reach catastrophic levels when Father made us stay with his new wife, Mainini Bertha, whose toughness bordered on cruelty. The fact that I would always question why she wanted us to do things differently from what we had been accustomed to made it worse for me.

Not accepting what was, especially that she was there to stay was energy sapping, taking me from what should have been my primary focus, schooling. I lived in denial, consumed by anger and bitterness. Consequently, I had not applied myself to the one thing that, if I did well, would help change my situation, positioning me and the rest of the family on the path of success – an education. Instead, I had chosen a life of denial, concentrating on a painful past and unacceptable present, instead of accepting what was and using it as a portal, to shaping a beckoning future through hard work, persistence and determination.

That lack of focus would take on a life of its own, rearing its ugly head even when Johanne, Thomas and I moved in with our mother in Chitungwiza in 1977, where we were enrolled at Farai Primary School. Despite our changed circumstances, it was crystal clear that when Johane and I wrote our Grade Seven exams, none of us had applied our minds to the high-stakes mandatory tests that certified completion of primary education. Neither had we taken a long-term view on life, which should have aroused in us a more purposeful approach to our studies.

The end result was our lacklustre performance in the exams, which condemned us to the backwater of Chifuri village in Chiduku Tribal Trust Lands, where my first real-life experience would be working for the Chikudo family, herding cattle and doing other menial jobs for a small wage of ZW$7 per month. I had been badly injured after a brick-moulding assignment I had been given went wrong. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise as I subsequently moved in with my mother at Matererini hostels in Mbare courtesy of her childhood friend, Abigail Muropa, with whom we stayed, after being discharged from Rusape District Hospital.

I would move out of Matererini hostels to stay on the fringes of Mbare Musika in an abandoned, ramshackle Volkswagen van, along with my uncle, Edward, from where we would learn the trades of welding and motor mechanics under the able tutelage of Edward's father, Sekuru Samson Musasa. Through Sekuru Samson, I would meet my long-forgotten cousin, Leonard Basiyawo, whose meteoric rise in business was the stuff of legends.

Leonard would build his LB Timbers (Private) Limited enterprise from scratch, turning it into a strong timber merchant business that held its own in the timber industry. Through him, I would get to interact with many successful people who were his associates.

Sekuru Samson had decided it was time for him to abandon his business in Mbare for reviving his fortunes at Mubaira Growth Point in Mhondoro, following the signing of the Lancaster House Agreement in December 1979, marking the end of our war of liberation. Independence had followed in April 1980. Our relocation would open my eyes to the horrible pit that would consume me had I gotten comfortable with my new environment.

At sixteen, I would consciously decide to trace my footsteps back to Harare, this time landing in Egypt, Highfield, where I would start to job-hunt while sharing a room at Number 2195 with Babamukuru Tongai Mataranyika's son, Amos. My eureka moment had come while working for builders John Sisk and Son, building the Maths and Computers Department at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) as a builder's assistant or "dhaka boy."

My interaction with university students as they went about their business of acquiring knowledge would fire in me a burning desire to do the same.

Over time, this evolved into a liking for education and aversion for menial jobs such as being a bricklayer's assistant whose responsibilities included prepping and cleaning up the construction area; mixing cement and pit sand with water and supplying the mixture to the builder so he could proceed with construction; assembling and disassembling scaffolding and helping with other tasks as assigned by the builder.

I would vow to go back to school at the first opportunity, which I did, getting my study material from the Central African Correspondence College in 1982 to help me study towards my Zimbabwe Junior Certificate (ZJC) exams the following year. I subsequently joined the study group at Nyandoro Primary School as I realised I would struggle to understand the material on my own, even though the design of the study material was for self-help. Realising my limitations, I had sought help and went on to do well passing my ZJC exams with flying colours, which motivated me to work even harder.

The school of life had come in handy, teaching me life lessons that jolted me into changing focus and working hard, relegating the thoughts of denial, anger and bitterness into the dustbin of history. My battles had changed entirely, from being the whipping boy at Farai Primary School to fighting for first position in class and good grades overall, even when I wrote my Zimbabwe Junior Certificate Exams.

To help me get better results for my "O" Levels, I had made the decision to go back to formal education, and my comeback had been seamless. Instead of fighting at the bottom of the pyramid like I did at Farai Primary School, at Rukweza Secondary School, I was fighting for the top position and succeeding!

Looking back at my change in fortunes and with the benefit of hindsight, it is crystal clear that there was a complete shift in the way I looked at life. What happened to Christopher also reminded me and others that in the absence of focus, it was easy to be consumed by the fad or fashion of the moment or the desires of the flesh.

It sent an unequivocal and loud message that we needed to be good boys and girls, focused on our mission to excel in school and not be side-tracked by rising fame and popularity which, if anything, demanded that we close our eyes and mind to instant gratification.

Without the stiff competition from Christopher, I had to find other mechanisms to continue working hard. I found this in other students who would keep me up on my toes.

At the beginning of 1985, we started Form Four with a new kid on the block. We were introduced to a new student, Alice Muzamhindo, who had transferred from Handina Secondary School, a sister school.

Alice's reputation preceded her. She was said to be intelligent, having proved her mettle at this Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church school – one of a number in Nyazura along with Nyazura Adventist High as well as Katsenga Secondary School.

The SDA Church has been investing in education since the 1870s, and to date it runs an extensive educational system in nearly 150 countries with over 6620 primary and 2700 secondary schools affiliated to the church, as at December 2019.

The work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zimbabwe (then known as Southern Rhodesia) was introduced through evangelism and educational institutions. In 1894, Pieter Wessels and A T Robinson were given a 12,000 acre piece of land, 50 kilometres west of Bulawayo, by Cecil John Rhodes, chairman of the British South Africa Company. This is where Solusi (named after Chief Soluswe) established the first mission station in Zimbabwe. Solusi Mission continued to expand, and by 1929 a government-approved teacher-training programme had begun. To meet the need for higher academic training, secondary school training started in 1948, and four years later, in 1952, the teacher-training programme was moved to Lower Gwelo (now Gweru) Mission to make room for the expanding academic programme.

At the end of October 1910, Mr M C Studevant, who had come to Africa in 1902, left Solusi with his wife and six trained African men and their families headed for Nyazura Mission (Tsungwesi Mission) on a wagon drawn by twelve donkeys. On reaching their destination on the 6th of November, Sturdevant reported, "O my! All our company are pleased. We find the place so much better than I remembered it on my prospecting trip; lovely rivers one fourth of a mile from the house and a beautiful valley of rich, black, loamy soils. There is an abundance of wood, and the land is much better than at Solusi."

Two months later, on the 1st of January 1911 a school was opened and they called it Tsungwesi Mission (Nyazura Mission). The first enrolment was twelve students, including four boarders. Today the church operates about forty schools in Zimbabwe.

Transferring from Handina Secondary School to Rukweza must have taken Alice through the same arduous journey I had gone through the year earlier when Mr Mahaja made me wait for a vacancy to arise before accepting my application for a Form Three place.

Upon being admitted at school, Alice had moved in with her sister, married to one of our neighbours, Shepherd Matsokotere. In addition, she had been placed in our class, Form Four A, suggesting that her progress reports must have convinced the school authorities that she had what it takes to fly with the eagles.

As for me, I celebrated her arrival with the view that she could be a possible match to Christopher in intellect with whom I could make friends, study with, at the same time thinking that I had to continue working hard to keep my place as the top student ahead of her and Trueness. Before long, Alice and I became friends, and soon we were studying together.

Since Alice lived in my neighbourhood, she became my closest study mate, and there was never a day that the thought of blurring the boundaries into developing a romantic relationship with each other crossed our minds. Bound by a brotherly and sisterly bond, we continued to study with Trueness, Cephas Mukwawaya, and others who lived far from our village, only when still at school.

Working and studying together, our group became the formidable Class of 1985, a group of determined young boys and girls who were undeterred by the many temptations and challenges that were prematurely condemning many promising students out of school, we chose to be different and kept our eyes firmly on the ball.

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