

GREAT RALEIGH ROAD RACE
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Young Man

In

A Hurry

...son of Mary.

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To dad and mum, Mary (Mary Ogwudu Ukwu), who gave birth to me, and stayed the course
to raise five children with the power of the Holy Rosary;

My children who doggedly insisted on knowing their father's story;

My mentor who gave me discipline, the glue that kept me together;

My wives who accepted me as I am, supported me to live, to create, and to tell my story;

The computer industry where I was compelled to grow and produce, and its professionals
who taught and accepted me for forty-two years.

Preface

Young Man In A Hurry was not written for me. It was demanded by my children to get to know me better. The book is equally dedicated to my mother, Mary, in-lieu of not giving her a better life while she lived. The collective stories and thoughts in this book are shared to show that no matter where you are born or raised, you can do great things with your life. Legally. It is your job to determine what and how. My story suggests that one can easily wrestle with these questions starting from the adolescence years between the ages of 10 and 18. Everyone will be different within those years, some earlier than others.

Young Man In A Hurry was written to show how an improbable life can be actualized, providing as many details as possible, subject to privacy boundaries. I hope that the details included in this book will push younger people to take more control of their lives. Not to delegate their lives for others to figure out, especially their parents and other relatives. And to equally persuade parents to hands-off their children's business, as safely as they can. Over-parenting is tantamount to eating a child's lunch and starving them of the fuel and energy they need to chart their own life's journey. That is not what parents want.

Young Man In A Hurry was written so that if anyone has been watching, they will not have unanswered questions, such as, *How did he do that?*

Young Man In A Hurry, although written by an African with 33 percent Nigerian life experience, is not considered African literature in the traditional sense. It is a handbook that reveals how one African born in Nigeria, lived the life he has, nearly on his own terms, to prove it can be done and done well.

I admire and salute Africa's literary giants such as the following: Chinua Achebe of Nigeria, who attended Government College, Umuahia before me; Wole Soyinka of Nigeria; Cyprian Ekwensi of Nigeria; Ama Atta Aido of Ghana; Meja Mwangi of Kenya, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie of Nigeria. I would love to be in their group. But the *Young Man In A Hurry* does not belong, or pretend to be in their genre of work. *Young Man In A Hurry* is raw but a practical tale of a real life and how it has been lived so far. I hope that the story of *Young Man In A Hurry* was told just well enough to give added confidence to readers who aspire for a better life. *Young Man In A Hurry* demonstrates it is doable.

PART I . . .*son of Mary goes to Work*

Why this book and title?

The preface answered this question. My children demanded to know their father. Me, better. This writing is primarily designed to fulfill that demand. So, I knew what I was going to write about. My story, I also contend, is an improbable one. If this story inspires one single child with an equally improbable future, then it would be worth it. Life has been extremely kind to me, so much so that I must demonstrate that I have been faithful and accountable for what I was given. By doing so, perhaps, others might be inspired to follow in my footsteps or to do better than I did.

Choosing a title for the book was not easy. Several titles were considered and tossed around. I concluded the title should answer the following question: “Who is Charlie O Ukwu?”

The short list included:

Young Man in A Hurry

Coal Miner’s Son

Son of Mary, and

Dare to be Different

After a protracted analysis, the two most preferred titles were *Young Man in A Hurry* and *Son of Mary*. *Son of Mary* easily won the contest for its simplicity. Although the tribute for this story goes equally to my parents and my mentor, Sir Patrick Uzoechi, the coal miner title was eliminated because my mother had a greater influence on who I became than my father. *Son of Mary* was also more appealing because of its subtle allusion to the scriptural family of baby Jesus, Saint Mary, and Saint Joseph of Nazareth in Christian theology. Like Joseph, my father was a “tekton” (carpenter) before he became a coal miner.

Consistent with the virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary, my mother was dedicated to her lifetime choice of religion, the Catholic faith. She made the Holy Rosary the center, and indispensable core of her world. She strived to make it mine too. She invested her time and money, which she had little of, during most of my adolescent years, coaching and guiding me through catechism, making sure I was on target with all my sacraments, and that I attended the Holy Mass regularly. The title of this book, *Son of Mary*, would greatly please Mother Mary, wherever she may be. I can almost hear her whispering, “Well done son, I raised you right,” in response to the choice of title for this book.

There is some irony in my title choice. When Mother was alive, everyone in the village used to call her “Mama Charlie” or Charlie’s mum. Very few people knew her by her real name, Mary. To be fair, I thought, *Why not identify myself in this book as Mary’s son?*

What also became evident in researching my story was the sense of urgency that dominated the most productive years of my life, particularly my education phase and my professional life phases. I am forever indebted to Mr. Sunny Young-Harry, national director of programs

at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, Ikoyi, Lagos, Nigeria, in the early 70s. Mr. Sunny Young-Harry defined me, even before I knew who I was. “A young man in a hurry,” he had called me.

I discovered how accurate his characterization was, much later in life. To honor Mr. Young-Harry for making a near-perfect observation, I have included it as the subtitle. Such a subtitle could inspire the youth to “make hay while the sun shines” (Heywood, 1546:), thus making things better faster, not just for themselves, but for others.

But wait, the search for the best title for the son of Mary, Charlie O, was just beginning. As I wrote, I thought about it, applying all known methods of decision making—coin toss, paper wraps, rock-paper-scissors, thumb war, a button, washer with a one-sided mark.

Nearly out of frustration, residual knowledge from an MBA marketing class at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas kicked into memory:

How about using a focus group? I yelled to myself.

I proceeded to release the manuscript to about 20 readers and waited for their comments. The focus group was only required to read and provide comments, with no specific instructions about the title. Nevertheless, nearly half of the group made comments on the title, and more than half of those who did, suggested a change.

Young Man in a Hurry was the preferred title, according to those who commented. No explanation I gave could change their mind. To keep Mother Mary happy, both the title and subtitle are used interchangeably as the story unfolds.

Finally, why this book? As a lifetime student of economics, I am often motivated to take the global view that allows me to see most matters in terms of their benefits to the world, rather than benefits for one person, family, or country. The micro view struck me as limiting and lacked the glue that binds humans and humanity together. By sharing the little stories and experiences embedded in this *Son of Mary*, or “*Young Man in a Hurry*” I hope to show that no matter your starting point, anyone—especially the youths who have the time—can reach their desired destination simply by placing one progressive step in front of the other. consistent with their original, or modified objectives.

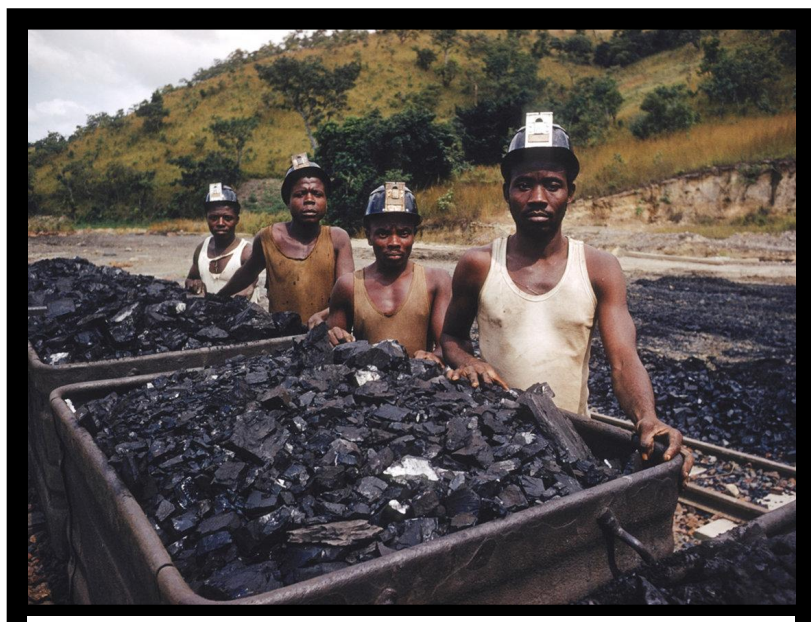
Early days

The story, "*Young Man In A Hurry*", begins at Iva Valley, a coal-mining settlement, not even the size of a town or city. Iva Valley, the site of the Iva Valley Coal Mine is located next to Enugu, the eastern regional capital in the south-east of Nigeria. This is where the son of Mary, Charlie O(Onuzulike) Ukwu was born to Mary Ogwudu of Akama Oghe in Ezeagu Local Government Area and Basil Maduka Ukwu of Umuavulu-Abor, in Udi Local Government Area, Mr. and Mrs. Basil M. Ukwu.

Iva Valley (OlliverWithDoubleL, 2021) had made history about thirty years earlier before the Ukwu family arrived. Back in 1917, the British, Nigeria's colonial masters, opened several coal mines in and around Enugu, south-eastern Nigeria. Because of the coal mine, Iva Valley flourished with a settlement attracted and buoyed by coal mining. Miners were recruited from the neighboring towns of Ngwo, Nsude, Obioma, Udi, Abor, Nike, Awkunanaw and a few other distant towns. The miners were housed in single room living quarters at Iva Valley to minimize long commutes to and from work. With little public transportation, productivity at the mines was boosted because miners lived close to their place of work. That is how my parents came to reside at Iva Valley.

Years later, as an adolescent, I was to discover the proximity of Iva Valley to places of importance in my family's life: the Ukwu hometown of Umuavulu-Abor, less than ten kilometers north-west of Iva Valley, Iyi Ohune and Iyi Usala, two streams that were the sole sources of drinking water for Abor, Ebe, and other surrounding towns, and finally, Enugu, the capital city, the seat of regional governance to the south.

I do not know how many years my father had been working at the Iva Valley coal mines before I was born. But about two weeks after I was born, on November 18, 1949, there was a major clash between the miners and their British managers because the miners were owed back pay (Harman, 2018). More than 20 people were shot dead by policemen while they were striking. Thankfully, my father was not one of them.



Coal Miners like My Father

I can only imagine what life was like at Iva Valley for my young parents before I was born. As my father's first paid employment, coal mining must have been received with gratitude, joy and excitement, not considering what a tough job it was, and the risks that came with it. Prior to coal mining, my father was a self-employed carpenter with an unpredictable income flow. Hence, becoming a miner, with a regular paycheck, would have been considered a major

accomplishment. I imagine my dad must have felt the way I did thirty two years later. That was when I received an offer to intern with Andersen Consulting in Houston, Texas, straight from graduate school, earning \$24,000 per year — my biggest paycheck in the United States at that time.

My mother, in contrast, was a full-time housewife skilled in sewing women's clothes. She would have mastered the skill of sewing by going to "Ozuzu" or training. Amazingly enough, in those days, parents would send young women and spinsters to training to learn etiquette, and sometimes, to acquire skills that would serve them well with, or without, marriage. As of this writing, *Ozuzu* for young women who do not have the privilege of secondary school or university education is almost nonexistent.

My mother would make new clothes and mend old ones for neighbors, friends, and relatives, strictly by word of mouth. There were no advertising services. Being a full-time housewife also meant that her chores at the home, such as preparing meals and cleaning the house, took precedence over everything else. When the household had a live-in maid or relatives, some of my mother's chores would be delegated to them. But mother was still accountable for everything at the home front while dad worked.

I can also imagine Mother checking on her house help from time to time, yelling,

"Nkechi-o! Isicha go nni?" meaning, Nkechi, have you finished cooking?

And Nkechi would yell back in response, *"O folu nwobele oge ka mmesia, Ma"* or, I am almost done Madam.

If Mother was not satisfied with the response she got from Nkechi, and depending on father's expected arrival time, she would drop everything and get engaged hands-on with the

cooking. Sometimes mum would need to whip up a quick appetizer, such as *Ugba* or *Abacha* to keep Dad and occasional guests, busy, while the main course meal was completed. At other times, mum's involvement would be as simple as assisting with a type of presentation that made a good meal a great meal! She must have known that *presentation is everything!* (SHERMAN, 2011).

Due to the dangerous nature of coal mining, welcoming Dad from work with smiles, open arms, and great food were essential parts of the family routine. Without exception, every family that had someone working in the mines had tales of what a difficult and dangerous job coal mining was. Mining accidents were common. All things considered, father's returning home from work every day was a miracle and a daily celebration of life. This is a major reason mother took her welcoming receptions seriously. It was the least she could do.

“

Mr. & Mrs. Basil and MaryUkwu



Kindergarten Minority Student

When I think of my entire life, it always felt like I constantly moved from one minority group to another. A “minority group”, in this context, is used loosely to describe the state of being ethnically alone, and in the minority, wherever I moved. This is different from the definition of a *minority group* in social sciences.

During kindergarten, or my first ever educational experience, I lived with my grandparents at Akama Oghe in Ezeagu Local Government Area of Enugu State, my mother’s maternal home. My parents did not live in Akama Oghe, nor was I born there. I was a visitor to the town and knew only my grandparents, a few uncles, aunties, and cousins, at least initially. None of these people attended school with me. I was a minority.

At school, I was surrounded by strangers as classmates. If my teacher, for example, asked all students in my class to stand if they came from Akama Oghe, or if they were born in Akama Oghe, I would be the only one sitting.

Although everyone loved me and called me by adoring names such as “*Nwa m’lamu*,” it was sort of lonely. Before you start feeling sorry for me, I will make the case that being in the minority was good for business. I would not have changed a thing. Being in the minority bothered me only when I consciously thought about it.

When compared to the children in military families, where parents are constantly moving from one location to another, my situation was different. Military had it better than me because they, at least, lived with their parents in the same home.

Thus, began my first adventure ever into what would be referred to, in this book, as being in *minority land*. This attribute will appear repeatedly throughout this story. I did not know at this early stage that this ‘curse’, I mean, attribute, would follow me for the rest of my life like an albatross. While *minority land* was ubiquitous, it was not a problem.



*

My grandfather’s House In Akama Oghe where I lived From Ages 5 - 8

I am not sure how the decision was made for me to live at Akama Oghe for kindergarten. I think it just happened. Some would say organically. Being the first

grandchild out of many to come later, perhaps my grandparents were simply lending a helping hand to ensure I was raised properly. Perhaps they concluded that a place called Iva Valley, a coal miner's squalor, in the middle of nowhere, was not the most appropriate place to raise their first grandchild. The massacre killings of more than 20 miners at Iva Valley barely two weeks after I was born may have played a part too. I was not old enough to understand what amenities the British masters made available for their coal workers at Iva Valley. But if the workers could be shot for demanding what they were owed, it is highly improbable the same masters would have built school facilities to benefit the miners' children.

* * *

One day, my youngest uncle, Joseph, called me in front of several family members and visitors. He was about to determine if I was old enough to start kindergarten. He began by saying to me,

"Nwa m'lamu! I think we are ready to send you to school, come here, and let me see..."

He then proceeded to grab my right hand. He placed the hand over my right ear and across my head. Finally, using my stretched right fingers, he touched and attempted to cover my left ear, as if he was using my right arm to measure the distance between my right shoulder and my left ear. Later, I was to discover that if my right hand with the fingers stretched touched, or completely covered my left ear, that meant I was old enough to go to school. If not, then I could stay home and play all day long.

"Eh-heh", my uncle continued, and in an excited, almost jubilant voice, he announced the breaking news of the day.

"I told you, you are old enough to go to school now."

I was silent. Everyone around us was focused, watching intently as a movie of the next phase of my life debuted. There was excitement and cheers all over and around me as if I had just won a lottery. I was not amused. Although I thought I looked forward to going to school someday, this sudden announcement left me speechless, perplexed, and with mixed emotions. Would other kids at school like me? Would they accept me? Could I make friends? Would I be abandoned and all alone? Would the teachers even like me? Too many questions, but few answers. I even didn't know other kids my age who would be starting at the same time as me. I was worried. I would be all alone without friends and amidst strangers!

* * *

In the end, school was not as bad as I feared. Known as St. Mary's Catholic School and Church, the building also served as the only church of the town on Sundays. The school building itself was long and stretched for about 274 meters. The school was located in an elevated part of town, next to a moderately busy roadway that led to *Ajali* Cashew Industry (CHIBUZOR, 2023), a major local employer in those days. The roof was made of corrugated aluminum

sheets. Then firmly attached to wooden rafters with nails bearing crowns of flattened heads. No ceiling or parapet to cover the roof's nakedness.

Inside, the school was equipped with long benches with armrests that also served as desks for students to write on. Each bench was capable of seating three to six children or adults. But they were flexible enough for small, or large classes, as well as Easter and Christmas services. The surrounding walls were painted in light spring colors with paintings of twelve stations of the cross used during the Holy Week of Easter. One end of the school had a raised floor approximately 152 millimeter above the rest of the school floor. On Sundays, the raised floor propped up a makeshift altar for Sunday masses.

Outside, wide open spaces and playgrounds yearned for children to run around, roll on the grass, and play 'til exhaustion. For a change, I could leave my grandparent's home daily to be among children close to my age. Instead of having one or two playmates, I suddenly had 15 to 20 mates.

Attending kindergarten school was only one part of my responsibility while I lived with my grandparents. I assisted with other types of chores—washing dishes, sweeping, farm work, especially weeding, and running errands. While performing any of these chores, I often got distracted and failed to complete a task properly or completely. I was only about six or seven years old.

Even at that age, I enjoyed some tasks better than others. I liked being sent on errands, away from home, especially to *Eke-Ugbo* market to buy salt and pepper or any items used up overnight. *Eke-Ugbo* which translates to “Eke roadside market” holds a full market on “Eke” days, one of the four Igbo market days. The other market days in Igbo-land are, *Nkwo*, *Orie*, and *Afor*. *Eke-Ugbo* was aptly located beside the major road that led to Enugu through the towns of *Eke*, 9th Mile Corner, and *Ngwo*, on one side; and on the other side, led to *Iwollo*, *Olo*, and *Amagu Umulokpa*. The location of the market gave easy access to visitors and petty traders looking to purchase fresh produce, poultry, and livestock.

Golu oloma !

Golu akwukwo-nni!

Golu okpa-di-oku!

Golunu mango!

Buy oranges! Buy vegetables! Buy hot *okpa!* Y'all buy mango fruit! The hawkers shouted and yelled, as they rushed to be the first to make a sale with each arriving transport vehicle. The hawkers included young children my age, helping to make a living for their families, instead of being at school. Now, as I try to recall my own story, I wonder what became of them. What is their story?

What I was often sent to buy at *Eke-Ugbo* were basic; they could be purchased any day, beside *Eke* market day. I recall I was prohibited to go to *Eke-Ugbo* on busy *Eke* market days for fear of being kidnapped or encountering a traffic fatality.

There was one noteworthy feature of my errands to *Eke-Ugbo*, and other errands that required me to travel from home to pick up or deliver a message. The speed and alacrity with which I did them. I always ran, instead of walking, to do the errands. It is hard to determine the origin of this quest to dazzle my grandparents with my quickness. The speed of my errands was so incredible, and beyond belief, that I was often challenged on whether the task was actually completed.

Heh!

E-w-o-o-o! I-na-ta-go-li!

“Wow! Are you back already?” my grandmother would ask with eyes and mouth wide open in disbelief.

With no intention of revealing the secrets of my magic, I would nod in affirmation, instead of speaking and thereby give away the secret to my magical performance. The truth was, I was

completely out of breath, running so fast to complete the errand. As of this writing, now in my seventies, it is astonishing how such childhood qualities stayed with me. Case in point, there is a backroad or trail, *American Tobacco Trail* (Newsome, 2022), that passes behind my house, and through to nearby stores and shops in Durham, North Carolina. At age seventy-plus, I still find myself trotting for a mile and a half to the store, instead of walking.

“Wow! Are you back already?” My wife would say, just like my grandma used to say many years ago. So, my magical performance remains with me. A lesson from this experience is that what children do while they are young, and how they do it, matters. Pay attention.

One responsibility I did not enjoy was evening lessons supervised by Uncle Joe. I dreaded evening periods, just before dinner because of this daily ordeal. Uncle Joe would have me repeat and write my 1, 2, 3...and A, B, C... over and over until he was satisfied everything had been done correctly. He would even use a cane on me, or make me kneel for long periods if

he was dissatisfied with the results. Oh, how I dreaded those sessions. My grandmother would console me and plead with me to understand.



22-mile long American Tobacco Trail in Durham, North Carolina, USA

“Everything your uncle is doing is for your future,” she would plead.

“You will grow up to be a better and smarter person because of Uncle Joe”.

Her reasoning and thinking did not make sense to me. I was not persuaded. All I wanted was for the session to be over. Then I can have my freedom, eat dinner, and go to bed.

* * *

My relationship and bonding with Uncle Joseph had an opportunity to grow stronger when he got a teaching appointment at *Owo, Nike*, near Enugu. He invited me to live with him and go to school there. This was Uncle Joe’s first teaching job.

Before qualifying for the teaching job, he studied at Lourdes Teacher Training College, LTTC, Iwollo-Oghe. I fondly recall doing Uncle Joe’s laundry. Mostly white clothing. I hand-washed his shorts, pants, short sleeve, and long-sleeve shirts, and ironed them too. All the clothes were folded symmetrically and layered into a metal bucket, instead of a suitcase. I don’t know why he didn’t use a suitcase. Maybe it was not required, or he just could not afford one. I did not ask. Instead, I imagined a similar future for myself. Someday it will be my turn to get higher education, beyond primary school. I would have my own bucket and sets of white clothing. My sister, Christina, would probably do my laundry when that time came.

A Greek fabulist and storyteller, Aesop, reminds us to “...be careful what you wish for, ‘cause you just might get it...” (London: Cassell, 2023) Less than ten years later, I got what I wished for. The only difference—there was no Christina to wash and fold my laundry. My parents never discussed Christina. I don’t know much about her. All I know is that I had a younger sister who was nowhere to be found when I needed her. I think she died and my parents were uncomfortable sharing the details with me.

Hence, I did my laundry all by myself when I was ready to go to Government College, Umuahia. It made me sad.

* * *

My stay with Uncle Joe at *Owo, Nike* was cut short due to financial reasons - his income turned out to be insufficient to support us without assistance from my grandparents.

Why are teachers never paid what they deserve? This question remains unanswered even today.

Although my stay at *Owo, Nike* was for about one year, it still gave me another opportunity to live in *minority land*. That land where I always found myself different from others in my space. Coming to *Owo* also freed me from a bully named Gilbert Obiekwe, a bigger boy at St. Mary’s School. He preyed on me after my first year at the school. He seized my lunches regularly and demanded my lunch money. He also would encourage me to steal from my grandmother for him. Perhaps because my grandparents were influential in the community and thought to be wealthy by the standards of the day. I had no way to prove if this wealth was real or imagined.

“Heh, Charlie, did you bring anything for your friend today?” Gilbert would often say to me.

The voice was the creepiest thing I ever heard. Sometimes, I would simply run away from him as fast as my legs could carry me. That meant a severe beating awaited me the next time we met. At other times, I simply complied and gave him my lunch money. This ordeal continued for months, and perhaps up to a year until Uncle Joe invited me to *Owo*. The ordeal was a secret pact between the bully and me. I was not supposed to tell anyone. I was trapped, or so it felt.

Dad's Surprise

Starting from the school year following my eighth birthday, I lived with my father. He now worked at an underground coal mine called *Hayes Mine* (Shraddha Mishra, 2016). Hayes mine, opened in 1952, was later renamed Okpara Mines to honor Dr. Michael Iheonukara Okpara, first premier of Eastern Nigeria during the nation's first republic, 1959 to 1966 (Awa, 2020; speller, 2022). At this time, who knew I would be crossing paths, not once, but two times, with the first son of Hon. Michael Okpara?

Living with dad had been a topic of discussion for at least one year before it happened. True to form, I approached the new opportunity with a welcoming spirit of adventure fueled by the thrill of what could happen, on the other side. A predictable aspect of the impending move was that I would be well-fed and clothed. After all, Dad must be well paid for all the hard work he did for the Nigerian Coal Corporation. Dad was a foreman, or first-level manager.

The real surprise that emerged at my father's house was the confirmation of a rumor. The rumors had it that dad was about to take a second wife. Not old enough to engage or understand such serious matters, I pretty much ignored the subject. At some point in 1957, the issue was right in front of me, and it was true. Burying one's head in the sand never resolved issues.

Initially, I was simply angry and confused. But I wasn't sure why I was angry, or who was the object of my anger. I even contemplated running away from the home I just arrived at. Ultimately, I concluded I was too young to take such risks. So, I stayed and focused on the education that brought me there in the first place.

The decision to stay was not without consequences. Most significantly I struggled to keep up with school. I was nearly expelled despite several meetings and counseling sessions at the headmaster's office. My father also visited the headmaster at least three times that I knew about. I was never told what was discussed. My feelings, attitudes, and behavior at the time would be considered a form of mental illness in today's world.

* * *

Time passed.

The bad feelings eventually and gradually started to peel off like the skins of an onion. It was as if the older, hurt feelings were being replaced with fresh feelings. Dad's marriage to Mrs. Comfort Nweke Ukwu became less and less of an issue as time passed. I knew I was never angry at her. She, as far as I knew, did not instigate the situation. All my emotions had been directed towards my father, the only one who could have made this arrangement happen. Capitulation meant that I had to grow up fast. Perhaps faster than normal, to keep up with the demands of my new home.

Madam Comfort Ukwu, I discovered, was an entrepreneur specializing in catering, selling cooked food to the miners, like a food truck owner, except without a truck. The food was transported by head, also known as *head-carrying*; occasionally by taxi. She made two trips per day, Monday through Saturday. In the mornings, she served breakfast to morning and returning night shift workers. In the afternoons, she sold to returning morning shift workers and afternoon shift workers. She was busy six days a week, allowing herself only a brief break on Sundays. Every other Saturday was dedicated to purchasing more uncooked food from *Ogbete* Market.

Madam Comfort Ukwu, a sole proprietor, did not have additional staff to run this business. It would be just her and I. She did all the adult stuff; it was my job to handle everything else that a kid could do. The list of chores was endless, including, crushing and grinding food items like *egusi*, *ogbono*, pepper, and dry crawfish with a mortar and pestle called *ikwe na odu* to prepare soup for the miners. I fetched and split firewood; and washed dishes, pots, and pans before and after cooking. And I still had my homework to do after completing the home chores.

It was indeed a lot of work. I wondered how she managed to do everything before I arrived. I was unperturbed. I did the best I could without complaining. Occasionally, I acted like a child and went out playing with other kids. I would come home only after all the cooking had been done. On such days, I made sure to have dinner at the home of one of my playmates so that I wouldn't come home hungry. This allowed me to go straight to bed. As I got older and progressed to higher demanding classes, I accepted less housework so that I could do homework with school mates. With so many chores to do at home, going to school and staying at school was more fun than going home to Okpara Mines. I could not wait to be at school. School became an escape that I looked forward to.

In hindsight, living with Madam Comfort Ukwu prepared me for other upcoming phases of life. Assisting with Madam Comfort's food business made me resilient and even stronger. I learned about different food items, and how to prepare them. What I didn't like was the occasional interference with my homework. Luckily, there were no child labor laws to be broken. And the best part was, I could eat anything on the menu that I wanted.

First Grade Minority Student

The closest accessible primary school from Okpara Mines was St. Mary's Catholic School, Akwuke, near Awkunanaw, about six and a half kilometers in the southeastern direction of the mine. Other schools, physically closer, were in the northwestern direction across the mountain ranges, towards the town of *Enugu-Ngwo*. At this time, there were no motorways connecting Okpara Mines to *Enugu-Ngwo* through those mountains. There were no known plans to build such connections in the immediate future. All that existed were foot pathways in the wilderness, used mainly by coal miners and farmers from *Enugu-Ngwo*. These pathways passed through mountain and hill ranges. Those would have been too risky and treacherous for young children under ten to travel.

To get to school, six of us—four girls and two boys, all under the age of eleven—walked a total of eight miles or thirteen kilometers five days per week. Our school route began from the staff quarters at Okpara Mines to the town of *Akwuke*, the location of St Mary's Catholic School and Church. The road to school was the same one that connected Okpara mines with the Enugu-Umuahia-Port Harcourt expressway through Four Corners. Before the installation of aerial ropeways to haul coal across the wild to shipping depots, this road was the only thoroughfare used to transport coal. Trucks and lorries buzzed round the clock, transporting coal to depots for shipping. Luckily this phase in the history of coal transportation ended before I arrived.

The Okpara mines to *Akwuke* road had no sidewalks. We stayed away from the middle of the road as much as possible to avoid being hit by bicycles or cars. We wore no shoes to school. On warm days, the melting tar from some poorly paved sections of the road stuck to our feet and burned badly. I started to wear shoes only after I left home for secondary school where shoes were required.

* * *

Akwuke (Mapcarta, 2024), the location of our school, was a small town of a few thousand residents, consisting mostly of coal miners, farmers, and petty traders. Despite the distance, we had to walk, we still chose *Akwuke* town instead of *Enugu-Ngwo*, barely five kilometers in the north-west direction. It is hard to overlook the wild unfriendly mountainous ranges. In comparison, *Akwuke*, in the direction of Enugu city, was in a flat, low-altitude region. The road boasted of both human traffic and friendly automobile traffic that offered rides, to and from school.

One of us would typically wave down a passing car and request a ride, like a hitchhiker. Many times the cars would not stop at all. But when they did, it was usually at a distance requiring the six of us to set out on a mad dash to secure a seat in the car. The mad dash only determined who got to the car first. Not who got the ride. In some cases, the driver would select the youngest-looking children among us, and encourage the remaining older children to catch the next ride. At other times some drivers asked the smaller ones among us to sit on

the laps of the bigger kids to allow us to fit in the car. Fortunately, there were no seat belt laws to worry about.

Conversations with the benevolent driver were usually brief and straight to the point,

“Sir, can we get a ride home with you?”

“Where’s home?” asks the driver of the car, especially if it is an owner we have not ridden with before.

“Okpara Mines staff quarters, Sir,” we shout back.

By this time, some of us were already pulling at the door handle as if the bargaining was already a done deal. The majority of the drivers were quite compassionate; we got rides about 70 percent of the time.

The school at *Akwuke* provided both an academic and religious education home to students. There were a total of eight classes consisting of Infant 1, Infant 2, Standards 1 – 6. The key subjects taught, especially from Standard 1 – 6 were English, Arithmetic, Geography, History, Nature Study, and Physical Education or PE. Each class had one permanent teacher to teach all the principal subjects. PE had special teachers that separated and organized the kids by age groups depending on the activity. The infant classes were held from 8 am to noon, while the rest of the classes continued until 4 pm allowing a one-hour break at noon for lunch. The school had one head teacher called a headmaster. He was the chief disciplinarian and administrator, occasionally substituting for absent teachers.

My four years at St. Mary’s Catholic School and Church were largely uneventful. All the children that traveled from Okpara Mines to attend classes at St. Mary’s, not surprisingly, qualified for *minority land*, meaning that we were minorities at *Akwuke*. We were not born in *Akwuke*, and none of us planned to live in *Akwuke* long term. We only visited to go to school, like the children of the military. Being in the minority, at this stage of life often proved to be more of a liability than an asset. The locals at *Akwuke* appeared to admire us perhaps because we were better dressed and better fed. While some vied to become our friends, others tried to isolate, bully, and steal from us. In some cases, we, the visiting students, banded together to fend-off threats from any of the indigenous children of *Akwuke*.

Amidst all the social anomalies arising from being visitors and minorities in an unfamiliar town, the business of education went on unperturbed. Most of the visiting children were top performers in their classes and became recognized and rewarded by school management. When recognized, the kids from Okpara Mines were able to escape social injustices they might have suffered otherwise.

Attaining excellence in all my classes became a means for boosting my personality and escaping all forms of abuse or molestation at the hands of bullies and ‘bad boys’ at *Akwuke*. I even made friends with some of the bullies by being ready and eager to share what I knew to help make them better students. This was a win-win that didn’t require much to

accomplish. It was also how I survived the four years that I spent at St. Mary's Catholic School and Church, *Akwuke* before moving to the next minority land.

Not so fast.

Adventures With Dad

At Okpara Mines, I served as a *house-help* or servant to support Madam Comfort Ukwu's food catering business. Madam Comfort, my father's second wife, never maltreated me, or let me go hungry. She even took me to the Colliery Hospital once when I was sick. The only anomaly in our relationship was that I was made to work harder than most people my age. In certain cultures, this was tantamount to child abuse, especially to the extent that it interfered with my school homework. My main responsibility at that age was to be of good behavior and perform well in school. Yet, I will argue the relationship and the work made me a better, stronger person. I acquired skills that I would not have acquired, otherwise, especially cooking skills. There was no observable negative impact on my education. As is often said,

"What doesn't kill you often makes you stronger..."

(Wohns, 2011)



**Mr. Basil Maduka Ukwu,
Carpenter, and later Coal Miner**

My father lived at the colliery staff quarters about three kilometers from Okpara mines. The quarters consisted of a pair of long buildings perched on a flattened elevated landing. The landing itself was carved out of a hillside that overlooked the main thoroughfare to Okpara mines about twelve feet, or a little over 3.5 meters below. The two long buildings provided accommodation for ten families. The first building was numbered Units #1 to #4. The second provided space for Units #5 to #10. Each unit had one bedroom, living room, kitchen, and a separate smaller room or pantry. At Unit #5, assigned to my dad, there was one bed in the master bedroom, and a daybed in the living room.

My dad's living room was probably where I took my first-ever *music lessons*! The living room, in addition to the daybed, had two easy chairs plus a wooden cabinet about two times my height. Whereas my own children took piano, violin, or voice lessons, the only musical device available to me in the late fifties was a battery-operated shortwave radio. Whenever my dad was not home, I would climb one of the nearby chairs to reach this wonder box called a radio. At this time I had no clue I would one day become a broadcaster myself.

The short-wave radio became an instant window into the world for me at a very young age. Music programs were my favorite. This was a few years before the advent of the Beatles and The Rolling Stones. If I recall correctly, Congo or Zairean music was my preference back then. Pop music and other musical tastes developed after I went to High School. Music continues to be very important in my life.

* * *

I had a step-sister, *Anyaji*, who came home from time to time from *Enugu-Ngwo* across the hills. She attended school there. When she visited, we shared the same sleeping space on a mat spread on the floor of the living room. My step-sister was older, perhaps 4-6 years older. She had a domineering personality and perhaps was resentful of me. I didn't know why.

Whenever she visited she assigned the house chores and I seemed to get more difficult chores. But when we ate together she would claim an extra piece of meat for being older. This inconsistency in her behavior always bothered me.

Anyaji was upset whenever I left the house to play with other boys.

"*Ebe k'ineje, isi-okpo?*" (Where are you going, big head?, she would ask.) I would usually ignore her and continue on my way to visit playmates, and she would come back swinging!

Anu s'olu enwe o'majie aka!!!

One who follows or runs with the monkeys is bound to break an arm. She implied I was keeping bad company, and that I would ultimately get into trouble running around with those playmates.

* * *

Due to my age, I did not know how much my dad earned from working at the mines. I knew he was a foreman or first-level manager. I also knew that people who worked under him respected him very much and called him "*Oga*" or "*Onye-Isi*", meaning boss. At the same time, my father was not up to the level of those colliery staff that gave us rides to and from school in their "pleasure cars", as they were called in those days. Those managers earned those positions by virtue of better education. I let my imagination go wild again; just like I did while doing Uncle Joseph's laundry. Can I one day drive a pleasure car like the Coal managers? I mused. All it would take is more and higher education, I said silently to myself. Pleasure cars are sedans that are not used for commercial transportation. Although they are sedans, taxis, and *kabu-kabu* are not considered pleasure cars.

In contrast, my father had only a fourth-grade education and drove a bike instead of a car. With a bicycle, my dad could only give a ride to one person at a time. The passenger would either sit sideways across the bar in front or on the bicycle luggage rack at the back.

As a child, I preferred my father owning a bicycle than owning a car. At my age, I could never be allowed to drive a car, but I could sneak out with dad's bicycle, especially when he was at work. No one would know it. That was how I learned to ride a bicycle on my own. No one taught me. Before my encounter with the bicycle, I had never used a tool or device that moved a person from point A to point B, apart from the human feet. No wonder I had such an incredible feeling of both liberation and exhilaration on the first day of riding a bike. It must have felt like an orgasm. I mustered just enough courage to release, and surrender my body-weight to the bicycle when that incredible feeling took over me. Birds must have

similar feelings during their first flights. As I tell this story, the memory of that simple, but memorable, experience makes me want to sing...

I believe I can fly

I believe I can touch the sky...

Riding a bicycle at under the age of ten in eastern Nigeria in the late 50s was different. Where I lived, every child had to use an adult-sized bicycle whose frame was too tall for children our age. If I was propped up and seated properly on the seat of an adult bike, my short legs would be hanging or dangling! My legs would not reach the pedals, let alone move the pedals up and down. The only option available to me was a riding style called "*monkey style*". Monkey style consisted of accessing the right pedal with the right foot through the bicycle's open triangular frame structure, grasping the two handlebars, while the bicycle seat was tucked under one's right arm-pit for support. The rider would then pedal as smoothly as possible in this posture. This style of riding has probably disappeared with the arrival of different-sized bicycles for different ages in Nigeria.

* * *

Father, his wife, and I went shopping at *Ogbete* market every other Saturday. Oh, how I disliked those shopping trips. I would beg to stay home and play with other kids, but father would have none of it.

"*I told you before, it's for your own good,*" he would say, staring down at me as he spoke those words.

"You are coming with us, and that is final."

Ogbete market was less than one hour by public transportation from Okpara mines. It took even less time to come home by taxi. We usually returned by taxi because of all the purchased food and household items that needed to be transported. Our shopping was never easy. As we bought food for the house, we also bought for Madam Comfort's food catering business. I always wondered how she was able to keep the accounting separate without commingling the funds. Perhaps she was responsible for the family food too and did not need to keep the finances apart.

Although the concept of babysitting existed in Igboland and Nigerian culture while I was growing up, it was and still mostly used for very young children who cannot take care of themselves at all. The preadolescent ages were a different story. That explained why my parents struggled to determine the right thing to do with me whenever they needed to be somewhere together as adults, such as the family weekend shopping trips. I didn't need to travel with them, except that it was not also a good idea for me to be home alone all day. I enjoyed sightseeing and observing the busy beehive called *Ogbete* market. What bored me to death was when my parents did the adult stuff, such as visiting one of the bars located inside *Ogbete* market.

The drinking places in those days were mostly hosted by adult women inside Ogbete main market. Each bar was relatively small in size, measuring about 3.7 x 3.7 meters. These bars littered the market, operating from late morning to dusk. They were simple. Each was equipped with matted mud slab sitting spaces that circled 75 percent of the perimeter of the bar like a curved sectional couch. Some of the bars also sold food, but the exclusive drink sold was white Nigerian palm wine.

There was good music too, drowning in loud conversations, cheers, and laughter. These places were designed to be fun places for adults; not for children like me. During our visits, there was usually nothing else for me to do after I had had some lunch. No toys to play with, no other children in sight to talk to or play with. I recall sobbing silently often. All I wanted was for us to be on our way home. This feeling of neglect and loneliness, amidst adult boisterous conviviality, played itself over during the years I lived with dad. There was no better solution until I was off to my next minority land.

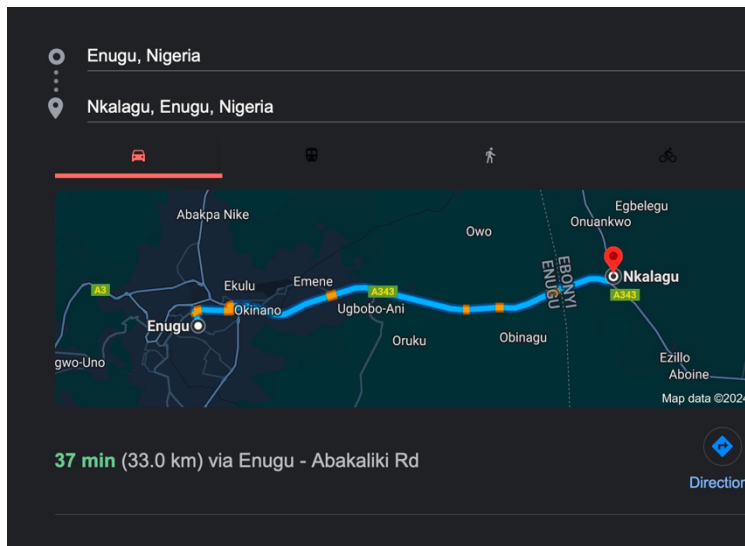
The Game Changer

Adults responsible for my welfare always planned my next moves without inviting me to the discussion table. Or, so it seemed. Apparently, nobody cared what I wanted, or thought I was old enough to have an opinion. It happened before I went to live with dad in 1957. It happened again when I relocated to Corpus Christi School, Umuhualli, Nkalagu in Ebonyi State in 1961, to live with a man who ultimately became my mentor, Sir. Patrick Uzoechi. May his wonderful and precious soul rest in peace. I was ten months away from my twelfth birthday. In hindsight, one has to admit the game plans designed for me worked. I executed them as if they were planned by me.

The move to Umuhualli was my fourth relocation before I turned into a full adolescent. And my parents were never in the military. How did this happen? I often wondered. How many other children my age lived this way? Were these moves the best for me? I will never know the answers. For me, it had become the norm rather than an exception—moving from one minority group to another, finding myself amidst the smaller population, or minority, within any of the many active populations that I joined. This theme echoes throughout this work.

* * *

Corpus Christi School is a Catholic school located in Umuhualli, Nkalagu in Ebonyi State. Nkalagu is about 33 kilometers from Enugu city. Once at Nkalagu, the Enugu-Abakaliki express road continues straight to Ezzamgbo, Abakaliki, and through subsidiary roads to the town of Ogoja in Cross River State.



Directions From Enugu to Nkalagu and Umuhualli in Ebonyi State

The road to Umuhualli and subsequently to the former Nigerian Cement Factory (Mapcarta, 2024) exits to the left from the aforementioned expressway. Umuhualli is approximately the midpoint between Nkalagu town junction and the former cement factory.

Whereas Nkalagu junction touted itself as a major commercial and transportation hub between Enugu and Abakaliki, and Nkalagu had Umuhualli had farmlands.

In the early sixties, the period addressed by this writing, Umuhualli did not have basic clean drinking water. Its citizens and visitors suffered water borne diseases such as cholera and guinea worms. To get clean water, residents, including us, traveled 6.4 to 9.6 kilometers

through bushy pathways to fetch water at nearby Nigerian Cement Factory. People relied on pond water for cooking and other needs. The ponds became muddy and overflowed during the rainy season, and became dry when it did not rain.

Corpus Christi School in Umuhualli was simple and unpretentious. The school boasted a large open space with one long brick building and regular zinc roofing. A large soccer field separated the school perimeter from the Nkalagu-Nigercem road. Rows of giant mango and gmelina trees stood 1.2 to 1.8 meters from the roadside like soldiers guarding over the school premises.

Four smaller buildings to the eastern corner housed the teachers. The rest of the school facilities consisted of two tennis courts and two huts for male and female toilets.

When I arrived at Umuhualli in January of 1961, I had only two more years left to finish my primary school. At the end of primary school, I would sit for the First School Leaving Certificate examination. Earning the certificate was a prerequisite for applying to attend a secondary school, also known as High School in some parts of the world. Once relocated to Umuhualli, I intuitively knew that my years of child's play were over; the making of "Charlie O" had begun in earnest.

The house we lived in at Umuhualli was one of four smaller buildings on the east corner of the school. Only a shouting distance from the sole paved road leading to the cement factory. Our particular building was reserved for my master, the headmaster or school principal. It had two bedrooms separated in the middle by a living room. One bedroom was for our master, Mr., later Sir. Patrick Uzoечи; the other room was for us. Six boys, ranging in ages from nine to sixteen. Behind the main house was a thatched hut that served as both a kitchen and chicken coop. The bathroom was a smaller area fenced with palm fronds, about two meters long and two meters wide. It was attached to the shorter side, or width of the house, next to the paved road leading to Nigercem cement factory.

The boys' bedroom had one bed shared by the older boys. Three of us, the youngest ones, slept on the floor, only separated from it by a thin mat, *ute*. Waking time was 6 am for everyone. From that time, each of us must complete our assigned house chores and be in class by 8 am. The older boys did the cooking while the younger ones swept the house and compound, washed dishes, or fetched water from a nearby pond. Our master's breakfast must be served by 7:15 am on school days; failure to do this was punishable by several lashes with a cane. Every failure to perform one's assigned duty was a punishable offense— no exceptions. Understandably, discipline was the centerpiece of our training at Umuhualli; it was not negotiable.

When one of us broke the rules, the conversation was usually short and the consequences were swift.

"Charlie! Charlie! Charlie!", our master calls on the culprit.

"Sir", Charlie answers running to the master. The culprit intuitively knows there's a problem. The heart starts to pound. What now?

“Why didn’t you shine the shoes this morning?” the master asks.

“Sorry, Sir, I-I-I was trying to finish the dishes before getting to them, Sir.”

Charlie replies.

“Get me the cane,” the master orders.

At this point, everyone knows how the story ends.

Next to discipline, our Umuhualli family emphasized excellence in education and hard work. We were expected to excel at school and sports. Excellence in class work was demanded because that was the main reason we lived with the master. I later understood other young boys applied to live with the master. But there were already six of us and no more room. Failure to stay on top of school with near-perfect grades was one way to lose one’s position in the family. Education was accepted as the only way we could control our future better; we all universally wanted and needed that. Not all of us successfully transformed these desires into results, but not for lack of trying.

One example of how hard we worked. I gained admission to Mary Knoll Secondary School, Okuku, Ogoja, one full year before I graduated from primary school. The norm was to seek such admissions in the final year of primary school. But it turned out I just wanted to test the waters. With the confidence gained from this experience, I took bolder steps one year later. That was *the game changer*. In my final year, I gained admission to a more prestigious, government-subsidized institution, Government College, Umuahia. “A patient dog gets the fattest bone” (Stover, 2010), according to a saying; perhaps originally from Africa.

* * *

In our Umuhualli household, physical hard work was required at the farms, especially during the planting and harvesting seasons. Our master hired professional migrant labor to do the hardest jobs in the farms, making mounds with hoes for planting yams and cassava. We did everything else, sowing the yams, sticking cassava stems between mounds, weeding, winding yam aerial stems around wooden stakes, and harvesting. During the farming season, we visited the farms every afternoon after school and on Saturdays.

Yams and cassava were the principal crops planted both for sale and consumption. We also grew assorted vegetables for our own use. What scared and bothered me most was running into snakes. There were injuries from the *ata* grass too. Even after the *ata* grass was cut above ground, the underground roots retained pin-like residuals that easily pierced the underside of the feet like needles, causing instant bleeding. Bleeding from under the feet was frequent because we did not wear shoes at all, at our age; not to class, and certainly no to the farms. These same feet previously suffered burns from melted hot tar on the road to my previous primary school at *Akwuke*.

Living with Mr. Patrick Uzoечи at Umuhualli was a turning point and a major transition for me. The experience was an important boot camp that arrived at the right time and lasted just the right amount of time. With the right level of intensity and momentum, the experience

propelled me to where I needed to be for the long life journey ahead. Compared to living at Okpara Mines for four years, two years at Umuhualli transformed me. Although I earned good grades in school at Akwuke, I did so with less focus, and for the wrong reasons. At Akwuke I sought good grades to escape the wrath of bullies. Living with dad, I was undisciplined as I shirked responsibility to dodge Mrs. Comfort's house chores. She lacked adequate authority to make me comply. Besides, I was only a child who shouldn't have been doing all the chores I was asked to do.

When I lived with my father, I did not understand the concept of working hard. Outside of schooling, which was my exclusive job, playing was the only thing else I understood. Food and sleep were guaranteed. Although my father and his wife had a farm, the size was small compared to Umuhualli farms, and I was not required to do much farm work because of my age. Without a doubt, every trait, attitude, and character needed to advance my life came together at Umuhualli. After Umuhualli, I was 'fired up, and ready to go' (Childs, 2012). There were no second thoughts about who I was, or where I was going.



EASTERN NIGERIA

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

FIRST SCHOOL LEAVING CERTIFICATE

STANDARD VI

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT

Ukwu, Charles

of Unuqualli-Nkalagu Corpus Christi School,

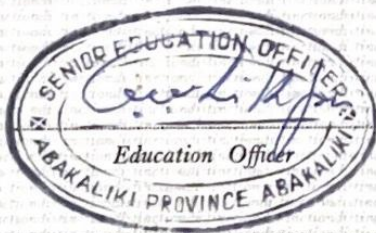
passed the Ministry of Education First School Leaving

(Standard VI) Examination held on 23rd November 1962

WITH DISTINCTION

S. E. Imoke

Minister of Education
Eastern Nigeria



D 0500

Education Office of Issue

Government College Umuahia

The next stop in my journey was Umuahia, located in southeastern Nigeria. To an observer, it would seem that I had developed a penchant for all things and places starting with “Umu”, especially after you realize that even my hometown is called “Umu...” too. In Igbo culture, it is common to identify villages and towns through their ancestors. Umu means “the children of...” Those who inhabit Umuavulu were very likely the descendants or children of ‘Avulu’, and Umuahia, the descendants and children of ‘Ahia’. This explanation is nothing more than interpreting the words literally. The explanation was not validated by experts of Igbo culture.

Umuahia (Arjayay, 2023), my next home in the story, is now the capital of Abia State of Nigeria. Although the state had not been created when I moved and lived there, Umuahia was one of the major towns in the southeastern region, conspicuously situated on the railroad line that links the capital city of Enugu to the north, with the port city of Port Harcourt to the south. The town and its surrounding villages were major producers of agricultural products, especially palm produce. An entire school dedicated to the study and research of agricultural produce and products was located next door to what was about to become my new home, Government College Umuahia. The school of Agriculture was located in the town of Umudike, seventeen kilometers from Umuahia. So was my new home. If a student were to take a taxi from Umuahia train station, as I did countless times, the student’s destination was

Government
College.

Umudike, not
Umuahia.



*Classroom
Buildings at
Government
College,
Umuahia in
1965*

Admission to Government College Umuahia — GCU, as it is commonly called, was not easy. GCU was regarded in Nigeria as the Harvard or Yale of our days at the high school level. Like Harvard and Yale, when one graduated and had made good use of their time at the school, they were in a good position to be successful in life. Unlike Harvard and Yale, GCU offered

relatively inexpensive tuition and fees to its students. Hence, admission was very competitive. To recruit candidates to attend GCU and other federal or regional government-subsidized secondary or high schools, the education department searched for the best and brightest students it can find, based on a set of undisclosed criteria.

The department cast a wide net, annually, across the entire region previously identified as Eastern Region or Eastern Nigeria. All students whose state of origin was Eastern Nigeria were eligible to apply regardless of where they lived. Despite the department of education's earnest efforts to achieve a universally equitable admission to GCU, unequal representation had persisted. The children of the privileged, such as politicians and successful business people appeared to be over-represented. The lack of readiness and awareness by less privileged students may also have been part of the problem.

My admission to GCU defied the latter. I was less privileged, but I was ready, aware, and prepared. I had just completed two years of boot camp at Umuhualli where I honed the art of excellence in school, became disciplined, and mastered hard-work and perseverance. Remember the *ata* grass injuries at the farm that bled my feet repeatedly. Similarly, in the area of awareness, I began looking for secondary school admissions two years before graduating from primary school. Recall I had admission to a Catholic secondary school, Mary Knoll, Okuku, Ogoja, one year before graduation. Once I proved this could be done, I spent the rest of my time optimizing my school choices and placing emphasis on those schools that would be the least expensive to my financially challenged family. That is how I came to apply to GCU, and it worked.



Government College Nile House Photo in 1964

The GCU experience was both wholesome and comprehensive. It was a perfect segue for the growth and advancement that began in Umuhualli. Day-to-day living was

always mapped into a schedule that told one what to do and where to be at all times. There is a time to go to bed, wake up, do housework, play sports, eat, go to classes, do assignments, and repeat the same or other activities the following day. My training at Umuhualli prepared me for this. Not that I followed all the rules perfectly all the time. Occasionally, under pressure, I would forget to make my bed before going to classes and get punished for that. GCU had rules for everything, and consequences for violating each rule. The students knew what to expect.

GCU had the RUN system.

The RUN system uses the RUNS Book (Ukwu, 2023) to track students with different types of offenses broken down into minor, medium, and major offenses. A minor offense is punishable by one run, a medium offense by two runs, and a major offense by three runs. Occasionally there was an egregious offense that attracted as much as five runs. A run required the offender to complete a distance equivalent to one mile, or 1.6 kilometers around GCU runs track. For three runs, the track is completed three times. This activity was supervised to ensure that the runs were completed.

During my years at GCU, most of my runs were incurred through group punishments rather than personal offenses. What I did not like about the RUN system is that it took up time that one could use for studying or catching up with assignments. But it helped me to develop a likeness for running. Running has served me well all of my life, as we will find in the Chapter “How I Stayed Alive and Well”.

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* * *

During the first semester of my sophomore year at GCU in 1964, my entire class of ninety students went through *tail-cutting*, an initiation process similar to hazing. I still do not know if it was an event approved by the school management. It would seem highly unlikely management was unaware it was happening. Apart from the tail-cutting, it was also apparently acceptable for the sophomore students to talk down on, or humiliate the freshmen student population for the entire year. To me, that was worse than tail-cutting which only occurred on a particular day for less than one hour. Some of my classmates suffered various acts of meanness and cruelty that are difficult to discuss. To avoid these experiences, I learned early in the game that it was wise to obey and not argue with a sophomore student.

During my time, I also found that the most difficult part of tail-cutting was the anticipation. We spent several months talking about it and anticipating it, and it was over in a matter of an hour. Tail-cutting took place in the spacious dining hall after supper on the appointed tail-cutting day. The outgoing sophomore students, armed with their potions, most of them laced with poison ivy, and canes, would form a circle around the freshmen. There was also an outer circle that was added by the attackers to prevent any fresh sophomores from running off prematurely. An umpire was appointed to start and end each phase of attack until the end.

During tail-cutting, I experienced itchiness from encountering poison ivy applied by the sophomore students. I was also bruised in several places by flogging. Luckily the wounds were not severe enough to go to a hospital or clinic. In the end, it seemed that the cheekiest (Cheeky, 2023) graduating freshmen got the most punishment on tail-cutting day because

they were attacked by multiple sophomores. In comparison, perhaps only one or two people attacked me before I could escape out of the tail-cutting circle.

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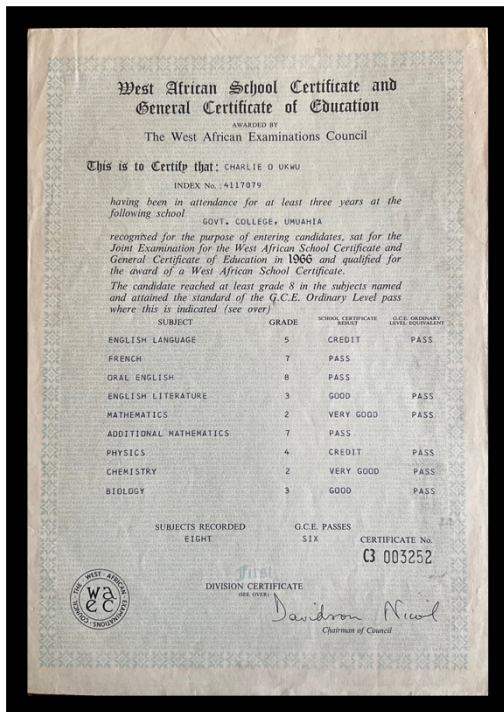
Sports and academics were given the same priority at GCU. I made a strategic upfront decision to emphasize academics instead of sports. In reality, I had other ways to achieve my physical fitness requirements such as mandatory physical activities in the mornings and evenings before and after classes, completing accumulated runs from the RUN Book as punishment, and picking up a game of tennis or table tennis whenever possible. Paying greater attention to academics was an easy choice to make, considering that the grades from classes would have longer-term and far-reaching consequences. High school grades had the potential to follow each student for most of their adult lives, influencing their advanced education choices, job offers, and even promotions. I strived to put in every hour that I could muster. In contrast, some students found reasons to visit home frequently, or just travel to get out of school for fun. Not many students did this.

In the end hard work paid off. Instead of spending five years preparing for the final qualifying exam, I was among a smaller group of students selected to sit for the examination in four years and graduate. Our final class was named "Class Lower Five" which came after we passed Class Three. The remaining students in our set were supposed to go from Class Three to Class Four, and finally to Class Five in 1967. This sequence of events never happened because of the Nigerian Civil War.

GCU Takeaway

Wars are never easy to discuss. Hence, before diving into tales about the Nigerian Civil War, it is both instructive and liberating to observe some of the war's repercussions for GCU students and to attenuate the impacts, with a final recognition and affirmation of what students still gained from the Umuahia experience, despite the war.

As a result of the Nigerian Civil War, my fellow class of 1963 Class Five students had to wait for the war to end in January of 1970 to get their first chance to take the qualifying examination. Even when that time came, due to other unanticipated obstacles, the students still could not successfully take their examinations in 1970, or even in 1971. Ultimately, many of the GCU Class Five students used the alternate route of General Certificate of Education (GCE)/Ordinary level instead of the standard West African Examination Council examination or WAEC to prepare themselves for university and other advanced education choices.



WAEC Results for Charlie O Ukwu

The lessons learned from this experience are lessons for a lifetime. It could have been possible, although unrealistic, for the entire class of 1963 population to finish their secondary school program in four years. But that did not happen for any number of reasons. Perhaps some of us needed a longer high school experience. Perhaps others wanted to take more time with certain classes for personal reasons. Yet some others may have needed the extra year to grow up and become more mature to face the next stages of life. The reasons for why things happened the way they did, could go on and on, and it doesn't matter what those reasons were. What is abundantly clear is that none of us could predict what could happen one day later, let alone one year later.

We all make our best plans, but the eventual outcomes are often out of our control. As the saying, attributable to Benjamin Franklin, one of the founders of the United States goes, "Never leave to tomorrow that which you can do today." (Franklin, 2024) A single seemingly inconsequential decision at the time it was made resulted in potentially avoidable five years of stress and uncertainty for some of our students. No matter the cost and sacrifices, it is hoped that whatever path each of us took to reach our individual goals made us stronger and better people.

Attending GCU for four years was one of the most life-changing experiences of our lives. The experience taught us that we could do anything we set our mind to accomplish. I learned that no matter where one came from, or who their parents were, what mattered most was what one could do with the opportunity they had. Nobody else could do it for you, I think. It taught me that the school one attended made a difference and that it is important to distinguish one's self academically from the immediate population to improve their odds in the future.

GCU set the tone for the rest of our lives, although the momentum was nearly lost during three years of the Nigerian Civil War which started less than one year after my graduation. But things could have been worse. As we found out after the war, many of us lost our lives, parents, friends, or other relatives. May this writing become one more dedication to all of our fallen heroes. May this book guide young people everywhere to find their own pathways in a smarter and better way than we did.

Intermission: Nigeria Civil War

While we were in school at GCU, the political climate and mood of the country were rapidly shifting from bad to worse. It all started with a military coup in January of 1966 during which five young military officers took control of the federal government and murdered at least four high-level political leaders (Master]66667, 2023). Whereas it did not take long to bring the country back to some level of normalcy, the agitation and seething discontent within the country remained. A counter-coup in July 1966 was the outcome (Kirk-Greene, 2024).

This new coup was far-reaching. By the time it was over Nigerians had been ushered into a prolonged era of military rule. Meanwhile, as early as June 1966, mass killings of Christians of southeastern origin had started in the northern states, unleashing waves of escaping families by road and rail from the north to the south (Disciple, 2023). In January 1967, one futile attempt was made at Aburi, Ghana to mediate the dispute (Ayomide, 2022). Regrettably, the federal government of Nigeria did not honor commitments made to the Eastern Region at Aburi, Ghana. Instead, the government introduced twelve new states adding to the original four existing states (Ejitu N. Ota, et al., 2020). The move outraged the military government of eastern Nigeria whose indigenes were overwhelmingly the victims of the massacre in the North.

On May 30th, 1967, the Eastern Region of Nigeria seceded from the rest of Nigeria by announcing the creation of the State of Biafra (Ojukwu, 2017). In July of 1967, the Federal government of Nigeria declared war on Biafra in an attempt to reunite the country (Nwaubani, 2020).

* * *

I was exhausted from long hours and months of studies to prepare for the WAEC examinations at GCU in November 1966. I returned to Enugu in December still expecting and looking forward to a period of rest despite the disturbances in the country. The trains and train stations were overwhelmed by returnees from the north. Some bore big wounds that needed immediate treatment, while others were visibly exhausted by the long travel demanding lots of care and attention. Anxiety and apprehension filled the air like thick, dark rain clouds waiting to be unleashed. Christmas and New Year celebrations leading into 1967 were uncomfortable to celebrate for fear of what lay ahead.

The months went by fast. Before long, the sounds of war penetrated the southeastern region and could be heard from my town of Umuavulu-Abor as early as the middle of July 1967. The Nigerian soldiers had launched a major offensive through Nsukka potentially to attack Enugu, the capital of Biafra. There was a state of confusion everywhere. People did not know where to go, how long they would be gone, and what to take with them. For no reason, I did not evacuate from Umuavulu-Abor with my parents. Instead, I traveled to Enugu to join my Auntie Cecilia's family at Coal Camp, Enugu. I do not recall why I did this, but I did.

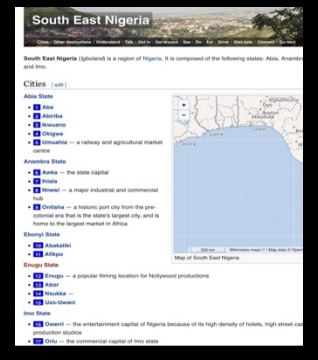
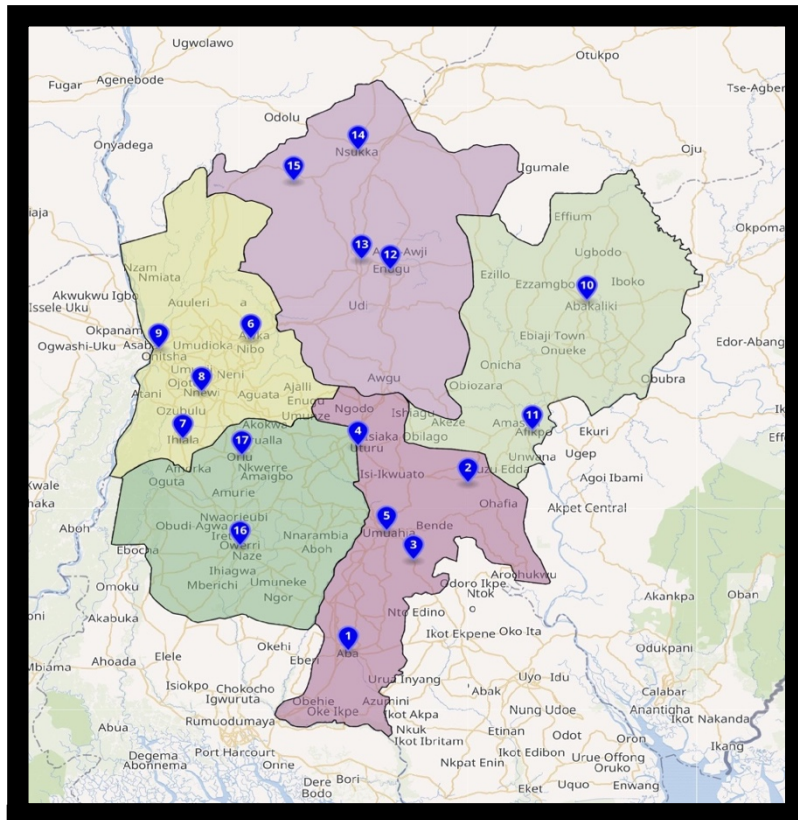
This inexplicable behavior led to a long-term separation between my immediate family and me. For most of the war. Within three days of my arrival at Coal Camp, six of us, including

five members of my auntie’s family and I, left Enugu by foot and headed south towards Okigwi. My first-ever evacuation to avoid being crushed by the advancing Nigerian troops had begun.

We did not have a car, and there were no other means of transport with room to spare. We must have walked more than 32 kilometers on the first day alone, stopping periodically to rest and get refreshments. It is both painful and difficult to recall what transpired during the rest of the journey. But somehow, we made it to Port Harcourt where my auntie’s husband owned a business. Living in Port Harcourt was a rewarding experience. But it was not what I had planned for, after a fulfilling and successful secondary school education.

* * *

Map showing major towns and cities of the Southeastern Region of Nigeria (Zero, 2022)



In writing this story, the most challenging thing is recalling what happened to my family and me between the last quarter of 1967 and the first quarter of 1969. By all measures, those eighteen months, nearly the most difficult years of my life, feel like redacted pages of a book. Psychological repression studied by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) (Cherry, 2023) is real.

Paraphrasing Sigmund Freud’s theory, repression occurs when a thought, memory, or feeling is too painful for an individual, so the person unconsciously pushes the information out of consciousness and becomes unaware of its existence.

Memory is the process the brain uses to comprehend, store, and retrieve a wide variety of information ranging from autobiographical facts to complex procedures (Dictionary.com/, n.d.). Sigmund Freud’s concept is a plausible explanation of what had happened to me.

For a more detailed account of what happened in the country as a whole, we will rely on other sources, including Chimamanda Ngozi

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Frederick Forsyth's *The Biafra Story*, Chinua Achebe's *There was a Country*, and Alfred Obiora Uzokwe's *Surviving in Biafra*. There are much more detailed accounts of this very historic subject presented in a variety of ways. Meanwhile, my personal story continues with snippets of what I recall from that period.

I clearly recall that we evacuated from Enugu to Port Harcourt. In Port Harcourt, I recall assisting at my in-law's electronic store. My in-law is the husband of my auntie on my maternal side. During my brief stay in Port Harcourt, one of my favorite things to do on weekends was attending Sunday afternoon popular music concerts called "Sunday Jump". Bands like the Hykkers and Fractions were featured at Lido Nite Club, Garden Square, Port Harcourt (eriwaboy.tv, 2022).

When the Nigerian army directed its campaign towards the port city of Port Harcourt shortly after the first quarter of 1968, it was time for us to evacuate again. This time, our destination was Mbanjo in Imo State, Nigeria.

It is instructive to note the nature of our evacuations and movements as we ran for dear life during the Nigerian civil war. Initially from Enugu, we went as far south as we could to Port Harcourt. Less than one year later, we retraced our steps back, towards the northern direction, but stopping only midway at Mbanjo. Thinking of the evacuations, one gets the sense of a pack of wolves, the Nigerian Army, rounding up a bunch of deers, the Biafrans, for the killing.

At Mbanjo, without a job or source of income, my auntie's family and I lived from hand to mouth. I even spent a stint as a motor guard, also called a *conductor*. I assisted the driver in ushering in passengers and collecting fares as we transported passengers from one local market to another using a rented van. During the same period, I recall having an accident whose scar remains on my left foot today. While splitting firewood, an axe accidentally landed perfectly and symmetrically just before the split between the long toe and the middle toe of my left foot. Had the injury occurred two-tenths of a centimeter on either side of the two toes, I would have sustained a major left foot deformity. That didn't happen, yet life could not get any worse.

* * *

At this stage of the civil war, Enugu the capital of Biafra had already been occupied by Nigerian troops. The Nigerian army was also attacking from the south, through Port Harcourt and its environs, and headed towards Umuahia, the new capital of Biafra in the center of the southeastern region. We received unconfirmed information that some of our relatives had begun to return to their homes after the Nigerian soldiers overran their homes and moved on. I recall setting out, leaving Mbanjo, to go towards Okigwi again in search of my parents.

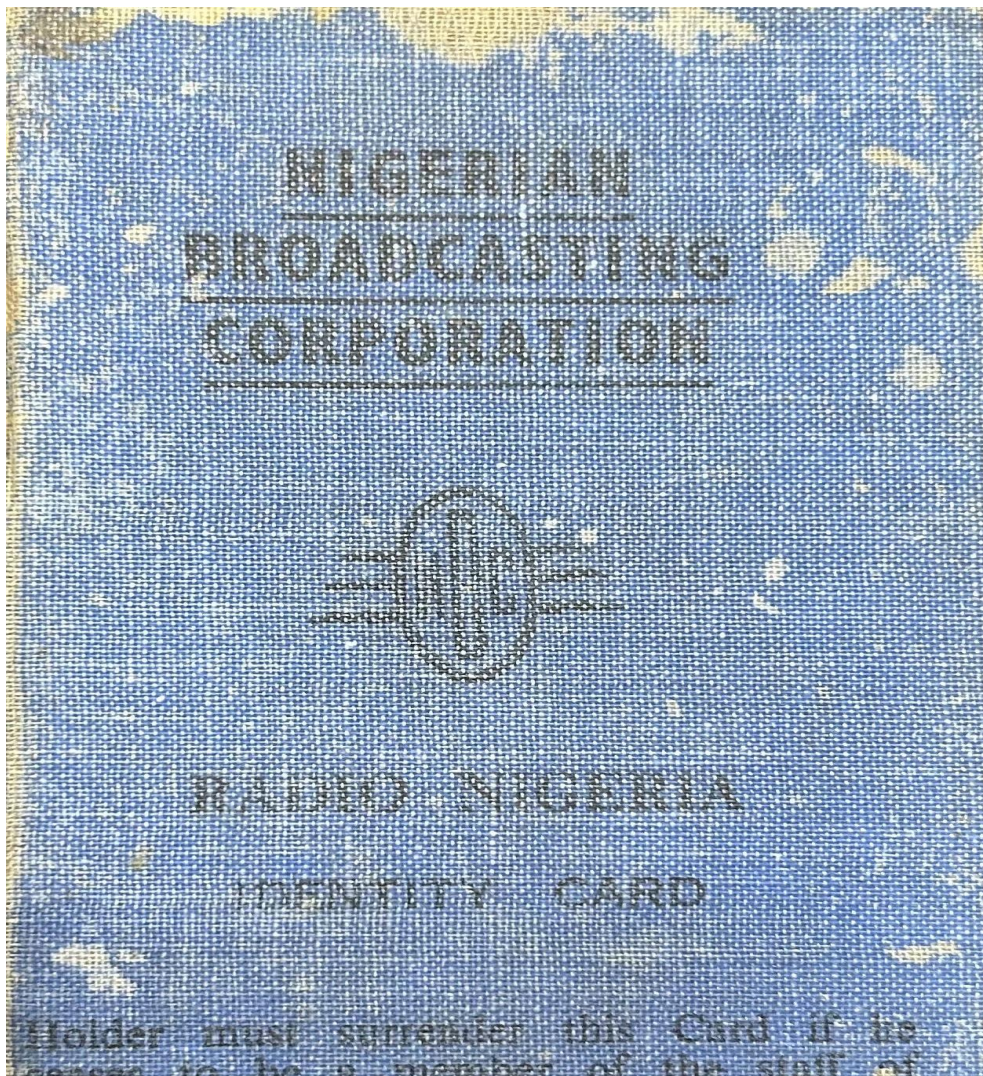
This was the first time, since the war began, that I visited a "refugee" settlement. Most people showed signs of severe malnutrition. I saw children with protruding stomachs and tight skins transparently clinging to their bones. The conditions were painful to watch. Soon, I found and united with my parents. They itched to return home to Umuavulu-Abor. I could not safely travel with them immediately for fear of encountering Nigerian soldiers. Time

passed. About the first quarter of 1969, I developed enough courage to travel towards Enugu, on my own.

Life After the Civil War

Contrary to conventional wisdom at the time, the Nigerian army command in Enugu welcomed people to come home to assist with rebuilding the city to bring life to normal. I took a clerical job at the Ministry of Health and embarked on the long journey of rehabilitating my parents who were, like most people their age, badly bitten by the war. My siblings and I were blessed and lucky to have them alive. Many families were not as lucky, coming out of the war. The clerical job was a means to get started in the near post-war Nigeria; it was not intended to be a long-term commitment. Not surprisingly, I spent less than one year with the department of health before resigning to work for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) in Enugu.

Broadcasting ID Card



No 3332

The bearer Mr. C. Ukwue whose photograph appears opposite, is a member of the staff of the

NIGERIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION


It is requested that he may be given all practicable assistance to enable him to carry out his duties.

S. V. Badgo
Director-General

DATE 25th June '69

PHOTOGRAPH OF BEARER WHOSE NAME APPEARS OPPOSITE.

Office Stamp Over Photograph



Ukwue
Signature of Bearer

PROGRAMME Division

As Ekwue
Signature of Head of Division/Controller

Date 14th June 1968

NOT TRANSFERABLE

Only valid when Mr. C. J. Ukwue is on duty.

As I settled down to play my part to bring Enugu to normalcy, the war raged down south from my current location. Port Harcourt, where I lived with my auntie's family after evacuating from Enugu in 1967, was attacked in May 1968. That is why we had left for Mbano located one hundred forty kilometers north, away from the war zone.

By the end of June 1968, the Nigerian army had attacked Aba, sixty kilometers north-east of Port Harcourt, but 90 kilometers farther south of Mbano. It took nearly one year, April 1969, for the advancing Nigerian soldiers to arrive close to Umuahia, the final seat of the Biafran government. Umuahia is located only about 65 kilometers northeast of Aba. A map is enclosed.²⁷ All these final military maneuvers took place between 100 and 150 kilometers south of us in Enugu.

I was now on my second job, a studio manager job at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, Broadcasting House, Enugu. A studio manager does not manage people, except at the highest levels. During my time, studio managers worked primarily with studio announcers and program producers to install and balance microphones in the studios and to operate broadcasting equipment. The announcers and program participants were located inside the studios with their microphones, while the studio managers, the producers, and the equipment were stationed in an adjacent room separated by a glass window also called the

Control Room. The clear glass window allowed the participants in a broadcast or recording session to see and signal to studio managers when needed. Sound proofing made it almost impossible to hear voices from the studios except electronically through intercom. Studio Managers worked two shifts, an early morning shift from 6 am to 3 pm and an afternoon shift from 3 pm to midnight.

I always preferred the early morning shifts. Morning shifts provided the occasional opportunity to step in for an announcer who called off or did not show up for work. I gained listening fans by doing this. My dreams eventually came through when the radio station introduced a new morning show, the 7¹⁰ Express. The 7¹⁰, an upbeat musical show that came after the 7 am news, was designed to wake up the listeners on weekdays, set their mood for work, and accompany them to work.

The show featured popular music from 7:10 am to 9 am. The show was hosted by different announcers on alternate days. Our announcers were so good on the show that we built a significant fan base and were considered quasi-celebrities by many. Fans wrote in to express their gratitude for the show and made suggestions.

The 7¹⁰ Express permitted me to live out my musical fantasies. I cannot explain the origins of it, but I have been fascinated by music of all genres for as far back as I can remember. When I lived with my dad, I used to climb up next to a living room wooden cabinet, called a *cupboard*, to fiddle with, and tune my father's shortwave radio. That was when I discovered Congo or Zairean music. My love for music grew immensely when I attended GCU. I enjoyed all the popular music stars of the sixties ranging from The Hollies, Super Small Faces, Beatles, Who, The Kinks, the Rolling Stones, Procol-Harum, and Jimi Hendrix.

I still cannot explain where all these tastes came from. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons I struggle to understand myself, and where I came from. Most other people I grew up with, or around me, be they younger or older, did not share these types of musical tastes. Where did these tastes and likeness come from? Who is "Charlie O?"

Before and after high school, I used to purchase 45 and 33.3 RPM vinyl records even though I could not afford a record player to play them. I read all the music magazines I could find and followed the ups and downs of the pop music charts and the lives of pop musicians. I used to keep a scrapbook just to maintain the list and photos of the top ten artists and songs for each week. In fashion, although I did not have much money at school, I dressed like the popular music artists as much as I could. Bell-bottom pants, fitted shirts, and *Beatles* boots or platform shoes.

Apart from the Zairean radio stations, the BBC in London, Radio Luxembourg, and Voice of Germany, were my favorite stations for pop music. A disk jockey, Brian Mathew of BBC *Top of the Pops* (Mathews, 2016) was my favorite of all time. I followed his show every Friday from Noon to 1 pm. I think. It is however noteworthy that Nigeria experienced minimal impact from North America during this era of fascination with popular music. The exceptions were jazz shows and few popular music shows hosted by Yvonne Barclay of Voice of America. By the time Dick Clark's American Bandstand and Soul Train hosted by Don Cornelius debuted in Nigeria, I had left the country.

With this much fascination for everything musical, it is no wonder that working at a radio station at the age of 20 was such a magical experience. The experience healed me from the impact of the war, both psychologically and financially. As a disk jockey or DJ, I felt like—and was seen by many—as a celebrity. I was invited to parties and asked to host celebratory occasions, although my ebullient studio personality did not always translate to a spirited, animated personality needed for live stage presentations. I went on a multitude of dates by invitation, but preferred to remain uncommitted as much as possible. Life was good, except for one thing. I never believed that working at a radio station was my life's calling, ambition, or endgame. It was very tempting to stay and have fun, especially with the easy access to girls with no introduction needed. In the end, my hunger for more education, to unlock the potential to do more in life, won.

Searching for the Next Level

The Nigerian civil war finally ended shortly after January 1970 (Kobo, 2020). I observed that my classmates were returning to GCU to continue the next level of their education, called *Higher School*, or seeking admission to universities. I was at another crossroads. Firstly, my parents were not yet fully rehabilitated from the war. Although our homes in the village were not destroyed during the war, neither of the parents had income. My father went frequently to the head office of the Nigerian Coal Corporation to ask for his pension. Apparently, no decisions had been made on how the corporation would function after the war, or whether it would function at all. Not surprisingly, the mines had declined into dangerous conditions of disrepair during the war. My parents clearly needed me around and working, for their own survival.

Secondly, if I were to decide to leave my work and attempt to return to school or seek admission to a local university, who would provide financial support for my education? I had no one. Hence, I stayed and continued to work in studio management and hosted the 7¹⁰ Express for extra pay.

To address the issue of financial support, I began to apply for scholarships as well as college admissions in Nigeria. Within one year of this effort, I had won a five-year scholarship to study Mass Communication at a local university. The joy created by this accomplishment was so powerful that it began to awaken the educational momentum that started at GCU in 1963 and waned with the Nigerian Civil War in 1967.

There was another dilemma. Between 1971 and 1972, none of the local universities offered a full degree program in Mass Communication. Only one university, University of Lagos, had a two-year program that awarded a diploma certificate instead of a full bachelor's degree. As I later found out, with an admission to a foreign university, I could petition for a change of venue to use the scholarship overseas. I now became concerned about how long the process of application and admission could take; I had never done this before. I did not want to take too long and lose the scholarship completely.

To retain the scholarship, I enrolled at the University of Lagos for the 1972/1973 and 1973/1974 academic sessions to study Mass Communication for two years. Concurrently, I started applying to other universities abroad that could accept my college credits from the University of Lagos, and perhaps confer a bachelor's degree in less than three years. Meanwhile, news about my impending departure for Lagos created a crisis, especially for my mother. She sent delegates of friends and relatives to appeal to me, not to leave her behind again in Enugu.

This was a subtle reminder that my strange, lone-wolf absence during the civil war was not appreciated. Unfortunately, this time was different. The desire to get more education was an investment. It would, most likely, place me in a better position to support the family, especially as the parents got older. To communicate this perfectly logical explanation was

not as easy as one would think. Yet I could not imagine any other long-term and better solution.

Lagos: Gateway to the Next Level

In 1972, I departed for Lagos to execute the new plan. NBC granted me a study leave during which I was also allowed access to the broadcasting house at Ikoyi, Lagos. I could only work part-time and earned less than a full salary. With my DJ skills, I earned additional money on the side. When combined I had enough to live comfortably and still send money home to my parents. Before admission to the University of Lagos, I sojourned with extended family and had the opportunity to relive my pre-high school experience. Sleeping on the floor with only a mat for bedding. Such sacrifices were transitional, temporary, and acceptable to me.

In August of 1972, I said farewell to the extended family that sheltered me and moved into the university dormitory to begin my first-ever university experience in Lagos, Nigeria. My scholarship paid for boarding and tuition plus a stipend. I still retained my broadcasting gigs and continued to support my parents from afar. I was incredibly busy and spent so much time in traffic constantly traveling from Akoka, Lagos, to Ikoyi at a time when those two locations lacked high-speed freeway connections. This 15-kilometer journey took over one hour instead of thirty minutes. But the experience was exciting too. My academic journey stalled with the onset of the Nigerian civil war had been jump-started again. This was a minor sacrifice compared to the fate of classmates who lost their lives during the war. We honor them.

* * *

I maintained two schedules at the University of Lagos. All my classes met on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays were reserved for work. On these days I spent most of the day at the Ikoyi broadcasting station of the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria, FRCN, also known as the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. The time was spent compiling, recording, or hosting shows or programs. My working days proved to be more challenging than my school days, especially considering the long commutes to and from the broadcasting house. Occasionally these trips were made easier when I was lucky to get a ride at least in one direction.

In contrast to class days, I spent the entire day at Akoka hopping from class to class, to the library, and to the dining halls. Classes were not too difficult. What I found most challenging were team projects. Scheduling when and where to meet, and getting team members to complete individually assigned tasks on time to meet the delivery dates was most difficult. Working in teams, although difficult, was a great way to meet and know other students and even establish a social life. I had none. Time was the enemy.

As I attended classes at Akoka and went to work at Ikoyi, it never escaped me that two outstanding tasks must be completed for my academic plans to continue uninterrupted — first, secure admission abroad to complete a Mass Communication or Journalism degree, and second, —apply to the Federal Education Department in Lagos, Nigeria for a change of venue.

These tasks were not only significant and critical to my future, they were also risky because success depended on the actions of others, totally outside my control.

The second of these tasks, getting the education department to grant a change of venue, proved to be the greater challenge that threatened to scuttle my entire plans after the University of Lagos. I made countless trips to the Federal Ministry of Education offices in Lagos mainland after the application was submitted. Sometimes I would visit and be told that my application and file were missing and could not be found. Other visitors like me speculated that “file missing” was a euphemism or ploy used to elicit tips to make the file reappear. I did not acknowledge or encourage this behavior but maintained my steadfastness to tell my story to whoever listened.

As the days wore on, I became more desperate and emotional and even cried on some days when no one would give me attention at the Federal Ministry of Education. One particular morning, a Friday, I came very early before the doors were unlocked to let visitors in at the Federal Ministry of Education, Lagos, Nigeria. For over thirty days that I had been visiting the ministry, I had never arrived this early. Shortly after I arrived, a middle-aged man who looked like one of the senior people at the ministry came out to purchase drinking water or coffee at one of the nearby kiosks. Seeing me, he wondered aloud what brought me to the office so early this morning.

Weeping spontaneously, with tears rolling down my cheeks, I stammered, somewhat incoherently,

“Sir, Sir, a-m-m just looking for assistance to change a scholarship venue,” I said. “I’ve been coming here for over thirty days for this.”

“What seems to be the problem?”

“No one seems to want to process my application,” I replied. “And my file is often misplaced.”

“Listen”, he ordered. “When the doors open today, tell the receptionist you have an appointment, the first appointment with Mr. Dele Ogundimu”.

He vanished into the growing morning rush hour crowd.

I think I had seen Mr. Ogundimu before. Dark, tall, and perhaps in his mid-forties. He dressed professionally and trimmed his hair low. His upper lip showed fresh-looking, almost raw skin as if that area of his lips were peeled or burned by hot liquid. Perhaps, a trumpeter’s wart, if he is a musician.

“Was he going to be my Messiah?” I wondered.

Should that happen, it would reinforce my faith in the goodness of humanity, no matter where they come from. “Ogundimu” is clearly Yoruba, one of the major Nigerian ethnic groups in the south-west. “Ukwuani” or “Ukwu” is Igbo, another major ethnic group located in the southeast. Stereotypical convention would probably suggest to us that ethnic groups are often in competition, and do not help, or cooperate.

At 9 am the doors to the Education Ministry offices opened. Since I was the first to arrive, I was the first to speak with the receptionist. I repeated what Mr. Ogundimu told me earlier. The receptionist sent a colleague to check whether Mr. Ogundimu was back in his office, and he wasn't. I waited some more. About one hour later, I sat in front of Mr. Ogundimu and told my story again, answering his questions as he asked them. He ordered my files. As I waited, I silently worried whether my file might be missing again, but luckily not on that day. After pouring through my files for what felt like an eternity, Mr. Ogundimu spoke.

"Do you realize that you will have only three years remaining in your scholarship?" he said.

I nodded and told him I expected to transfer credits from the University of Lagos. He paused, looking further into my files.

Finally, he spoke again.

"Congratulations"!

"Your change of venue is now approved," he said.

"Return to this office no earlier than thirty days before your travel date to pick up your ticket and travel documents," he said.

Still numbed by the experience and incredulous at what I just heard, I gave a weak but triumphant smile, thanking Mr. Ogundimu for what he had just done for me. The entire experience was exhausting. As I left Mr. Ogundimu's office, I unwittingly pulled a piece of tissue paper from my pocket to wipe away my tears. I had been crying. Tears of joy. Then I suddenly realized it was Friday and time to go broadcasting. As I left the premises, I walked with extra spring in my steps and felt a weight, gradually but surely, lifting off my shoulders.

"Taxi, taxi," I called, as I was engulfed by the Friday afternoon melee of hungry people going for lunch.

* * *

My studies at the University of Lagos were ending in about nine months. All things being equal, I would be studying at Indiana University located in Bloomington, Indiana, United States of America, no later than six months thereafter. For good reason, no one else had access to this information but I. As optimistic as I can be, I realized that so much can change in fifteen months. I had no choice but to contain myself, do what needed to be done, and never take my eyes off the price.

The major tasks remaining were completing the work to earn a diploma in mass communication, winding down my relationship with Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, moving my belongings from Lagos back to Enugu, announcing my new long-term plans to family and friends, and getting ready to travel. By far the most critical outstanding work was finishing my studies. I did not hesitate in laying out a work plan, milestones, and critical paths that would get me to the desired finish line on time and successfully.

As my remaining school work at the University of Lagos progressed, a reflection on how we arrived at this point is instructive. Specifically, this is a tale of the power of positive thinking. During the first quarter of 1970 when the civil war just ended, most of my GCU classmates returned to school or the universities. I could not join them because of the responsibility I had to support my parents. I was the only one with a job in my entire family. When people asked why I hadn't resigned from my work to return to school, as they often did, my standard response was, "I plan to study abroad." I gave this response consistently, without equivocation, throughout the entire period. The reality at this time was, I had no savings, let alone savings sufficient to sponsor a foreign education. What I had, in abundance, was the desire and firm belief that I could make it happen. I'm still unable to explain where such a level of confidence came from. All I knew was that I could work hard once the right goal and direction was defined.

I went to work to make it happen by spending 15 to 20 hours per week at the United States Information Service and British Council libraries in Enugu. I applied for university admissions everywhere, especially in North America. I also applied for scholarship programs, both locally and abroad. By the time the Nigerian Federal Government scholarships were announced, I already had a few admissions abroad, but no funds to take the next steps. While these activities went on, I was still able to support my family. In contrast, if I had returned to school with my classmates or focused on local admissions, my family would have gone hungry and my chances of success low.

My chances were low because I had no networking apparatus, nor the money to resolve inevitable obstacles to the admission process. To put it succinctly, I was unprepared to deal with the cultural and ethical challenges that inevitably came with the local admission process. Ultimately, my path to higher education morphed into a hybrid. With a scholarship, it was feasible to consume what was available locally and plan to complete what remained abroad.


Adios Nigeria

What was left of the academic year 1973/1974 at the University of Lagos went well. The diploma in mass communication was duly awarded to me on June 26, 1974 after the examinations were held from May through June 1974 in six subjects:

UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS
LAGOS, NIGERIA

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

TELEPHONE: 41361-9
TELEGRAMS: UNIVERSITY



Examinations Office
Date: 26th June, 1974

Ref.No. D/7070

Mr. Charlie O. Ukwu,
c/o Mr. L. O. Akaya,
N.B.C. Gramophone Library,
Radio Nigeria,
Broadcasting House,
Ikoyi.

Dear Sir,

UNIVERSITY DEGREE EXAMINATIONS, MAY/JUNE 1974
NOTIFICATION OF RESULTS

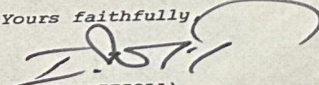
I have pleasure in informing you that you have satisfied the Examiners at the Examination for the Diploma in Mass Communication held in May/June 1974 in the following subjects at the grades written against each subject:

Communication Technique I	-	A
Functional English	-	A
French I	-	A
Public Relations & Advertising	-	B+
Psychological Foundations	-	A
Communication Law	-	B

In consequence of this, you have been awarded the Diploma in Mass Communication (Passed with Distinction).

Accept my congratulations.

A copy of this letter is being sent to your sponsor.

Yours faithfully

(I. O. AJIOLA)
SENIOR ASSISTANT REGISTRAR (ACADEMIC)

c.c. Dean
Sponsor

Key to Grades

70 and above	-	A
60-69	-	B+
50-59	-	B
40-49	-	C
33-39	-	D Failure
Below 33	-	E Failure

University of Lagos Diploma in Mass Communication

Communication Techniques (A),

English (A)

French (A)

Public Relations & Advertising (B+)

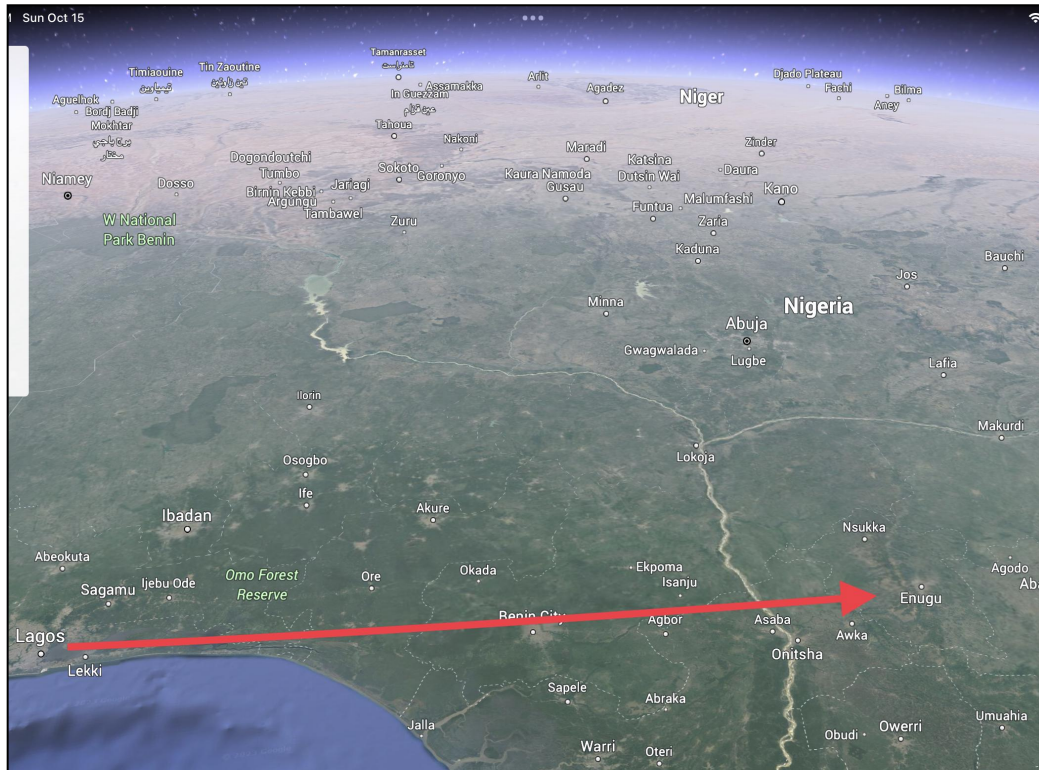
Psychology (A)

Communication Law (B)

“In consequence of this, you have been awarded the Diploma in Mass Communication (Passed with Distinction),” read the letter from the University of Lagos registrar’s office. The letter was signed by I. O. Ajijola, Senior Assistant Registrar (Academic).

I was ecstatic. A free man, free to travel home to Enugu in the east of the country where my parents lived. It was now time to start planning for the trip to Bloomington, Indiana, USA to resume the second phase of my education. Due to the uncertainties still surrounding these plans, all the information was still held in strict confidence by me – but not for much longer.

My trip to Enugu began shortly after graduation on a warm Sunday morning in the middle of July 1974. I opted for a twelve-hour road journey from west to east instead of a 70-minute flight, not including flight delays and cancellations. Aside from the obvious cost savings, I wanted to feel and experience my country, perhaps for the last time in a long time. One good way to do that, I decided, was by traversing key towns and cities along the way, notably Ore, Ijebu Ode, Benin City, Agbor, Asaba, Onitsha, Awka, and Oji River. The curiosity was to see how these places had emerged, or not, from the Nigerian Civil War that ended about forty-two months earlier. My experience came from the vantage point of a window seat in one of the luxury bus services of the time, Ekene Dili Chukwu, or Praise Be To God. With the elevated bus seats, my line of sight was probably over three meters above the ground.



Travel path from Lagos to Enugu to announce Phase II of my journey³³

As I found out after the trip started, my blissful journey through my country of birth became something else along the way. Unknown to me, two salesmen boarded the bus with us selling drugs and religion. This was obviously my first time consuming both together. Apart from breaks here and there, to catch their breaths, the drug salesman and preacher man loudly hawked their products while on the bus.

“Are you suffering from ‘women disease’, diarrhea, diabetes, malaria, or vomiting, this medicine will cure you,” says the drug salesman, raising a bottle without a label containing a dark concoction.

At the time, I knew enough to ponder that the Nigerian equivalent of the US Food and Drug Administration would have approved this ‘medicine’ before it came to market. Nobody knows. I was very tempted to ask for a bottle just to check if the bottle had a Nigerian FDA stamp on it. I did not.

It was now the preacher’s turn. “Have you been ogling your neighbor’s wife or husband, or living with the opposite sex outside of marriage?” he asked. “This is your chance to repent and follow Christ.”

Luckily the human ability to focus on the same subject for hours and hours is limited. This allowed me to tune out the religious and “medical” talk and tune in to the road conditions, and to appreciate the geography and vitality of the communities along the way.

The road conditions varied. Some parts were good, others fair, and yet others very bad. Particularly worthy of note were the ubiquitous potholes. Next in frequency were accident wreckages sprinkled along our route in no predictable intervals. The wreckage displays were like relics of a road art show gone very wrong. One quickly got the impression there was no enforced obligation to clear accident wreckage. They were simply allowed to be, like exhibits.

Could that be a deliberate strategy to frighten drivers from having new accidents?

I wondered.

"Beware, this could happen to you too, if you are not careful!"

* * *

The general condition of Nigerian roads is a topic that has attracted frequent commentary over the years. According to Voice of America writer Gilbert da Costa, "Nigeria has a 121,167 miles, or 195,000 kilometers network of roads, the quality of which is generally poor" (Lee, 2023). Not much has changed, or is changing. If anything, Nigerian roads seem to get progressively worse. Conversely, Namibia has a road network that is about one quarter the size of Nigeria's and ranked the best road network in Africa (Maya, 2021) consecutively for several years.

The geography of our long drive from west to east proved to have a better story. Moving west to east in the southern regions, one would expect an initial landscape of lowland to be gradually and progressively replaced by hills, valleys, and mountains that gave the capital city of *Enugu* its name. *Enugu's* literal translation is "*top of the hill*" That is what I saw.

Much more intriguing was the relationship between the vegetation and the soils that hosted them along our route. According to researchers, the soil gives moisture, nutrients, and anchorage to vegetation to grow effectively. On the other hand, vegetation provides protective cover, suppresses soil erosion, and helps nutrients through litter accumulation. (D. D. Eni, 2011) This journey saw the impact of this intricate romance between soil and vegetation play out in real-time as we drove past forest reserves, farmlands, logging fields, and populated towns and cities. Within a 16-to-32-kilometer radius of each major town, the pristine vegetation was replaced by farmland, lower-grade forest patches, and wild grass. These conditions were more than likely the consequences of wood fuel harvesting, overgrazing by livestock, land clearance for agriculture by burning, over-cultivation, and subsequently, land erosion. Without land use planning, unguided expansion had allowed human activity to create terrains with patches along the way. A Google Earth high-altitude view (Ukwu, Google Map: Lagos to Enugu, 2023) of this area looked like a green hollandaise wrapper, or *Abada* randomly smudged with bleach, a depiction of loss of habitat, flora, and fauna.

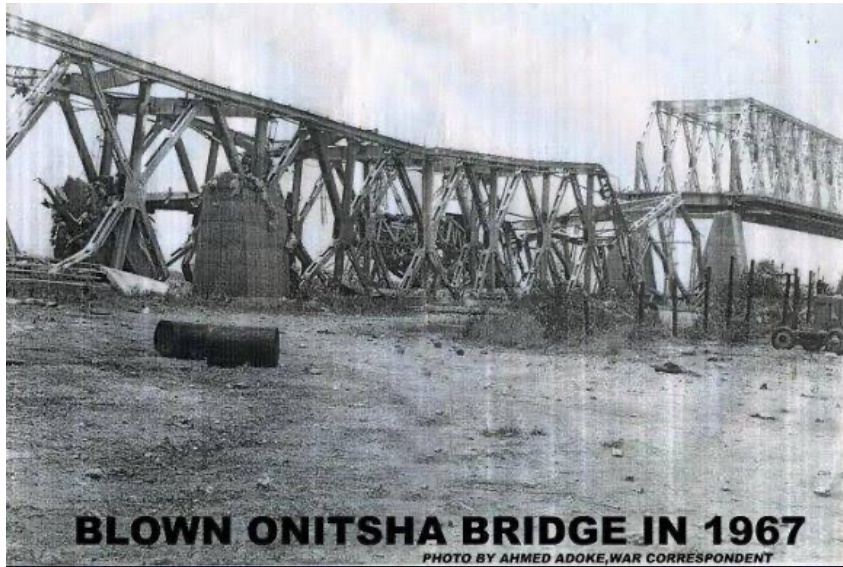
Whereas vegetation and soil conditions appeared to lose vitality around the communities and towns on our path, the hawking activities, in contrast, were robust, and on overdrive. As soon as the bus stopped, we were quickly surrounded by hawkers selling items ranging from water and soda to bush meat, including one popularly known as *anu nchi*. As alluring as these

refreshments might have seemed to a famished traveler, one was advised to be choosy to avoid diarrhea or running stomach on a long journey such as the one at hand. Bottled water was usually by far the safest purchase.

Beyond the hawkers and roadside sellers, the energy of the nearby marketplaces were equally palpable and infectious. It was not difficult to understand why. The roadway on which we traveled created the marketplace and, in some cases, the most exposure for each seller and traveler to interact during the day. The income from roadside sales often represented all the earnings that a seller contributed towards the support of their families. On their part, the travelers haggled aggressively to get the most of all purchases at bargain prices, relative to the prices expected at their destinations. The spirited interaction between the sellers in quest of good income and the tired, yet combative travelers hunting for “best buys” filled the air with an interesting cacophony of voices.

As we drove from Lagos to Enugu, my immersion in the scenery and the vibrant energy of the people along the way made the travel go fast. Or so, I thought. I was in the zone, only awakened by our approach to the famous Niger Bridge (Dfertileplain, 2022).

The bridge was originally built in 1965. It was destroyed in 1967, apparently as a tactical war strategy to slow down the advancement of Nigerian soldiers from the west. The bridge quickly came back to life in 1970 complements of a £116,000 (pound sterling) grant from West Germany (AutoJoshNG, 2020).



Niger Bridge Back to Business After the War

The Niger Bridge is still a major gateway that connects the western states with the southeastern states. Asaba, the capital of Delta State on the west links with Onitsha on the eastern side. The significance of a Niger Bridge to commerce and industry prompted the launching of a second Niger Bridge in September 2018. The new infrastructure was officially handed over to the government of the day by the lead construction company in 2023, concurrent with the start of the research of *Young Man In a Hurry*.



The New Second Niger Bridge (Muonagor, 2022)

Onitsha is a major historical and commercial city in Anambra State (Drmies, 2023). It is a port and market town in Anambra state, southern Nigeria. It lies on the east bank of the Niger River just south of its confluence with the Anambra River. Onitsha was founded by adventurers from Benin in the early 17th century and grew to become the political and trading center with a population of about 1.2 million based on 2021 statistics (CHUKWUEMEKA, 2023).

Onitsha-Market prides itself as the largest market in West Africa and potentially the largest market in Africa when all the sub-markets in Onitsha metroplex are combined. The population of traders in Onitsha-Market made Onitsha the second most densely populated city in Nigeria after Lagos, numbering above two million.³⁸

Once we successfully navigated through the routine Onitsha city traffic, the journey from Onitsha through Awka, Oji River, and other subsequent towns proceeded rather quickly without incident. After the town of Oji River, most of the towns in-between before the 9th Mile Corner were starting to look harmless and homelike. The type of town or countryside where traffic stops for livestock, or a raft of ducks to cross the road.

Goodbye Family and Friends I

At 9th Mile Corner, I alighted from the Ekene Dili Chukwu luxury bus from Lagos. I bid farewell to passengers that were seated next to me and traveling farther to Enugu. The plan was to visit my parents in my hometown of Umuavulu-Abor before going to see friends in Enugu. Umuavulu-Abor is a little over three kilometers, north of 9th Mile. I took a ride to my father's compound, Maduka House, arriving shortly before dusk. My father had already retired from the Nigerian Coal Corporation and was home. Most of the other families that shared the same compound were busy preparing supper. My mother was at a church meeting. However, my father was there to greet me.

"When a toad hops in the middle of the day, one must ask what's gone awry? (Achebe, 1958)" said my father as he jumped out of his seat to hug me.

I laughed and replied, "No worries, Dad, everything is just fine, couldn't be better".

As we exchanged pleasantries, other relatives began to converge in the family room of the main building, or *nkolo*, where I had stopped to greet my father. The sound of the car that brought me home must have distracted everyone's attention, away from cooking supper. Everyone was excited and happy to see me. Most of them had not seen me since I left for Lagos to study in 1972.

Telephone devices and services were not as present then, as they are today. Only the rich and privileged could afford phone services at home. Also, the service was only available in urban centers such as Enugu and Lagos. People wrote letters to one another to communicate instead. Occasionally letters did not reach their destinations without explanation from the postal services.



My Father's Historic unfinished landmark two-storey building

Maduka House, or my father's house, was the centerpiece of the Ukwu compound (Ukwu, Maduka House, 2023)⁴¹. It was not always this way. Before my father retired from the Nigerian Coal Corporation to the village, Anigbogu, his older brother, managed the *nkolo*. Anigbogu is the father of the late Celestine Ukwu, famous Nigerian musician and composer.



Behind the trees, the rusted-roof bungalow where Mother Mary lived

Even at that time, the *nkolo* was at the center of the compound, like the hub of a bicycle wheel. The compound had six imaginary spokes or branches that networked six households of the Ukwu family like a spider's web. In a clockwise direction, the six households included the following: my step-grandmother, Afiawkwa; the family of my step mother, Madam Comfort Ukwu; the family of my mother, Mary; my uncle Anigbogu's first wife, Aku-Ekwu; my grandmother, Okwu Eji N'elo; and my uncle Anigbogu's second wife, Nwa Opkoko. This is not the complete list of our family. Missing from this list are the families of my late uncle, Vincent, and my two aunts who got married and moved to their husband's homes; Auntie Bridget and Auntie Nne-Eze. There were unconfirmed rumors of a third aunt, Ugo-eke, who was kidnapped and sold into slavery. This information was never confirmed. My uncle Vincent either passed away before I was born, or had not established his family home inside the compound. I also had a half uncle, Felix Ukwu, who lived out of state, and had not built a home yet for his family within the compound.

The *nkolo* that was managed by my uncle Anigbogu was an elevated, grand, thatched house built of mud walls. It was perched on a flat bed of mud bricks, almost one meter high, to get its elevation. It had private rooms along its perimeter with a wide and spacious front living space. The space was sufficient to accommodate almost all present family members for meetings. I recall a central fireplace that provided us, especially children, with much needed

warmth during the harmattan months of December through February. During this period, it was not uncommon to find several of us huddled in a low squatting pose as close as fifty centimeters from the indoor campfire that was the fireplace.

When my father started working for the coal corporation, he built a small three-room stretched out bungalow next to, and behind the nkolo. The bungalow offered bedrooms for my mother, Mary, Aku-Ekwu, my uncle Anigbogu's wife and my grandmother, Okwu-Eji-N'elo. The kitchens were located separately next to the bungalow, constructed with grass and mud walls.

A few years later, Mr. Basil Ukwu got even bolder and more ambitious. He wanted to construct a two-story house in Ukwu compound. Folktales have it that Mr. Ukwu first surveyed public opinion. It was reported that he personally spoke to many people to determine their reaction to the proposed project. Unfortunately, he did not receive the widespread support he expected. Some even warned that his life might be in danger if he dared to move forward with such a bold project. The objections did not deter my ambitious father. The two-storey house was built. According to Ojebe Ogene folklore, it was the first of its kind in the entire community called Ojebe Ogene. Ojebe Ogene (The history of Ojebe Ogene, Ngwo, Nike and Ugwunye Ezedike, 2022) is a clan in Udi Local Government Area, or LGA of Nigeria.



Before and After Images of Dad's House Following a facelift

The original nkolo constructed with mud was demolished to build my father's two-storey home. The front of the house was repositioned ninety degrees to the left, from east to north. This was the history of the house in which the entire family was now gathered to welcome me from Lagos.

While I exchanged greetings with the rest of the family, my sister, Evan, ran off to get my mother. Mother was less than one mile away at a church meeting at Theresa's Church. Before

I could finish pleasantries with the assembled family members, my mother and sister had joined us. I screamed immediately after I saw her, pausing my prior conversations midway and abruptly, to give her what must have been the biggest hug of the evening.

“Charlie nwam o-o-l-o-o!” she shouted, using an endearing form of greeting that is still common in Umuavulu-Abor today. Before I could say anything, she said, “It looks like they have not been feeding you well in Lagos; you are so skinny.”

I mumbled something about having been too busy with school, and perhaps missed a few meals. She was anxious to know how long I was going to stay. I told her I was home for three weeks. My response appeared not to do the trick, as she pressed on, apparently seeking to know if she had me home permanently, or not.

“And what will happen at the end of three weeks?” she asked.

“Mum, I do not know yet,” I replied. “I’m still working out the details of my next steps. Thank you.”

One or two people watching this exchange play out cut in, addressing her directly, saying,

“Why don’t you allow the young man time to catch his breath from a long journey, before asking what she had for breakfast five years ago.”

This got everyone laughing.

Mum, seeming a little embarrassed, hugged me again, and took permission to go to her kitchen to fix me something to eat. As she left, I went to my luggage and retrieved bread, snacks, and cookies that I purchased along the way for the children in the compound.

Over the next couple of days, I met with my parents to disclose the full story surrounding my visit—how I had completed the first phase of my studies at the University of Lagos, and how I planned to complete the second phase at Indiana University in the United States beginning in January of 1975. Everyone was joyous about how much I had accomplished, and still planned to accomplish. My mother questioned the wisdom of traveling overseas just to complete my studies.

Her concerns reminded me of an Igbo saying. “Egwu na akalu ndi no na akuku nso,” or a dance often seems easier from the sidelines. (People on the sidelines really do not know or understand what it takes to perform the dance.)

Attempting to explain how I ended up with two phases to complete my studies would have taken forever, and my mother would still not understand. Instead of attempting an explanation, I thought it was easier to remind her that one of her cousins, Mr. Jeremiah Oluchi, had been at Indiana University for a one-year special studies program many years before me. This revelation appeared to calm her fears. That was my intention but I knew nothing about my mother’s cousin studying at Indiana University before applying to the University.

My mother had other questions, such as, how long I would be gone, whether I would have access to ethnic foods, and whether I would come home between my studies. I answered my mother's questions as best as I could based on what I knew at the time. Even with all the grilling, I was very happy to be home.

Goodbye to Family and Friends II

My next move was to travel to Enugu to announce my impending travel plans to friends and former co-workers at Radio Nigeria. Some might consider such a visit as taking a victory lap. Not me. Barely four years earlier, in 1970, after the war ended, I had arrived in Enugu, tired and beaten. There were no other choices but to start life from the bottom. When my contemporaries returned to higher schools or universities, I stayed back due to circumstances beyond my control to support my parents. By doing so, I unwittingly began to chart a path different from my classmates. I had lost the baseline to compare myself to the others. Hence, this period was not a period for victory laps. It was time for introspection. It was time to acknowledge that, although difficult situations may delay and shift schedules, with patience, the issues can be resolved with better results.

As Igbo people like to say, “Nkita nwelu ndidi na ata okpukpu bulu ibu” or, a patient dog often gets the bigger bones. But the dog must be willing to wait, and without guarantees.

All the people that I visited in Enugu were gracious and wished me a safe trip and good luck with my studies. Several friends wanted to schedule specific dates to go out with me, one on one. I also spent the night with some, at their request. Understandably, it would be a long time before we would see each other again. That was why I did what I could to accommodate everyone’s request.

At my Uncle Joe’s place in one of the urban districts in Enugu to the east of town, the family rolled out the red carpet to welcome and celebrate with me. They prepared rice and stew, the celebratory dishes of the day, complete with a full-sized cock poultry meat. They made sure I got the head of the cock as a sign of recognition for my “accomplishment.”

There was music and dancing with music coming from one of NBC’s musical programs, “At Your Request” that happened to be on the air on that day and at that time. Most regular families did not own music players during this period. Except for professional disc jockeys and live music concerts, there was no method to spontaneously present music for people to dance during birthdays and other smaller events. All the news and music came from a battery or electric-powered transistor radio. To listen and dance to music, one must be familiar with the radio music program schedules and tune in at the right times.

While I celebrated at *Onu-Asata* with my uncle and his family, I couldn’t help remembering my sad kindergarten experience while studying 1,2,3...and A,B Cs under Uncle Joe’s tutelage. Perhaps this celebration should be for him. Without his evening lessons, would I be celebrating now? I asked myself. The lessons made me sad then, but today we are all happy and rejoicing.

The Bible predicted such outcomes ...”Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy...”, John 16:16-20 (Vatican, 2002)

It's often said that "time flies when you're having fun" (Pearson, 2022). That proved to be the case during the six months between my graduation from the University of Lagos and my departure to the United States. As I visited friends and families and celebrated with whoever was available and willing, I also made sure to spend time with my parents. During one of the intimate sessions, I received additional doses of counseling and advice. They ranged from "Be sure to eat and sleep well", to "Do not be in a hurry to get into serious relationships".

"There will be plenty of time for that", they said.

As time would later show, I did not take sufficient heed of this latest parental advice. Read on.

Relationship with my Parents

This story would be incomplete without addressing the unique churning relationship with my parents. Considering that I left the country in January 1975 without knowledge of when I would return, chances of ever living with my parents again vanished. The relationship we already had before the upcoming 1975 departure was intermittent and spotty. Some might say, abnormal, for good reason. That relationship was also normal in many ways.

Like everyone, I met my parents at birth, at a time that must have been the happiest in their lives. After all, I was their first child. I was born at Iva Valley where my father worked at the coal mines. It appears that I lived with both of them together only until the age of five before I was sent to live with my grandparents at Akama Oghe in Ezeagu Local Government Area, my mother's paternal home. I do not understand why. It was only after I turned eight that I returned to live with my father and his second wife. I also lived with my father and my mother in alternate years when the arrangement could be made.

I did not approve of, or like the fact that my father married a second wife. That was how early my resentment towards my father began. This second marriage cast a huge cloud over my relationship with my father for the rest of his life. It also explained why I enthusiastically embraced a departure from home—as soon as I could—to live with a teacher, Mr. Uzoечи, two years before high school.

The second separation from my parents at twelve, a critical stage of my young life, seemed to have worked well for me, based on subsequent results. Prior to the second separation, there were fun and not-so-fun moments with my father. I made him angry whenever I went out with my friends and failed to come home before dusk.

“Come here, I said come here,” he would yell. “I told you before, whenever it gets dark, look for your home! Bad people come out at night so that no one will see and catch them. Do you understand?”

This lesson has stayed with me all my life, and I have been passing it on to anyone who would listen. Criminals indeed do their dirty work in the dark.

It was also from my dad that I learned that it was acceptable for a man to know how to cook, even in a patriarchal society. He made very delicious meals for both of us whenever his wives were gone. I can still savor the taste of his game specialty of *anu-nchi*, or bush meat, which he prepared often following a successful hunting expedition in the wild. The tricky deal about *anu-nchi*, at least the way dad made it, was that it tasted so good you would want to eat a whole pot of it. However, it was also so spicy that you could only eat a few pieces of it at a time. My father's brand of *anu-nchi* was prepared with fresh tomatoes, fried dry to absorb all the liquid in it, lots of onions, red and green hot peppers, a tablespoon of oil, and seasoned to taste with salt.

I also enjoyed casual hunting trips that my father made with his white expatriate boss, or friend from England; I was not sure which. On these trips, they went after *ogazi*, or guinea fowl and usually got many of them. My father would offer to carry his friend on his back across shallow streams on the way to the hunting ground. The only reason for this, I concluded, was to prevent the expatriate from getting his shoes wet. I was unsure how to interpret my father's gesture – a sign of friendship towards the expatriate, or in reverence to the man's authority over my father? Which ever it was, they both seemed to enjoy the relationship.

Before I turned twelve, I had a significant and intense bonding experience with my mother at the family home in the village of Umuavulu-Abor, near Enugu. These reunions, as they turned out to be, had to occur on the off years when it was not



Mrs. Mary Ukwu: simply happy

my mother's turn to live with my father at the mines. Most of the time, I was an obedient child who would walk ten kilometers with other youths to fetch water from Iyi Ohune or Iyi Usala during the dry season. These two streams were the only sources of water for the towns of Umuavulu-Abor and the surrounding town of Ebe whenever rainwater was not sufficient.

As a seamstress, my mother would often have me try on dresses made for female children about my age to gauge if the clothes would be a good fit for the customer. This oddity took place only when parents were unable to send their children for actual measurements.

At other times, Mum would have me sew the buttons on finished clothing for her customers. At under ten, I would carefully make a slit for the buttonholes and thread the perimeter of each hole, before sewing each button symmetrically aligned with each corresponding buttonhole.

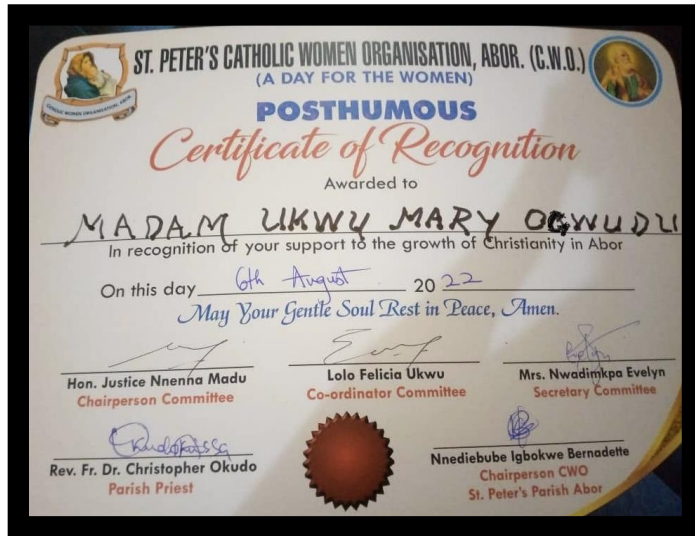
By far the most influence my mother had on me was in indoctrinating and preparing me for the Catholic Church. My mother was a leader in the Legion of Mary, a lay apostolic association of Catholics that gathered regularly to say the Rosary and serve the church in various ways. As soon as I was old enough to say my own prayers, my mother planted the Catholic Holy Rosary beads firmly in my hands. She said it was a powerful weapon that could protect me from all trials, threats, and dangers in the world. I still carry the rosary in my pocket for protection whenever I can.

The three most common rituals performed by most Catholics to fulfill their Catholic obligations include baptism, receiving the blessed sacrament or communion, and confirmation. I was already baptized within one year of birth. My mother subsequently guided me through all the catechism lectures and preparatory steps for the first communion when I was eight years old. She took the same steps when I went through confirmation. During the Catholic Holy Week, the week between Palm Sunday and Easter, my mother would assemble all the Christian mothers in our village and me. She would lead us, as a group, to our Catholic parish headquarters at Eke, near Enugu.

We congregated with attendees from other villages and towns in a camp-like setting. Throughout the entire period until Easter Sunday, we slept on the floor at night, prayed, fasted, and repeatedly conducted the stations of the cross, or Passion of Christ—the story of [Jesus Christ](#)'s arrest, trial, and suffering. My mother monitored my Catholic religious practices, especially attendance at morning mass and communion, whenever I was within reach.

Due to the distractions of a second wife, my father's attention towards my mother waned over time. Increasingly I observed that my mother was dependent on me for guidance and support, especially when I started my second job at the radio station. This dependency created a crisis when I was ready to move to Lagos to attend the University of Lagos. My mother assembled a host of emissaries to intervene and dissuade me from leaving home. She also came to me on her own. Pleading that I was her de facto husband and that if I left, she would die. I explained that the whole objective of furthering my education was to be in a better position to help her more than I was currently doing. Unfortunately, in retrospect, she was right.

My best efforts to be in a "better position to help her" did not happen soon enough. My mother passed away on the 14th of September 1994 while I was still in the United States.



A posthumous award to Mrs. Mary Ogwudu Ukwu by fellow Christian Mothers

to do unto others what I would have done if she were still alive.

As you will read later, an entire company, *bmpUnited*, was established later in my life to do just that.

Her death occurred nearly four years before my father's on September 9th, 1998. May their wonderful souls continue to rest perfectly in Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

Her premature death may be seen by some as a testament to how much she suffered in my absence, given that statistically, women tend to outlive men (PRB, 2001). Her passing before I could give her a better life remains my greatest regret in life. I spontaneously tear up each time I remember this failure because she warned me. The pain from this failure has no painkiller. The best that I can now do is dedicate this book, *Young Man In A Hurry*, to her memory, and

Relationship with Umuavulu-Abor

From the 9th mile intersection, my hometown of Umuavulu-Abor is five kilometers, or less than three miles to the north, on the old Nsukka Road. Umuavulu-Abor is one of eight villages called Abor-Na-Asato, in Udi Local Government Area, or LGA, consisting of: (Ukwu F. C., 2024)

Amukwu

Dinigweze

Dinobe

Ozalla

Ngwegu

Ubiekpo

Umuavulu-Abor

Ugwunani

In Umuavulu-Abor, the Ukwu family belongs to the Umudinaojime kinsmen or *umunna*, meaning children of the same father. Umudinaojime is part of a broader conglomerate of families called Orobo, specifically, Orobo-Etiti consisting of Ndu-Madukwe Ugwu family group and Ukwu-Obodechi family group.

My paternal grandfather Ukwuani Okwuibe married two wives, Okwu Eji N'elo, my grandmother, and Afiakwa, my step-grandmother. I had three uncles, Vincent, Anigbogu, and Felix Ukwu, and four aunts, Nneze, Uwodu, Bridget, and Ugoeke.

Unverified history passed on by word of mouth described the late Vincent Ukwu as a pioneer in telecommunications and radio broadcasting. He is said to have served briefly with Mr. Sam Nwaneri at Radio Nigeria, Port Harcourt. Mr. Nwaneri was the Controller of Radio Nigeria, Enugu when I accepted a job at Radio Nigeria right after the Nigerian civil war. I often wondered whether Mr. Nwaneri ever took a second look at my name. Had he made the connection between my last name and that of my late Uncle Vincent? Just a thought. Unfortunately, he probably had bigger fish to fry, making big corporate decisions.

Mr. Ralph Opara subsequently took over the Enugu radio station, as Controller, most likely after Mr. Sam Nwaneri. I almost lost my new job at Radio Nigeria, Enugu under Mr. Ralph Opara. Mr. Opara studied English at the University College Ibadan, Nigeria, and later at Cambridge University, London, England. What did I do? I used an NTBB, "Not To Be

Broadcast” word on the air, while presenting a morning show called 7¹⁰ Express, previously discussed under “Life After the Civil War” .

And what word did I use?

“Goddamn”!

I had used the word out of frustration because one of the turntables in the studio malfunctioned. Mr. Opara promptly summoned me to his office after the show at 9 a.m. His gun was pre-loaded and ready to fire immediately I walked in.

“How dare you use such a word in the air with thousands of fans listening?” he said.

I immediately recoiled, noticeably shaken and contrite.

“Such a word should never be heard on air for as long as I’m the controller of this station. Do you understand?”

He motioned me out of his office. He did not allow me to say a word, implying my act was indefensible under any circumstance. I guess that he was offended on two levels: Charlie had the temerity to utter a profanity on the air, and he didn’t even use English to do it! How audacious!!!

Anigbogu Ukwu, an older brother to my dad, Basil Maduka Ukwu, was the father of late highlife musician, Celestine Onwuha Ukwu. Anigbogu was a man of peace who played the

role of Chief Priest for our people's ancestral worship, Odo masquerade, and cult music in Orobo. He took his job seriously and performed it with superb talent and artistry.



***Late Nigerian Highlife Music Maestro,
Celestine Onwuha Ukwu & Charli O Ukwu***

Uncle Anigbogu's most prominent son, Celestine Ukwu, lived both in the southeastern and the northwestern regions of Nigeria. Traveling as far north as Sokoto to teach school, he gradually built the foundation for his musical career. He and I were not close due to our age difference and his traveling schedules. He was nearly as nomadic as I. Nevertheless, we managed to share the same roof for short periods at Aba, during the Nigerian Civil War, and at Peter Okoye Street, Uwani, Enugu, after the civil war.

Details of other Ukwu family members, siblings, and relatives are withheld to protect their privacy.

Umuavulu-Abor did not always feel like a hometown. I suspect this less-than-ideal feeling came from the peripatetic nature of my young life which did not permit time for an adequate understanding of the place and its wonderful people. As a child, I also had unexplained feelings of insecurity at Umuavulu whose origins I cannot explain or even remember.

"We all fear what we don't understand" is a quote that has been abundantly repeated.

Despite the insecurity, I, from time to time, traveled by foot, to and from, Umuavulu-Abor to nearby Ameke Ngwo to catch transportation to Akam-Oghe, my mother's hometown, or to and from Enugu-Ngwo to return, or visit my father's apartment at Okpara mines.

This insecurity usually vanished once I set foot inside the Ukwu compound when screams of joy and greetings erupt.

Charlie, nwune'm o-lo-o!

Charlie, nwune'm o-lo-o!

To which I would respond,

O-lo-o, Nwune!

As word got around that Charlie was visiting home, kids from the neighborhood rush to the Ukwu family compound to welcome me. I fondly remember my playmates, especially the girls...Nwakego, Ani-eku, Amuche and Ucheje.



Before I had time to share slices of bread and cabin biscuits, the welcome presents, and refreshments of the time, plans were already afoot to play hide and seek and other children's games later that evening, especially under moonlight. There was no electricity.

Amuche and Ucheje attended my Medical Outreach in January 2024

Kpa kpa nkolo, kpa nkolo

Kpa kpa nkolo, kpa nkolo

Odume, Ogene....

or

Od-o-o, O-o-o, Od-o-o, O-o-o

Abiakwam ...

Some of our favorite child games we played.

But first things first.

I hug everyone and give out slices of bread and cabin biscuits lightly coated with margarine. We didn't have butter. One or two of the girls jostle to sit next to me. Not Ani-eku or Nwakaego. These were the shy girls. But I was mostly fond of An-eku. The girls and one or two jealous boys, Emmanuel and Cyprian, would hang around. They kept me company until their parents started to call to send them on errands or to cook dinner.

I looked forward to this camaraderie anytime there was an opportunity to visit Umuavulu-Abor because the visits were among the few times to let my guard down and be a kid. These were the times I held a girl's hands for the first time...and Mother Mary better not be watching! These were the times I had my first innocent crush on a girl, curiously and mistakenly touching, and on and on. But these were also child's play. Nothing serious going on. Above all, we were still kids, and mostly relatives too. It was all so innocent, platonic, and fun. I loved it.

In the early mornings following any of my visits, we traveled as a group to fetch water from the streams, Iyi Ohune or Iyi Usala. We went to Iyi Ohune most of the time because it was a shorter distance, but Iyi Usalla was known to be cleaner and best for drinking.

A major feature of my relationship with Umuavulu-Abor was my initiation into Odomagana or Odo masquerade culture for a rite of passage into adulthood. In most of Igbo land, the living and the dead communicate through an intermediary or masquerade that comes to earth every two years or thereabouts. The masquerade represented the spirits of our ancestors who died many years ago. They were still relied upon to adjudicate and guide affairs on earth. In fact, they are believed to possess greater wisdom and power given that they reside in the spiritual world and are free of distractions of the flesh.

In Umuavulu-Abor, the masquerade is called Odomagana or Odo. During the Odo season, Odo brings entertainment, judgment, and blessings for the just; and curses for the evil ones. The initiation process is a serious affair that takes place every Odo season in a time frame within the Odo season calendar (Ukwuani, 2022). Initiation is open to all male children, perhaps as young as 3- 5 and as old as one can withstand the embarrassment of not being initiated. It costs money too; hence not every male child can pursue initiation when they are old enough to do so. The family must have adequate resources to go through the process.

When uninitiated, one must not touch or come close to Odo masquerade to avoid disastrous consequences. In place of my dad, I had a chaperone, Ma'diegwu, who guided and calmed me during the entire process, especially the scary sessions and events of the three-day experience. My head was shaved to prepare for the occasion, leaving a very small patch that was removed on the final day. My body was covered with makeup called *uffie* or camwood, giving my skin a dark maroon tinge. There was an incantation, music, food, and drinks for the adults only—all conducted in the privacy of the *Onu Odo*, or Odo's house. No female was allowed anywhere close to the Onu Odo. The initiation ceremony and activities took place over three Igbo market days, Nkwo, Eke, Afor. Orie, the market day was a day off for the

community to catch up with farming, shopping, fetching water, washing clothes at the stream, and other home chores.

On the first day, a special firewood is used to roast yams in the open. No women were allowed. The firewood came from a special tree called *Avu*. Although this tree was cut down fresh, it was still highly flammable and cooked the yams well. As the yams were roasted, young and energetic masquerades or Odomaganas from the maternal homes of the initiation candidates swooped around to steal roasted yams like hawks striking at chicks. This ritual was repeated several times during the night, with fun and excitement (Osondu, 2023).

On the final day, Afor, all Odo initiates for that year assembled at the village of Amogwu in Umuavulu-Abor for a final conference. The scene was an orderly congregation of all participating villages. Orderly, yes. Yet a thunderous mix of incantation and music, including *Ode*, pronounced Od-e-e. There was always food, and palm wine for the adults only. Over the years, Amogwu village had earned special accreditation to host this initiation final day event. Out of the 14 villages in Umuavulu-Abor – Amogwu, Umuikwo, Ohemuje, Umuezike, Nzuko, Ezionya, Umuoka, Eziagu, Uwenu-N'uwani, Eguma, Umuozor-Uwani, Umuozor-Uwenu, Orobor and Alwagu, (Ndu, 2024) Amogwu had no rival.

Mother Mary was unaware of my initiation. She would have fought vigorously against the initiation based on her strong catholic faith. Sorry, mum. For her, baptism and the Holy Rosary were all I needed. But my father was different. For him, the initiation was a prerequisite for me to become a man in the Umuavulu-Abor community of his time.

This chapter demonstrates that despite all my normadic moves, as a child, I still had moments to do what children do. Play; and when the right time came, got initiated for adulthood in my culture. These were critical development phases for my growth, which often happened organically for most children. When they didn't happen, as may have been the case with superstar musician, Michael Jackson, and many others that we may not know about, it created unpredictable developmental issues or even dysfunctions.

I was also proud to embrace my Umuavulu-Abor culture of Odomagana initiation despite being baptized in the Catholic Church. I believe that my people worship the same God of Jesus, Mary and Joseph of Nazareth. I believe my people use the masquerade only to establish a spiritual connection to our dead ancestors who have gone to live with that same God.

My Big Day Arrives

My marathon farewell and departure celebration soon eased into the Christmas of 1974 and New Year's Day of 1975. In only five days my very first plane flight ever will be underway. I had never flown before. This fact alone aroused a variety of feelings, thoughts, and imaginations. What does flying in an airplane feel like? Is it safe, and would this be the end of me? Where was I really going? Who would I be with? What are they like? What are the streets like?

The chicken had finally come to roost, as the saying goes. These must be the very questions that troubled all my incredulous friends as I told them I would be studying abroad. The difference in attitude between those friends and me was that they worried about the issues or obstacles far too early. I was willing to ignore issues and questions related to my impending study trip as "unknowns," while I carefully worked my way towards the ultimate goal. Now that I had cleared the path to achieve the goal of getting my advanced education, it was time to address the "unknowns", those questions that now puzzled me.

I intuitively knew about Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, said to be the most popular American poet of the 19th century. In a poem written in 1851, called *The Golden Legend*, he is quoted as saying,

"Don't cross the bridge til you come to it. (Pearson, Cross the Bridge – Meaning, Origin and Usage, 2022)

Now that I am at the bridgehead, all these questions need to be answered with either facts or assumptions. One embarrassing assumption I had before arrival to the United States was that every inch of space in the United States was paved with concrete! After all, this was the world's most advanced and developed country. But I had studied biology too in High School. I should have known that plant and human life would be endangered when rainwater is not allowed to penetrate the soil because concrete was everywhere!

On my travel date, January 4th, 1975, it seemed as if anybody and everyone who knew me was at the Enugu airport to see me off. It was overwhelming. The group of people who came on my behalf occupied a full section of the southern end of the main lounge. Without my family getting involved, guests bought drinks and refreshments for each other to continue the farewell party. Several guests gave impromptu speeches and words of encouragement directed towards me. Although most of the remarks were made with great intentions, affection, and humor, I found some of them embarrassing.



Friends Come Together to say Goodbye

Soon enough I found relief as other guests took me outside to take pictures. The merrymaking continued for nearly two hours before the arrival flight came from Lagos. The arrival of the Lagos flight became the long-awaited signal for us to begin our final goodbyes. About forty minutes later, the boarding of the Lagos flight was announced, and many began to shed tears, including my mother and younger siblings. I went over and kissed and hugged them before leaving for the tarmac. This particular airport did not have a jetway. As I proceeded towards the plane, walking behind other travelers, I looked back every thirty to sixty seconds to wave at my family and all the well-wishers until I could no longer see them.

For a first-time flyer, my composure and demeanor were normal and attracted no discernible or unusual attention. The length of the flight, just under one hour, was perfect to test the waters. Within the time it took to get introduced to my seatmate to engage in small talk. Looking through the window, I wonder if the clouds flying by my window-seat were tangible or not. Then, there was the announcement to fasten our seatbelts and prepare for landing. The only other thing I had sufficient time to do was to look up the instructions to get to my connecting flight to Boston, Massachusetts. Once we landed and stepped into the Lagos local airport lounge, I asked around for directions to get to the international airport. About four kilometers separated the Lagos local and international airports.

In 1975 there was no Transportation Security Administration, TSA, to check luggage and frisk people, but there were customs and immigration services. All the international travelers moved together as a group and arrived at the international boarding gates, well ahead of time, despite nervous and uncomfortable moments passing through customs and immigration. I was worried that some required travel documentation might be incomplete or missing because I would be delayed. As the nervousness subsided and the adrenaline flow ebbed, the length of the layover ahead became obvious.

Four hours! What was I going to do in four hours? I thought. I certainly was not calm enough to sit and read a book.

Hungry, tired, and surrounded by unfamiliar faces, I felt my first pang of loneliness. Unlike the scene at the Enugu airport, I was all alone, with a long, uncertain journey and life ahead, staring me in the face. With the limited rational decision-making power left in me, I concluded I needed to eat first before anything else.

Igbo people have a saying –

“Onye agu na agu na aha njo eghe,”?? a hungry person often makes bad judgment.

I ambled to the terminal hallway in search of familiar food. It did not take long.

“Hey, madam, what food do you have to serve to a tired and hungry man?, I asked.

“It depends on what you are hungry for”, she responded in Yoruba. Although I didn’t speak the language, I understood snippets of it, especially food items. Living nearly three years in Lagos, I never picked up the language. Perhaps I was too focused on my mission, completing the first phase of my advanced education and getting out. I had no social life that would have enabled me to learn Yoruba. As I pondered the wherefores and reasons for my limited Yoruba language skills, the food-seller spoke again.

“We have swallow (fufu), ewa (beans), jollof rice and yams.”

“Which one do you want?” she asked.

In ten minutes, I was seated and feasting on a large plate of jollof rice and beans. Remembering that I still had a long layover time to kill, I slowed my eating to allow my brain to catch up with my eating. This private and quiet moment allowed me to catch up with the latest national news before departing the country. For several months, I had been preoccupied, perhaps even consumed, by my own personal affairs to pay attention to national events.

It turned out that rumors of unhappiness among the ranks of junior Nigerian military officers had begun to surface. They were concerned about the lack of progress by the Yakubu Gowon military administration in moving the country towards democratic rule. This meant that the country could be tethering on the edge of more instability. I ordered a drink, adjusted my seat, and settled myself more comfortably to catch up with more news in the country. Soon I started to feel sleepy from all the food. I put my head down on the dining table to catch a nap. I must have napped close to one hour before I was aroused by the international airport intercom announcing the boarding of PANAM Flight 965 to Boston, USA.

America Here I come

The remnants of sleep inertia from my nap quickly cleared my eyes. I grabbed my hand luggage and hurried off to the departure gate. When I arrived, the flight attendants were boarding first-class passengers, those with young children, and those who needed assistance. Ten minutes later, it was the turn of my group to board, based on row numbers. This was my second flight of the day, and I was now poised to step into one of the largest commercial aircraft in the world, a Jet Airliner. Compared to my first flight from Enugu, this plane had two separated aisles, three columns of seats, and over three scores of rows.

This huge piece of equipment fascinated me. Growing up as a child, my playmates and I were equally captivated by the idea of large flying objects. We used to pretend to run as fast as the airplanes in the same direction, and as the plane passed overhead, we sang –

“Arowplain tualum akpa-ego,” meaning airplane, please drop me a bag of money.

We were disappointed when our wishes were never granted.

During the Nigerian Civil War, those same large flying objects that fascinated and excited us as children, now frightened us as adults. How ironic! The planes had suddenly become instruments for war and killing, capable of dropping bombs on valued assets, and unfortunately, on innocent humans. As adults, we witnessed how much damage those “fascinating” objects inflicted with bombs coming from inside of them, setting houses ablaze, maiming and destroying human lives.

* * *

I found my window seat and eased into it. Several travelers passed by to other seats behind me, leaving the two seats to my left open. After about forty minutes of continuous boarding, the aircraft doors closed. That was when I found out I would be sitting alone in the same row in my particular column of seats. This allowed me to stretch out and utilize the extra space. As we took off, one thing that first caught my attention was the nighttime aerial view of the city of Lagos. While Christmas has come and gone, the city of Lagos appeared to stay lit with Christmas lights all over the city. Some dense and extremely bright areas, and patches of dark, and not-so-bright areas of the city too.

As the jet aircraft gained altitude, and we were outside the Nigerian air space, my interest quickly shifted to the dark view outside, interfacing with my window. Although the moon was not full, there was sufficient light to show that I was gazing at empty spaces of the earth uninhabited by humans. It made me ponder what percentage of the earth is actually inhabited by humans or animals. According to study.com, “humans use approximately 14.5 percent of the total surface of the planet.” About 71 percent is water while only 29 percent is land (Water Science School, 2019).

The night wore on. More novelty experiences of a first-time international traveler continued to unfold - airline cuisine, wine, music on a headset for the first time, and simply gazing at

the stars from thirty-five thousand feet and higher. Out of all the food items served to me on the flight, the only familiar ones were beef, bread, margarine, and apple. I enjoyed it because just like music, the taste of food and the sound of music share the common element of universality.

The food, wine, entertainment, and naps seemed to speed up our flight such that Logan International Airport was now within reach in the next hour. The announcement that followed unleashed a flurry of activities. Many travelers rose from their seats, nearly one by one, to visit the toilets, or to repackage their hand luggage before returning them to the overhead bins. A sleeping child behind me, apparently jolted by the frenzy, began to cry. The second announcement came as quiet returned to the cabin. "Flight attendants, prepare for landing, please."

The PANAM 746 descended in leaps of eight to ten thousand feet per minute, or so it seemed. I looked outside through my private window and noticed whiteness all around like I had never witnessed before in Nigeria. Unlike the whiteness of the cloud, this whiteness seemed granular, as if bags of salt crystals had covered the entire ground within sight. It was atop every object that presented a surface for it to settle—leaves, trees, rooftops, and car tops. By the time the flight landed on the tarmac at Logan International, the white stuff had been cleared off its path in anticipation of our arrival. The clean tarmac made it easier for the plane to taxi to the gate for us to deplane.

Once inside the airport, all international travelers were directed to Terminal E for U.S. Customs and Border Protection processing. Terminal E was known to process travelers from nearly fifty destinations (massport, 1999 - 2023) all over the world. Customs and immigration exit and entry checkpoints appeared to create anxiety for many international travelers, especially the new and uninitiated like me. It was no different at Boston Logan. The anxiety compounded by hours of flying and limited, uncomfortable, sleeping hours showed in most faces as they lined up to be processed. In about fifteen minutes, it was my turn.

"Your passport, Sir," requested the immigration officer.

I placed my passport in front of her without a word from me. She flips through the pages quickly.

"Have you completed the I-94 Form?" she asked. I rummaged through my breast pocket and produced the form. Before landing, air hostesses had passed out I-94 forms to be completed before landing.

"Is Bloomington your final destination?"

"Yes, ma'am," I responded.

She stamped my passport on the next blank page and handed it back to me.

I breathed a sigh of relief. What I had just accomplished, successfully being admitted into the United States to continue my education, was and still is a Herculean accomplishment for

many international students, especially those from less privileged families. Some have spent a lifetime trying to cross this line.

Outside the immigration and customs checkpoint, an airline personnel reviewed my tickets and noted that I had one more flight to go, to get to Bloomington, Indiana. The agent, discerning how unsure I was about my location and movements, took personal interest and directed me to the boarding gate for my final flight.

The gate was still unattended and without activity because the commuter flight to Bloomington was not due for three hours. I sat down and waited rather than wander around and get lost. To put the situation in context, this traveler flew for the first time about one day ago, had never been in any major airport like Logan before, and had just been admitted into the United States for the first time. Under these circumstances, the decision to sit and just wait was wise. Although I had some travelers' checks, I had never used one before, and it seemed all too complicated to find a restaurant that would accept them. So, I just sat and waited, and even slept.

By the time I woke up, aroused by increased activity around me, the flight attendants for Allegheny Airlines were boarding the Indiana commuter flight. Within half an hour, the ten of us were each sitting by a window in ten rows and two columns. Everyone had a window seat. The takeoff and landing with an aircraft of that size was different, perhaps, scary. However, the flying experience was more rewarding. I could see more activity below me because of the lower flying altitude. As we flew south and then in a southwesterly direction, the guessing game of what was happening below me kept me busy until we began to approach the Monroe County Municipal Airport in Indiana, my very first U.S. home state.

My First US Home State of Indiana

“Ladies and gentlemen, as we start our descent, please make sure your seats and tray tables are in their full upright position. Make sure your seat belt is securely fastened and all carry-on luggage is stowed underneath the seat in front of you or the overhead bins. Thank you.”

With those words, the Allegheny commuter flight descended on the tarmac of Monroe County Municipal Airport in Bloomington, Indiana. It did not take long for the ten travelers on board to deplane and step on the tarmac. There was no jetway to pass through to the airport lounge, just the airstair of the aircraft. For the first time, I was stepping on to the white stuff that I had talked about as the flight from Lagos landed at Logan international. Someone had mentioned during our flight that the white stuff was called “snow.” I was embarrassed to admit I had never seen or touched snow in my life. Little did I know what a significant role snow, and related weather conditions, would play in my life in Bloomington for the next few years.

Inside the small cozy airport waiting area there were just three groups of families waiting to welcome arriving travelers and loved ones. One of the three was a couple with their daughter waving a sign with my last name “Ukwu ” on it. I hesitated at first. I was not expecting anyone to come to the airport to welcome me. But just how many Ukwus were currently in North America? None! Sorry, I had a cousin living in Alfred, New York. But he was still unaware of my journey.

On second thoughts, I moved towards the couple cautiously, reaching out to accept an outstretched handshake.

The man spoke first. “Hello, you must be Charlie Ukwu,” he said.

“Yes Sir, yes, I am,” I replied.

“You have come a long way, haven’t you? How was your journey. You must be tired?”

“Yes, indeed, Sir,” I replied.

“Welcome, welcome. Allow me to introduce myself, I am Professor Martin, and this is my wife, Phyllis Martin, and our daughter, Jenny. We are your host family.”

“It is my pleasure to meet your lovely family, Sir, thank you,” I said, as we picked up my luggage and headed outside to a parked maroon Volvo station wagon car.

Inside the car, the Martin family discussed the plan for the evening. We would first go to dinner, after which they would drop me off at a place called Teter Quadrangle, one of the many dormitories and student living quarters inside the Indiana University campus. I endorsed their plan as a good one. At dinner, Mr. Martin asked about my parents, while Mrs.

Martin was interested in what I needed urgently in the next few days. They had planned ahead and brought along multiple sizes of winter jackets out of which I chose one at the end of dinner.

After I was dropped off at Teter Quadrangle, my roommate, Jeff, was at the lobby waiting to direct me to our dorm room. I wasn't sure how he knew to expect me. Meanwhile, I said goodnight to the Martins and took the elevator to the second floor of Teter Quadrangle accompanied by Jeff.

Our dorm room had two identical sections, each with a bed, a reading table, a lamp, and a wardrobe. The bathroom also had two sections, one for each resident. Jeff arrived before me and had chosen his own section. I settled into the remaining section. Jeff told me what to expect in the next few days and encouraged me to ask questions if I needed anything he had not addressed. I thanked him and took my leave to shower. I had not showered in over two days of traveling. By the time I came out of the shower, Jeff had left the room. I went to bed.

The following morning Jeff and I went to breakfast together at 8 a.m. and planned to assemble at the auditorium for orientation beginning at 9 a.m. At breakfast, we stepped into long rows of food items served at the Teter Dining Hall, buffet style. Much of the food was unfamiliar to me. Among the unfamiliar items, I had ham, sausages, and fresh milk for the very first time. It began to occur to me that, without moderation, one could easily overeat when confronted daily with such assorted spreads. With less than one hour to do all the eating, Jeff and I rushed our breakfast and went for orientation and a tour of the beautiful Bloomington Indiana University campus. Out of the several locations that we toured, the Herman B Wells Library, the Memorial Union, the Musical Arts Center, and the Department of Journalism at Ernie Pyle Hall were my favorites. Ernie Pyle Hall was soon to become my most frequented location on all of campus. So began my five-year residency in the state of Indiana.

Wife, Child, and Career Arrive together.

I felt like an artist who had just purchased a brand-new piece of canvas. A can of paint and a paintbrush were both ready to create a new piece of art—my life. I needed to define what direction my life would go for the foreseeable future. Unlike a piece of art, however, one is not able to erase or redo their life, nor can one preview outcomes, results, and consequences of different courses of action. That was the significance of what lay immediately ahead of me.

At twenty-five, Indiana University unwittingly and suddenly became the crossroads of my life. Indiana University was where I reconnected with a former friend and married her as my first wife, where I had my first child, and where I “met” Computer Science. What has remained a surprise, or even shocking, was how insouciantly these life-changing steps and events snuck up on me and took over my life without resistance. They unfolded in succession; apparently without much consideration of the consequences! In contrast, people spend years dating and trying to decide who to marry, spend years deciding or trying to have a child or spend months and years searching for the right job or profession. Not Charlie O. If this sounds arrogant to you, it is not meant to be. As they say on television, please do not try this at home. None of this was planned. And no one believes that either.

* * *

I met Valerie at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation office location in Enugu, the capital city of Enugu State around 1970 or 1971. We were introduced by an Igbo language newscaster and translator, Mr. Nathaniel Ikeagu from Ebe, near Enugu. Over time, we became friends. Our friendship was platonic, consistent with my other relationships designed to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest with my radio job. Admittedly, some might have difficulty believing the aforementioned characterization, especially as Valerie stood next to me at the final farewell party held on my behalf in Enugu. The long-distance communication between us after I arrived in the United States did not go well. It did not advance the relationship. At one point, one of us did not react favorably when described as “just a friend” in response to certain unrealistic expectations at the time.

Fast forward to July of 1975 when Valerie was ostensibly stranded in Vancouver, Canada after attending a Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) conference. There had been a bloodless coup in Nigeria where junior Nigerian military officers overthrew the sitting military government of General Yakubu Gowon. This military action confirmed the rumors that circulated as I left the country in January 1975. I was sitting at the Lagos international

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airport on my first trip to the United States when the tremors of the military coup were seething.

It was summertime, and I was in Miami, Florida selling books, door to door, for a Nashville, Tennessee company, Southwestern Publishing Company. Valerie reached me in Miami. After carefully listening to her plans and lines of action, we arranged to meet before she returned to Nigeria. We met at a cousin's house at Alfred, New York for a few days before I flew back to Miami to finish my summer job. Her original plan was to return to Nigeria when airlines resumed flights to Nigeria following the coup. Meanwhile, she would follow up on several college admissions that were in progress.

The single move --to follow up on college admissions, turned out to be an earshaker that altered the course of both of our lives forever! I was unsure what to make of it. I was both scared and excited, all at the same time. This was not entirely new territory for me: always lunging or thrusting into the unknown without fear, and hoping for the best. But this time, there were two lives involved and the consequences far greater.

Wait! Am I already having *anticipatory anxiety*^{xx} before the shoe falls?

When I returned to Bloomington at the end of summer, Valerie had secured a provisional admission to Indiana University to study Accounting. She was also offered a part-time job at the Office of International Services to earn part of her living expenses. All that remained to finalize the admission process was to get a co-signer for the remaining balance of her tuition. This was for the fall of 1975.



Yes; There were both Civil and Legal Marriages

At the time of this writing, I am still unable to recall the exact details of what transpired hereafter. What I do recall is that we both pledged to cooperate to shoot for the skies and attain both academic and professional excellence. Whatever it took. This meant consolidating our resources and sharing costs. When we floated the idea of moving-in together to reduce costs, it was denied by our parents on both sides. We ignored them, moved to A-2 Rowe Apartments on the IU Bloomington campus, and got married in 1976. Later that year, our first child, Nneka, was born at Bloomington Hospital in Monroe County, Bloomington, Indiana. The arrival of a child that we both loved took the stress and focus away from us and placed the focus on an innocent child, an unquestionable source of joy. The

Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel 1970 song, “Bridge over Troubled Water” became our solace and refuge. Our parents later reversed course, even apologizing for being slow to bless the union.



Many years later when I shared this story with friends—both males and females—it was remarkable that the females overwhelmingly believed that what happened to me was a “setup!” Even some relatives, after taking another look at my send-off party photos, concluded that I colluded with Valerie. The outcome had been pre-planned from the beginning, they insisted. I can unequivocally confirm there was no such collusion. Unfortunately, I cannot speak for Valerie.

The setup? True or not, I was already an adult completely responsible for my own decisions.

Because of the love God has for us, I believe everything worked out as best as it could.

Father & Daughter At North Shore of Lake Michigan, Evanston, Illinois, USA

However, it is highly recommended that young people take more time and be more deliberate with such life-changing decisions. Please don't

do what I did; the outcome may not be the same. Again, as is often said on television, “Don't try this at home. “

As the foregoing seismic shifts were happening at the home front, other equally consequential events were growing roots in the classroom. I was not doing well in one of my five classes as a freshman. The culprit was an elective called “Introduction to Computer Science” or C201, using FORTRAN. Unlike other classes where my lowest grade so far was a B+, I was narrowly making a grade of C in the computer class. I could easily end up with a D, given my current level of understanding of Computer Science. That was when I reached out to a classmate who was doing much better than I was.

Her name is Madeleine Lockhart from Elkhart, Indiana. As we studied together and did our labs together, I discovered that Computer Science required a shift in thinking and problem-solving methods. In the end, I still made a C grade in the class because I waited too long before seeking help. The low grade of C triggered a curiosity and resolve to dig further into this new discipline. “The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet,” (384–322 & Philosopher, 384–322 bc)said Aristotle many years ago. Having tasted some of the bitterness, I could not forego the sweetness.

My next encounter with Computer Science was during a master’s program in Economics in 1978. The complexity of econometrics and economic modeling, using regression analysis, numerical analysis, and matrix calculations could not be done without computing. I had the opportunity to work with MATLAB, a fourth-generation programming language used for mathematical, engineering, and economic modeling. Unfortunately, MATLAB was a canned software and too constraining, allowing the user to manipulate mostly variables and inputs. It was also restricted to the ivory towers of academia and sophisticated engineering firms. My hunger was for regular software used to solve everyday problems for accounting, payroll, finance, and manufacturing.

To reach this goal I began to search for a Computer Science program at the graduate level. In the Spring of 1979, as my professors and advisers were evaluating my candidacy for a Ph.D. program in economics, I was on the verge of accepting an offer for an MBA in Business Computing Science at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas.

As I went after Computer Science, Valerie was not idle. In addition to being a full-time mother, she carried a nearly full semester load in Accounting at The Kelley School of Business (KSB) at Indiana University. She also worked part-time at the Office of International Services. She was so good in class that she won both academic and financial awards that came in handy to pay part of her tuition. Valerie finished her Accounting degree in three years, instead of the normal four years. She equally passed her Certified Public Accountant (CPA) examination on her first attempt. She was an inspiration to have as a partner.

As an undergraduate, she took advanced classes that concurrently earned her graduate credit hours. By the time she earned her bachelor’s degree in accounting, she had accumulated approximately fifty percent of what was needed to earn a master’s in business administration (MBA). The climax of Valerie’s academic excellence and performance at KSB was qualifying for the highly contested three-month internship program at American Hospital Supplies company in Evanston, Illinois. Valerie was truly living the spirit of the

chorus of our family's song, "Bridge over Troubled Water" especially where the duo's melodic voices sang.

*"...Sail on Silver Girl,
Sail on by;
Your time has come to shine...."*

Betting On the Computer Industry

With Valerie's stellar academic performance and my stubborn quest for Computer Science knowledge happening simultaneously, our young family was suddenly faced with a crisis of choices. It would be unwise to ignore the amazing streak of success Valerie has continued to show in the field of accounting to chase after a relatively unknown, obscure, and untested field of Computer Science. We also wondered if Valerie's academic excellence would translate into a comparable level of professional excellence. Could she monetize her academic prowess to help us support the family? We also knew that personal successes may not always lead to family success. These were tough choices for a young couple under the age of thirty.

It was decided that our goal would be to choose the option that preserved and nurtured the family unit. Under these circumstances, I was supported to go forward with accepting an offer to attend Texas A&M University. This meant that the family would finally leave Bloomington and move to College Station, Texas, no later than the middle of August 1979. Valerie and Nneka would visit a family friend, Dr. & Mrs. Okeke Nwankwo, in Columbus, Ohio, first, and then fly to College Station to join me. I would travel by Greyhound bus to College Station with most of our belongings. I had been on Greyhound before and expected no surprises.

The distance turned out to be too far for comfort. There were not enough spaces for the travelers to move around or lie down. My knees were constantly jammed against the backrest of the passenger in front of me and my backrest did not recline enough to be comfortable. In the interest of time, the bus did not stop frequently to allow travelers to stretch their legs. The one good news, a very important one, was that we made the trip to College Station without an incident. For that, I was very thankful.

* * *

To say College Station is a college town may be misleading. Like everything in Texas, College Station and its student population were "BIG". Compared to Bloomington Indiana, College Station was forty-one percent bigger in both their city and student populations as of this writing. Our move turned out to be an upgrade. After nearly five years of snow and winter blizzards, we were ready for a change. More days of sunshine, guaranteed!

Our living space within student housing would be identical to the Bloomington housing. As a student, I enrolled in the master's program for Business Computing Science leading to a Master's in Business Administration or MBA (Business Computing). To pay for my tuition and earn a stipend I would be leading laboratory sections two days per week, for two classes, Introduction to Fortran and Introduction to COBOL, both classes designed for freshmen. Valerie applied for several accounting positions both on and off campus with promising results.

From Internship To Professional Life

Our transition to College Station motivated us to change our lifestyle, and meet, and make new friends. Our schedule in Bloomington was too busy to allow that to happen. With extra time to devote to being a family, it was no surprise when our second child, Ebele, was born on May 1, 1980. Ebele's features appeared to favor Valerie's side of the family; Nneka was from my side of the family. We loved them both. As the family size grew, so did our responsibilities and financial needs. I was reminded of our family pact to always put the family unit's interests above individual interests. It was time to put the pact to the test again.

While researching our options, I discovered that major American companies visited college campuses, especially in the Fall, to recruit interns and future employees. That was how American Hospital Supplies found Valerie at the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University. I decided to use this approach by contacting companies that had visited Texas



A&M in prior years. In my research, I discovered that Arthur Andersen and Andersen Consulting had an office in Lagos, Nigeria, our country of birth. I also confirmed that this company would be on campus at Texas A&M in the Fall of 1980.

During the recruiting season in the Fall of 1980, I met Mr. Randy Tutor, a partner at Andersen Consulting, Houston Office,

for lunch. International students were not permitted to meet visiting companies on campus

due to immigration restrictions. My proposal to Arthur Andersen was simple – allow me to intern with you here in America, and I will be prepared to serve your office in Lagos, Nigeria.

“When would you be available to get this started?” he asked.

“January, next year,” I replied. “That would be January of 1981.”

“You have a family, don’t you? What about them?”

I explained that the family situation was flexible. My family could stay back at College Station temporarily and join me as soon as I had made the proper arrangements in Houston. That was it. The deal was done. Mr. Tutor took all my information and said I would hear from his company in due course.

When I came home and shared the information with Valerie, she was ecstatic. She said there would be no need to separate the family; we could all leave for Houston at the same time. Houston was not new to us. We had visited Houston several times in the past to see friends and purchase African food from ethnic grocery stores. Nneka, who was four at the time, picked up on the breaking news and joined the conversation –

“Daddy, mummy, when are we going to Houston? I want to go to Houston.”

“Yes, you will go to Houston, I promise,” I replied.

“Can my friends come too?” Nneka continued.

“We will have to get their parent’s permission first, won’t we?” I replied.

The prospects of interning with Arthur Andersen at their Houston office beginning in January 1981 defined a much-needed new direction for the family. It was now time to test my new unproven computer industry profession. Those facts aside, the prospect of interning with Arthur Andersen was huge by itself. Imagine little me, a coal miner’s son, from the remote town of Umuavulu-Abor; one letter away from walking the halls of one of the top 8 accounting firms in the United States in the eighties! The top 8 accounting firms at this time were:

Arthur Andersen (Parent company of Andersen Consulting),

Coopers and Lybrand,

Deloitte Haskins and Sells,

Ernst and Whinney,

Peat Marwick Mitchell,

Price Waterhouse,

Touche Ross,

and Arthur Young.

I felt some relief as well as anxiety for our new plans to become real. The family was ready to begin a new and critical phase of our lives after almost six years of academic work and five degrees between us. We were ready to monetize all our academic accomplishments. There is a fable in Igbo land featuring a tortoise, as many Igbo fables do. According to this fable, a tortoise had been held in captivity for years near a fetid sewage plant. When the animal kingdom was finally satisfied that the tortoise had suffered enough and learned its lessons, rumors spread quickly in the animal communities that the tortoise would be released within the next twenty-four hours. When the rumors reached the tortoise, it was livid, and began shouting –

“Please, hurry and get me out of this stinking place, I can’t take it anymore.”

For nearly five years, my family and I had been enduring a subsistent student lifestyle. Now that relief was in sight, we could not wait to leave College Station. Nonetheless, the family endured the rest of the Fall semester in 1980. I even worked harder for my students to pass their final computer laboratory assignments with flying colors, to earn me the best reviews on my way out of academia. To complete my academic work, after December 1980, I would have four credits remaining to earn my MBA in Computing Science. Those hours would be earned by producing a dissertation on my internship experience with Arthur Andersen.

Moving from Bloomington, Indiana to College Station, Texas, was a progression. Moving from College Station to Houston was a quantum leap on different levels—the population, facilities, culture, logistics, opportunities, healthcare, etc. There were no gentler ways to ease into this new level; it was a necessity to move the family forward into the professional phase from the academic phase. There was no going back. We loved academia and had two great opportunities to remain in it by enrolling in a PhD program. But to thrive in academia with its publishing requirements seemed daunting, not to mention the politics needed to survive in it. The internship also appeared to be a gentler transition than the demands placed on regular employees in a big city such as Houston. Houston was the fourth largest city in the United States as of this writing.



Trice, Kristie D. (husband, Roy)
 Joined the Firm in: January, 1981
 Consulting Division
 Born: Richmond, VA
 Education: Westchester HS, Houston, TX
 BA, Texas A&M University, 1979



Trussel, M. Elizabeth "Lisa"
 Joined the Firm in: September, 1980
 Consulting Division
 Born: Houston, TX
 Education: HSPVA, Houston, TX
 BBA, Texas A&M, 1979
 MBA, Texas A&M, 1980



Tutor, Jr., Jesse B. (wife, Betty)
 Joined the Firm in: June, 1968
 Consulting Partner
 Born: Oxford, MS
 Education: Meridan HS, Meridan, MS
 BBA, University of Mississippi, 1968



Tynan, Thomas G.
 Joined the Firm in: September, 1981
 Consulting Division
 Born: Bryn Mawr, PA
 Education: Cheltenham, Wyncote, PA
 BS, University of Delaware, 1981



Ukwu, Charlie O. (wife, Vicky)
 Joined the Firm in: January, 1981
 Consulting Division
 Born: Enugu, Nigeria, Anambra State
 Education: Government College, Umuahia, Nigeria
 BA, Indiana University, 1977
 MA, Indiana University, 1979
 MBA, Texas A&M University, 1981



Vandewater, Steven P. "VH20" (wife, Laurie)
 Joined the Firm in: May, 1980
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 Born: Toronto, Ontario, Canada
 Education: Trinity College HS, Port Hope, Ontario, Canada
 BS, Queen's University, 1978
 MBA, Queen's University, 1980



Vest, David L.
 Joined the Firm in: January, 1982
 Consulting Division
 Born: Bluefield, WVA
 Education: Wheelersburgh HS, Wheelersburgh, OH
 BA, Ohio University, 1979
 MBA, Ohio University, 1981



Vick, Michael M. "Mike" (wife, Gretchen)
 Joined the Firm in: October, 1975
 Consulting Division
 Born: Orlando, FL
 Education: Strake-Jesuit HS, Houston, TX
 BS, University of Texas, 1974
 MBA, University of Texas, 1975



Vrba, James, R. "Jim"
 Joined the Firm in: January, 1982
 Consulting Division
 Born: Vienna, Austria
 Education: T. Roosevelt HS, San Antonio, TX
 BS, Texas A&M University, 1977
 MBA, Texas A&M University, 1981



Vrotsos, Evelyn A. "Ann"
 Joined the Firm in: February, 1981
 Consulting Division
 Born: Fort Worth, TX
 Education: Southwest HS, Ft. Worth, TX
 BA, University of Texas, 1978
 MBA, University of Texas, 1981



Vyvial, Lisa J.
 Joined the Firm in: August, 1982
 Consulting Division
 Born: Texas City, TX
 Education: Selwyn HS, Denton, TX
 AA, College of the Mainland, 1977
 BA, University of Texas, 1979
 MBA, University of Texas, 1982



Wahtera, Edward H. "Ed" (wife, Patty)
 Joined the Firm in: July, 1962
 Consulting Partner
 Born: St. Clair, MI
 Education: John D. Pierce, Marquette, MI
 BS, University of Michigan, 1961
 MBA, University of Michigan, 1962



Walker, Vaughan R. (wife, Carol)
 Joined the Firm in: January, 1977
 Consulting Manager
 Born: San Angelo, TX
 Education: Bangs HS, Bangs, TX
 BS, Tarleton State University, 1975
 MS, Texas A&M University, 1976



Walls, Stephen C. "Steve" (wife, Susan)
 Joined the Firm in: June, 1974
 Consulting Manager
 Born: Pampa, TX
 Education: Pampa HS, Pampa, TX
 BS, University of Texas, 1972
 MBA, University of Texas, 1974

Charlie O in the Staff Directory of Arthur Andersen Houston Office

* * *

At work, I was treated much like a student in training, although I was expected to perform at the same or better level as full-time employees hired at the same time. I attended a boot-camp-style three-week training at Saint Charles, Illinois, near Chicago, with twenty-four other fresh recruits from various offices of the company. Talk of a baptism of fire. I was reminded of my two-year boot-camp experience at my mentor's house in Umuhualli, near Nkalagu. The experience helped me to hang on.

The boot-camp class used Assembler Language to design a payroll process. It was so intense that about twenty-five percent of the attendees abandoned the training before completion. Assembler Language is a symbolic programming language that is closest to machine language and specific to a given computer equipment. I was better prepared than other students because of my prior exposure to Assembler Language at Texas A&M University.

Valerie was patient to allow me to settle into my new Arthur Andersen assignment before casting her net in search of work. Consistent with what happened at College Station, although not planned, our third child, Adaora, arrived nine months after we moved to Houston. She was born at Memorial Hermann Southwest Hospital, 7600 Beechnut Street, Houston, Texas. This new bundle of joy was received with equanimity despite the added responsibility and financial pressures.

We were still relatively young and rose to the occasion with practical steps. We used babysitting services for the first time so that Valerie could return to work, although the financial benefits were marginal. She too had a profession to maintain, especially after her stellar performance at Indiana. Accounting jobs were abundant. What was challenging was the logistics of getting to work in a traffic-challenged city such as Houston in the early eighties. I, too, had major challenges traveling to and from work, sometimes spending over ninety minutes in traffic. Subliminally, we both must have experienced a bit of buyer's remorse. Not about the decision to leave the college campus, but the challenges that came with it.

* * *

At work, I had been on at least half a dozen projects assisting with the development and installation of accounting and other oil and gas software; sometimes on my own. Business was good in the Oil and Gas industry. Riding the wave that began with the Arab oil embargo of 1973 and continuing with the Iranian Revolution of 1979, business could not be better. The crest of that wave was reached in the first quarter of 1982 when oil prices started to go south. While it took time to trickle down to the information technology consulting business, it eventually did. When it did, many Arthur Andersen consultants were unassigned, and *sitting on the bench* during the later part of the year. 'Sitting on the bench' in the consulting business, at that time, meant that a consultant was stuck in the home office without a client assignment that brought in new revenue.

I had already completed my internship by the end of 1981, earning good billing rates for Arthur Andersen, and getting compensated accordingly. For the first time, our family budget was robust on my income alone, allowing us the flexibility to think "out of the box". That is how Valerie decided it was a good time to visit Nigeria. A visit to Nigeria at this time could

accomplish. the following: grandparents meet the children for the first time; Valerie performs the National Youth Service, required of every Nigerian university graduate; and finally, Valerie takes an overdue break since the fall of 1975.

The plan came to pass.

Valerie and the two youngest, Ebele and Adaora, left Houston for Lagos, Nigeria in May of 1982. Nneka and I stayed behind to complete the school year.

The English Adventure

With projects slowing down to trickles at the Arthur Andersen Houston office, it did not come as a surprise that some partners began to contemplate how best to put me back to work again. The partners suggested I consider a transfer to the London Office of Arthur Andersen where there were several projects in progress in finance, banking, and insurance. Although I had not worked in those sectors before, the London Office needed people and were willing to train. The transfer would be a good precursor for moving to the Lagos Office as originally planned. My family would also have an option to join me in London if we wanted.

The offer sounded great, although the family strategy was to evaluate each new move based on the impact on the entire family. After consulting with Valerie who was now in Nigeria and our six-year-old, Nneka, everyone was in support of the move to London, England. The move would be good exposure and a growth opportunity for every member of the family, they thought. To be in London was tantamount to living out my age-old fantasies. In fashion, music, broadcasting, and more.

To implement the plan, Nneka and I departed from Houston to Nigeria in March 1983, happily reuniting with the rest of the family a little less than twenty-four hours later. We found a mother and two children in reasonably good health. They were darker and had acquired a few bumps on their skin from mosquito bites. This was Nneka's first trip to Nigeria and she was inquisitive about everything. Most importantly she was exhilarated to be with her siblings after nearly one year of separation.

Unfortunately, the excitement was not reciprocated by the two younger children, Ebele and Adaora, both under three years of age. They did not recognize Nneka and me, and it took a few days for them to warm up to us. Nneka was equally anxious to meet her grandparents for the first time. But, unknown to her, the grandparents lived over five hundred kilometers away in Enugu in the eastern part of Nigeria.



This is Mrs. Mary Ukwu and her granddaughter, Adora. She lived to have this experience

I had only one week with the family between my arrival in Lagos and my departure to London. That was not sufficient time to satisfy Nneka's yearning for grandparents while I was still in town; it was now left for Valerie to fulfill that desire. Like a soldier under deployment, I left for London promptly at the end of the week, after another heartbreaking separation. The good news was that travelling from Lagos to London takes less than half the time it took to travel from Houston, Texas to Lagos, Nigeria. I was grateful for that.

In the sixties, trips to London for summer holidays or studies were relished as one of the most unique and fascinating experiences for a Nigerian. At that time, only a privileged few were financially capable of such grandeur, perhaps less than one-half percent of eighty million people³⁷. In fact, going to London had been so exclusive and so desirable for so long that the first president of Nigeria, the equivalent of Abraham Lincoln, was rumored to have stowed away in a boat bound for London, four decades earlier²⁷. While visits

to London may no longer be that special and exclusive to many, they still are for a coal miner's son like me. It is no wonder that I was willing to leave my family again to fulfill this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. London, here we come, I said to myself with some excitement.

It was nearly sunset at Heathrow Airport when British Caledonian Airways Flight 1949 touched down. A vibrant golden sun with fiery edges had descended across the horizon, nearly half gone, and ready to reveal it was still early spring in England. I was about to set foot on British soil for the first time. This was the same London that I heard talked about, written, and read about. This was the same London that was the capital of the British Empire, that hosted the Beatles, The Rolling Stones, the Hollies, and much more. This was London, the headquarters of the BBC World Service that guided my broadcasting career and that of many colleagues at NBC. It was London that tolerated King Henry VIII who married six wives (YouTube, 2022). It was also the same London, possibly the first-ever melting pot of cultures, well ahead of New York.

I deplaned and sought directions for the train to take me into London. My arrival instructions stipulated that a property agent, Mr. Badmus, would meet me just outside the West Ealing W5 train station. I had about two hours to get there. Direct train services operated between Heathrow Terminals 2 & 3 and Ealing Broadway; I caught the second to the last train for the day. The train ride from Heathrow took twenty minutes to arrive at Ealing, way ahead of my

expected rendezvous with Mr. Badmus. I used the time to take a deep breath, inhaling the musty London air, and reflecting on the past eight hours or thereabouts.

What was I doing here?

I left my family again in Nigeria following such a brief reunion after departing the United States. It would be June 1983 before I see them again. All these logistical maneuvers were triggered in response to a downturn in the Houston Oil and Gas practice market where I spent the last 27 months studying and practicing as a management consultant. Rather than sit on the bench with other colleagues at the Houston office of Arthur Andersen, I accepted an offer to transfer to the London office where there was abundant work in the banking, finance, and insurance departments. Here I was ready to put that plan into action. My thoughts snapped back to the moment when I saw a balding and aging man carrying a piece of cardboard with my last name on it. Ukwu. I waved to get his attention.

“Here!” I yelled out.

“Mr. Charles?” he asked.

“Yes, ‘Charlie’, that’s the one,” I replied. I made sure to correct Mr. Badmus because I never liked being addressed as “Charles.” It was always “Charlie”—even on my diplomas and certificates.

The preference for “Charlie” is because I was born a coal miner’s son and will always be. “Charles” is reserved for princes and kings at Buckingham Palace. Part of my story and philosophy of life is to be grounded and comfortable with who I am and take pride in it. That philosophy fuels this story, *Young Man In A Hurry*. It is suggested that no matter who you are, or where you come from, you have a natural capacity (God-given) to go places and do things your own way, and do them well, if you are hungry enough.

As Mr. Badmus approached, I stretched out my hands and gave him a firm handshake.

“I am John Badmus, and I’m here to guide you to your flat and deliver the keys at the end of the tour”.

“Thank you, thank you for coming to assist me,” I replied.

John and I got into his car to take a tour of #2 Thorn Tree Court on Park View Road, Ealing W5. The furnished flat was located on the second floor of a modest red brick building sitting close to the crest of a slow-rising hill on Park View Road. It had two bedrooms and a spacious family room. The family space morphed into a dining area and ended with a door leading into an oblong-shaped rectangular kitchen. The view from a French window that captures most of downtown Ealing, including shops, rooftops, tree tops, and the train station easily became my favorite spot of the flat. I predicted that this feature would attract more traffic to the kitchen and inspire many great dishes. As soon as John left the flat, I showered and was in bed within thirty minutes in anticipation of a busy day ahead when I would visit the Andersen office for the first time.

* * *

The morning rush hour train ride from West Ealing to London was not as complicated as originally thought. Despite the large number of people moving in and out of the train at each stop, the process was remarkably smooth and effective. Even a novice rider like me arrived at the office in less than thirty-five minutes although I purchased my tickets ahead of time.

The Arthur Andersen office at 2 Arundel Street, near Bush House, Strand met the modest image of a host of other London establishments. The external walls were of neutral solid brick. The only noticeable characteristic the walls had were vertical and horizontal lines that marked where the mason glued each piece of brick with one another at construction time. The walls had a simple, unassuming look to them, yet they exuded strength and robustness characteristic of new, or well-maintained buildings. There was no company name sign or logo. One had to know exactly where they were going to find the place. Luckily for me, my travel instructions indicated someone would be waiting outside.

I think I already saw him.

“Is this 2 Arundel Street?” I asked.

“Yes, how can I help you?”

“I am here to see Mr. Reynolds, a partner in the Banking and Finance group,” I replied.

“Ok. Are you Charlie from the Houston Office?”

“Yes, indeed,” I said. “Is Mr. Reynolds in the office?”

“Of course, he is. By the way, my name is Jack. Hope you had a good trip?”

Inside, 2 Arundel Street had only two levels with a basement. Consulting company offices tended to be identical; when you have seen one, you have seen them all. Huge filing cabinets were always essential for filing client work papers before they were archived. The concept of the paperless office was slow to become a reality here. Managers and partners were often recognized for their accomplishments by reserving and assigning corner offices to them. The magnificent, spacious partner and manager offices, with their giant and solid wooden oak doors, stood as military guards over the less distinguished consulting staff cubicles and administrative staff offices. The arrangement appeared to promote hard work and steadfastness. The executive offices also stood out as future carrots or rewards that awaited bright staff people who distinguished themselves as managers or partner “material.” The unspoken message appeared to be, “You work hard, and you would occupy one of these.”

* * *

Although Mr. Reynolds was in the office, he was in a meeting. The program he had prepared for my entire week was handed to me to review as I waited. On the first day alone, I was scheduled to meet with different staff and managers on different topics, including a complete tour of the office right after lunch. Several of the meetings included readings and project presentations on ongoing banking projects. I was also introduced to several internal projects.

The internal projects were highly recommended for a good understanding of how the management consulting business worked in England. Indeed, my first three months in London were spent assisting with internal management control systems used to manage billable and non-billable time for all the consultants in the London office.

Internal projects were relatively low-pressure assignments that fortuitously coincided with the arrival of my family from Lagos Nigeria. The job allowed me time off to welcome the family to London and to introduce them to the London transit system. In the process, I also took the family to key places that they needed to know for a smooth transition to Ealing, England, especially while I was gone.

After those initial three months during which I worked on internal projects, “being gone” became the most significant drawback of coming to London. It seemed ironic that tourists spend significant amounts of money just to visit interesting places in London. Yet a Londoner like me could not get time off from work to enjoy those same pleasures.

For the next 21 months, I was engaged in a string of projects in banking, finance, and insurance including Midland Bank International (London), AMRO Bank (London), Willis Faber & Dumas Insurance (Ipswich), and PK Christiania Bank – City (London.) For the Ipswich project that lasted several months, I was gone all week and came home to the family only on weekends. At one point during the Ipswich project when I could not come home during the weekends, I invited the family to visit where I worked.

Ipswich (Carlíkraite, 2023) is a North Sea port town and district, the administrative and historic county of Suffolk, England about 132 kilometers or one and half hours northeast of London. We used the same opportunity to travel southeast to the British port and seaside resort of Felixstowe (Encyclopaedia, 2024,) about twenty kilometers or half an hour from Ipswich. The trips were the most fun the family had together during our London residency.

* * *

While I was busy doing different projects at Arthur Andersen, Valerie did not have a dull moment as usual. She used the first three months of her time in London to recover from her stint in Nigeria completing her National Youth Service. By the end of 1983, she had hired a babysitter for the two youngest children to allow her to get out of the house to work. She did not have to look too far. The Human Resources department at Arthur Andersen gave her a project that kept her busy until we left London in April of 1985. Although I was aware Valerie was not challenged professionally in her favorite field of accounting, she never complained. Besides, being a mother of three, a wife, and working eight hours at the office five days a week, did not leave room to do more.

At the second anniversary of our move to London, the Lagos office of Andersen Consulting came calling. It was finally time for me to fulfill my side of the bargain to work for the Lagos office, the Office said. Earlier in this story, as a graduate student at Texas A&M University, I made a deal. At an interview with Arthur Andersen, I had promised to work for the Lagos Office in exchange for an internship and training in the United States. The promise made

nearly five years ago was now mature and ready to be fulfilled. The situation again brings to mind the saying from Aesop's Fables:⁶

"Be careful what you wish for, lest it comes true."⁶

The family was clearly in a quandary on what was the right thing to do. We consulted our true and tested family decision-making model and guidelines: What course of action best served the interest of the family as a unit at this time? This was the question of the day.

It was no longer appropriate to continue to chase after 'Computer Science' and management information systems as I had done over the last five years. Nor did it make sense at this time for Valerie to go after her Accounting profession. Hence, we decided that the education of our children was now of paramount importance. While living in Lagos for her National Youth Service, Valerie completed an exhaustive analysis of what it would take in resources and finances for the family to live successfully in Nigeria. She had concluded that between her family and mine, we did not have a family support system to rely on. We would be on our own raising three children and pursuing two challenging careers in Accounting and Computer Science, in a logistically challenged city like Lagos, Nigeria. Rather than have an extended family support system to rely on, we would likely be overwhelmed with demands for help from extended family. Faced with these complex choices, the resolution was surprisingly simple.

Given that Valerie and I had both pursued our careers to reasonable levels, it was now time to turn our attention to the children. The real substantive question was: what location would serve the children's future best? It was definitely not Lagos, based on Valerie's prior analysis. Not London, because neither the children nor we had the immigration status to live permanently in London. We were visiting professionals in London. Period. That left the United States as the only choice for the children.

* * *

Meanwhile, I had an obligation to fulfill my verbal agreement to serve Andersen Consulting in Lagos. The family knew and accepted that complying with the Lagos agreement and implementing the best choice for the children, at the same time, would most likely result in another family separation, although the timing and period of separation were unclear. Yet on May 18, 1985, the Charlie O Ukwu family departed London for Dallas, Texas. The children, with their newly acquired crisp British accents, were surprisingly very thrilled to be returning to the United States. I can still hear their excited and happy voices singing in unison

-

"...I wanna know what love is, I want you to show me...".

This Foreigner song had just been released in February 1985. As the children sang to us, they seemed to be pleading and urging us not to be afraid to show love by our actions and by taking them to a place that could give them the maximum opportunity to succeed, or so we thought.

* * *

The Ukwu family arrived in Dallas and moved into a townhouse on Coit Road close to the junction of Lyndon B Johnson Freeway (635) and North Central Expressway (75). This was a transition home for three months. Our first permanent home at 2422 Neal Drive in Garland, Texas 75040 was purchased subsequently. The children were nine, five, and four and the 1984/85 school year had ended. In the new school year, they enrolled in fourth grade, kindergarten, and daycare respectively. With the children in school and daycare, Valerie took a job with Atlantic Richfield Oil Company, ARCO. She finally had the opportunity to work at a professional level commensurate with her qualifications. I too began to visit the Dallas office of Arthur Andersen to study a new personal computer software, M³S. M³S stands for Manufacturing Maintenance Management System. The plan was for me to take the system to Lagos, Nigeria for installation and training at key oil company client locations such as Shell and Mobil.

Returning to Lagos all alone

It was now the first quarter of 1986. I left the family in Dallas to start work at the Lagos Office of Arthur Andersen at Victoria Island, Lagos, Nigeria. On arrival, the company under the management of Mr. Richard Ramker, originally from Kansas City, Missouri, welcomed me graciously. I was even allowed to share expatriate quarters in Victoria Island making my commute much easier and much less stressful.

At work, I conducted a few preliminary systems design (PSD) projects and also led a team of young consultants to develop personal-computer-based software for merchant banks using dBase II.

Although I was now in my country of birth, working in Lagos was stressful. I was overwhelmed by the predominance of staff from a particular Nigerian ethnicity. This was to be expected in Lagos. I was challenged by the new business climate and culture too. All my professional experience so far has been abroad.

I had to quickly assimilate the new culture to effectively market the services that Arthur Andersen Consulting services offered. Exacerbating the impact of these issues was the separation from the family. Telecommunication services were poor and unreliable. There were no cell phones. It was impossible to communicate well with the family on any regular basis. It was annoying to hear voices, but not understand what was said to each other because of poor network connectivity.

I was prepared to quit within six months of arrival. What put the final nail in the coffin of the Lagos adventure were conversations leading to my first anniversary at the Lagos Office. The proposal offered to me was to rehire me into the Lagos Office as a new local recruit. All of my prevailing salary and benefit conditions were to revert to the local Nigerian policies of the company at the end of my first year. My previous salary conditions outside Nigeria would be gone. Null and void!

In essence, the new conditions would have resulted in a 67 percent pay cut. This was an instant deal-breaker for the Ukwu family. The following disappointing conversation ensued in my attempt to negotiate the matter with the senior partner responsible for the Lagos office.

“Sir, I am here to discuss the impending changes to my employment conditions with Andersen,” I began.

“Hello, Charlie! Please have a seat, welcome to my office,” Mr. Ramker replied. “What is it you would like to know?”

“I was just wondering why I am getting a big pay cut, instead of a raise for all my hard work,” I explained.

The salary change was necessary to avoid demoralizing the local staff, he explained. To make the transition work, he had expected me to save up my per diems from working in England.

This was a more shocking revelation to me. I reminded Mr. Ramker that I had a family of four to support and that the per diems were spent as they were earned, leaving us with no savings. The explanation appeared to fall on deaf ears and made no difference to Mr. Ramker's position.

I left the office demoralized. The same feeling that he didn't want the local staff to experience. "What about me?" I asked silently to myself, as I left Mr. Ramker's office.

It was a deliberate business decision to demoralize one person than an entire office. I get it. All my dreams of teaching and transferring my technical knowledge to younger Nigerians working under Me vanished. On another level, I was shocked that the organization would walk away from a five-year relationship just like that. But the discussion was over; the die was cast. It was now time to apply the Ukwu family rule or UFR: "Follow the choice that is most beneficial to the family."

Staying back in Lagos would not have earned enough to support myself in Nigeria, let alone support my children in schools in the United States. There would also be nearby immediate family members to think about. All these considerations pointed to one conclusion: Return to the United States and pick up the pieces of my computer technology and management consulting career.

Returning to America

I returned to Dallas, Texas in the last quarter of 1986 to lick my wounds. But the children were happy to have their father back; so was I. Valerie was still working with ARCO and did her best to support the family while I was gone. Unfortunately, she developed discord with a boss who insisted on giving other favored staff credit for Valerie's work. That meant I had to find work quickly just in case she decided to quit ARCO. Instead of regular employment, I produced business cards under the assumed name of "Chazz Information & Financial" and began soliciting for contract work. "Chazz" was a nickname I earned at one of the early oil and gas gigs I did in Houston with a French company called Elf Aquitaine. The inventor of the name was a young consultant named Peter Beaman who taught me a lot.

Surprisingly, I became busy performing part-time work alongside other Andersen consultants on Andersen projects in Dallas. I also became partners with an accountant, Mr. Jeffrey Southworthy, handling all his Peachtree Accounting software installations. Within months, I was temporarily awash with cash that needed to be invested. I did not yet have experience investing in the stock market at the time. Instead of going to professional investors to invest the cash, I turned to young Nigerian businesses who were unable to secure business loans from commercial banks. The business model turned out not to be sustainable because borrowers did not always pay on time or pay off their loans. Offering such a service to fellow Nigerians was fulfilling but I had to cut my losses.

Chazz Information and Financial conducted business during all of 1987 and seemed to have done well. It was now necessary to prepare a formal plan to have better control of the business at least for the first quarter of 1988. To support a family of four, the business needed to generate more revenue, steadier income, and allow for modest savings for retirement. To accomplish these objectives would require selling more contract work and hiring at least two other consultants or computer professionals to assist. As I worked on the plan for Chazz Information and Financial, I received a random call from Carolina Power & Light, a utility company based in Raleigh, North Carolina. The company was hiring former Arthur Andersen Consulting employees to assist with implementing an Arthur Andersen system methodology called Method-1. I had worked with the Method-1 process for over five years and knew the product well. After I hung up the call, I wondered quietly,

I thought, "If Carolina Power & Light made me an offer, would my three objectives just discussed above be met?" More income, steadier income, and retirement savings. Health Insurance would also be included.

In Igboland of Nigeria there is a saying.-

"Ife ana acho n'uko enu, ada-a n'uko ani," meaning "What was sought from the highest kitchen cabinet that required a ladder, was now accessible on the ground level".

* * *

I could not wait to share my story with Valerie.

“Hello honey, welcome back!” I screamed once I heard Valerie turn the key to the front door at 2422 Neal Dr. in Garland. Without waiting for her to respond, I continued. “Honey, how would you like to move to North Carolina?”

With a puzzled look, she countered, “What do you mean move to North Carolina? Why? How? Isn’t this the home of Jesse Helms? Are you OK?”

Jesse Alexander Helms (JMC89 bot III, 2023) was an ultra-conservative Republican politician who represented the state of North Carolina in the US Senate from 1973 to 2003.

I followed Valerie to the family room, sat by her with my right arm across her shoulders, and narrated my story. She looked at me with her mouth wide open all through my account without saying a word.

When she finally recovered from her trance, she said, “But you don’t have an offer letter, yet, or do you?”

“I expect to get one soon, based on the conversation I had with the company,” I replied.

“Ok. Let us decide what to do once you have an offer letter,” she uttered matter-of-factly, and with no emotion.

She rose to go to the kitchen to get some dinner.

I was disappointed that Valerie didn’t show or have as much excitement as I had. Besides, I was getting tired of these big cities.

Houston, London, Lagos, Dallas...

These didn’t seem to be the right places for our young family. Besides, it was now time to make the children a priority.

In Search of a Stable Family Home

Valerie's unenthusiastic reaction to the news about a possible move to North Carolina did not come as a surprise. It weighed on me. She had been consumed with what was going on at the office since my return from Lagos. Valerie was locked in a bitter fight with her boss at ARCO. I suggested she consider changing jobs to avoid the stressful fight. Valerie felt that she would be rewarding bad behavior by leaving her job. The situation at Valerie's job was growing to become too stressful for the family to bear. That was the subject of conversation at the dinner table and indeed anytime we were together. Something needed to change.

About two weeks after my original conversation with Carolina Power & Light, I got another call from the Manager of the company's Development Center. An offer letter of employment was on its way. I thanked him and promised to respond as soon as I received the letter. As my optimism grew on a North Carolina offer, affirmed by the latest phone call, it was again time to invoke UFR. What choice would serve the entire family best, to remain in Dallas, or accept the potential offer coming from Carolina Power & Light?

For an objective answer, it was necessary to review the family history and growth since leaving Bloomington, Indiana in 1979 with one child barely three years old. Within eighteen months we left College Station, Texas for Houston, Texas with a second child less than a year old. Our oldest child, then four and half years old, enrolled in kindergarten. The third child came along in October 1981, nine months after we arrived in Houston. In May 1982, Valerie went to Nigeria, taking the two youngest children with her.

In March 1983, I left Houston with our oldest child to reunite briefly with Valerie and the rest of the family in Lagos, before I went to London to start work in the same month. In June 1983, Valerie and all three children joined me in London after Valerie completed her National Youth Service in Lagos. The children were placed in the appropriate schools for the two years that we lived in London. After my London assignment, the family returned to the United States and Dallas in May 1985 where the children, again, attempted to pick up their disjointed education history.

I wept when I realized the peripatetic nature of the family's movement over the past six years, only comparable to that of military families. Perhaps worse. The situation called for an immediate correction. It would have been easier to stay put in Dallas, having moved the children so much. But was Dallas the best place to stay? We only came to Dallas because we had the closest extended family there. It was really questionable whether Dallas was the best place to raise the children.

In contrast, analysis showed that the Research Triangle area of North Carolina, (communications@rtp.org, 2023) especially with its confluence of universities, was considered one of the better places to raise children in the United States. I had also just determined that my career needed to get to a new level requiring additional and steadier income; and the ability to start saving for retirement. All of these would be harder to accomplish with my current career path in Dallas. With this information swirling in my head,

I was prepared to push back on any form of objection against one more move, to North Carolina, from Valerie. Considering that her sole reason against leaving ARCO was personal, rather than family reasons, I did not think she had a better case to make.

* * *

In April 1988, a Mayflower truck arrived at 2422 Neal Drive, Garland, Texas to transport Ukwu household items and a car to Raleigh, North Carolina. The family flew to Raleigh to wait for the arrival of the truck. Completing this journey in April was apropos and befitting for the spring season. A period that, even in Mother Nature, is associated with rebirth, renewal, and awakening. Indeed. Considering where our family had been in the last eight years, it was truly time for a new beginning.

On our descent into the 'rural' airport that was called Raleigh-Durham Airport or RDU, we were pleasantly impressed that a place such as this existed in the United States. It was the middle of Spring season and we were greeted by thick regions of deciduous and evergreen pine tree forests like we had never seen in America before. This was such a sharp and stunning contrast to the vegetation we left behind in Dallas, Texas, a little over two hours ago. Interjections of oohs and ahhs from the children assured us, and gave us the confidence that we were finally on the right path again as a family.

"Is this going to be our new home?" asked my oldest child, Nneka.

"Yeah, daddy, are we going to stay here?, followed Ebele.

"What do you think? Should we go back to Dallas? I asked them.

"W-e-l-l, I am not really sure. I am going to miss my new friends in Dallas," Nneka said.

"But you can make new friends here too—if that is the only problem," I responded.

"Oh, ok. I think this place looks better. It is not crowded here, and there are not too many cars," Nneka replied.

"There you go. That was a great observation. Although we haven't seen the town yet," I added.

The family temporarily moved into a townhouse rented by the new employer for six months, or until we could find a permanent home. Our goal was to buy a home as soon as we could to help the children settle quickly. Meanwhile, the immediate priority for the family was to enroll the children in 1988 summer school or summer programs. My starting duties at the utility company were to design Method-1 methodology classes, teach the classes, and support individual project teams in using the methodology on their projects. The job was sufficiently flexible for me to provide the extra support needed by the children to settle into their new schools. I prepared their breakfasts and drove those who needed rides to their schools.

Valerie was always present to assist with homework. Professionally, she worked in accounting in several companies within Raleigh, and later, started an accounting firm of her

own. With a stable family life that allowed increased attention and focus, the children thrived in school over the years. Admissions to reputable schools rolled in, including, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Duke University in Durham, North Carolina and Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. The Ukwu move to North Carolina was producing desired results.

Valerie's Secret

This part of the story is a story that should not be told. It should not be shared because of the privacy requirements of the main character, Valerie, my first wife. I posthumously seek Valerie's permission and forgiveness to share as little as possible and still respect her privacy.

The Ukwu family life in North America and elsewhere were never beds of roses. What we call life and 'living life' necessarily have to have ups and downs to know the difference. As a family we did not have a lot, nor did we inherit anything from anyone. We did the best we could with what we had, always propelled to achieve a better and successful life for ourselves and others through hard work. So should you. Never let others, or expect others to live your life for you through dependency. That is not my definition of living.

* * *

Elsewhere in this memoir I have carefully and deliberately omitted information about Valerie except where it was necessary to move the story forward. This is one of such moments. I must say as little as possible while honoring Valerie's memory and wishes for privacy.

Once we arrived in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1988, Valerie took one or two jobs in accounting within the first two to three years of our nearly thirteen years in North Carolina. She subsequently decided to launch her own accounting firm, Valerie I Ukwu, CPA, PLLC with offices at 8521 Six Forks Road, Suite 106, Raleigh, North Carolina 27615. Valerie put her heart and soul into this company and quickly elevated her profile and involvement in the local accounting community. She served in several capacities on the executive board of the North Carolina Association of CPAs or NCACPA.

Valerie worked tirelessly on the PLLC, although the company was not a financial success. At best, the company was marginally profitable or breaking even. But success is not only measured in dollars and cents. My observation was that Valerie was content and happy with what she accomplished at her plush office space located at The Forum At Six Forks Road. She was so busy being content that she couldn't find enough time to pick a fight with me.

But something was beginning to go wrong. Starting from the early nineties, Valerie was becoming increasingly sick from a degenerative condition that made it difficult to enjoy her work. Being an intensely private person, she did not want this information shared with anyone, including her own family. Our immediate family held this secrecy until the last year of her life between 2001 and 2002 when she became hospitalized. We visited several hospitals in search of a treatment that would contain the illness. A complete cure was out of the question, absent any miraculous heavenly intervention. We traveled to several locations, in search of a place that would best suit her condition, including Laredo, Texas, and Yuma, Arizona. At the end of the search, the only sustainable strategy was to move to a town with close Ukwu family ties. That town was Dallas, Texas, a city that we had left fourteen years earlier.

On arrival, we checked into Extended Stay America, a hotel that provided a small kitchen and the flexibility to stay up to one month and beyond. This arrangement seemed to work well as it offered proximity to all the hospitals and doctor's offices we needed to visit. After a couple of weeks, Valerie seemed to become restless and dissatisfied with the prevailing arrangement. One morning, she summoned me to her bedside and spoke.

"Charlie..." she began, pausing momentarily to breathe and gather her thoughts and strength. "Charlie, I'm getting tired. I do not want to keep moving around anymore. I need a home so that I can rest properly. "

"Are you ready for us to settle down in Dallas, permanently?" I asked.

"Yes, I am", she replied.

With a mix of relief from the traveling and fear of what she meant by "so that I can rest properly". Valerie had been given a mandate to find and buy a house where she could rest better, I concluded.

The conversation took place on a Thursday afternoon. By Friday morning I was calling real estate agents all over town and making appointments. After making a dozen appointments, I embarked on a frenzied weekend. Probably the busiest I ever had. I drove from house to house with real estate agents, seeking the right property for Valerie to get the rest she so badly desired. By late afternoon on Sunday, I signed the contract to purchase 10505 Greenbriar Lane, Rowlett, Texas 75089. I checked us out of Extended Stay America by Monday morning around 11 a.m. and moved Valerie into the new house.

This accomplishment, to me, ranks as the single most significant act of love in our twenty-six years of marriage because of the circumstances surrounding the request. Moving into that house, when we did, was tantamount to fulfilling Valerie's dying wish. Valerie rested at the Greenbriar house, as she wanted, for about twenty-one days before relapsing into a heart failure from which she never recovered. The date was September 23, 2002. May her beautiful soul rest in peace.

Having come this far in this story, I worry that I have already disclosed more than Valerie would have wanted the world to know. For that, I must apologize to her. Yet there is still a little more to tell to conclude the story properly.

* * *

This portion of the story is not about Valerie but about Valerie's family's actions following her subsequent demise. In Igbo land, there is a tradition that requires that the remains of a female spouse visit her father's home before it can be interred at the husband's family home. There's also, unfortunately, another culture of finger-pointing against and blaming the living spouse as the cause of the partner's death. Those two cultures climaxed and placed me squarely at the scene of the crime. It was as if the people of Ozalla in Ezeagu Local Government Area, near Enugu, Nigeria, Valerie's hometown, literally caught me in the act of murdering their daughter with the murder weapon and fresh blood on my hands.

Shortly after the casket arrived at Valerie's father's compound at Ozalla, a crowd of mourners that had been gathering slowly in anticipation of our arrival reached a critical mass. People wailed and screamed. It came time to open the casket for a brief viewing and the crying and wailing became even louder, quickly reaching a crescendo. That was when I was surrounded by a crowd of people I did not recognize, yelling curses at me to my face, stopping short of spitting on my face, and saying--

"Ajo nwoke ka ibu!"

"Kwue ife imelu ada anyi nwanyi"

"Okwa gi gbulu ada anyi?"

"Iga aghulili iyi na oburo gi gbulu ya"

"Ama enyinata Valerie belu so na ighulu iyi"

"Hei e-w-o-o-o-o. Imelu alu "

"Tufiakwa, oma adikwalu gi mma".

Translated into English, the people of Ozalla were saying—

"What an evil man you are!"

"You must explain to us what you did to our daughter!"

"Didn't you kill her?"

"You must swear that you did not kill her"

"Valerie must not be buried until you confess and swear you didn't do it "

"Hei, what a shame!. You are evil"

"God forbid, it will never be well with you".

I lack adequate words to explain my feelings as this ordeal went on. I recall my entire body frozen numb as if I momentarily lost the ability to feel anything. It felt as if that part of me responsible for transmitting sensations abandoned my physical body allowing it to take the abuse. It was as if I was sedated, under the influence of anesthesia or propofol. I also recall thinking this must be the way Jesus Christ felt at Calvary when he was nailed to the cross and assaulted.

Valerie's mother, who was present as we traveled from hospital to hospital, during Valerie's last weeks and months, stood by and did not utter a single word. Valerie's brothers who knew as much as Valerie was willing to share with them also stood by and watched the humiliation.

This nightmare went on for what seemed like an eternity until I felt someone grab my right arm and quickly lead me out of the scene. We entered an idling car several kilometers away, and I was promptly whisked out of the location. It took more than a moment to regain my full consciousness.

Valerie apparently foresaw this unfortunate event. At the last hospital we visited in Dallas, Texas, she had assembled several of her relatives who had come to visit. Her words were prophetic, saying –

“I love this man, please treat him kindly, no matter what happens to me.”

These dying wishes were denied.

Students of humanities and human experience would find good fodder for lessons learned in the Valerie story in *Young Man In A Hurry*.

My lessons were already acknowledged many years ago. Then and now, it is recognized that our relationship in the United States could have been managed differently. It seemed that Valerie and I were consumed and overwhelmed with the enormity of the responsibility immediately ahead of us. We became too practical and pragmatic for our own good. We totally ignored our parent’s cautionary uncooperative position on marriage, and perhaps violated social norms in quest of success. Most of our actions in twenty-six years were in pursuit of academic and professional excellence and survival, as we knew it. It became mandatory to prove to our parents that our marital relationship cannot get in the way, or become an impediment to our respective individual futures and successes. It seemed to work; but at what cost? We will never know.

Based on anecdotal evidence, it seems that the abuse meted out to a surviving spouse is a common practice, at least among the Igbos. It would be unfair to condemn the people of Ozalla for my ordeal. They were neither the first to start the practice nor would they be the last to end it. The behavior of a group of persons under an extreme emotional state and frenzy is unpredictable. The event was no different than a mob action. Valerie’s mother who witnessed many of the hospital visits and hospitalization had enough knowledge to calm the storm, but she seemed unwilling or powerless to make that move.

Nevertheless, I forgave my inlaws for everything that was done to me on that day. I had to, because, according to Igbo people, when you hold someone on the ground, you are also holding yourself:

“*Onye ji mmadu na ana, ji onwe ya*”

The children are also constantly encouraged to nurture their relationships with their maternal family.

The final lesson learned: It is indeed true what they say, "What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger".

Transition to ERP Systems

In 1995, Carolina Power & Light, my employer at this time, purchased one of the best-rated human resources management systems (HRMS), PeopleSoft. I was assigned to the implementation project team.

Among a class of software used to manage and operate the enterprise, also known as enterprise resource planning (ERP), this product became a game changer. Working on this product instantly evoked my prior experiences working at Andersen Consulting.

Previously in the 1980s, I implemented oil and gas accounting software in Houston, and banking, finance, and insurance software in London. I yearned to return to this type of work again. To make this desire real, I invested time studying PeopleSoft on my personal time. It felt like I worked two shifts of the same job—from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and from 6 p.m. to midnight. The latter period was spent studying PeopleSoft.

Once I felt comfortable with the software, I created a resume and began interviewing for PeopleSoft positions in 1997. Within two months of learning PeopleSoft, I resigned from Carolina Power & Light and joined Technology Planning & Management Corporation, TPMC, with an office close to the Research Triangle Park. TPMC was small and nimble and offered pathways for an accelerated return to my former industry of software planning, development, and implementation. This time I was prepared to focus exclusively on PeopleSoft. It turned out to be a transformational 26-year investment. PeopleSoft offered me opportunities and a variety of skills that abundantly rewarded the rest of my information technology career. PeopleSoft was a major game changer that I fell into; almost by accident.

Under TPMC, owned by technologist and businessman Hari Nath, I did PeopleSoft projects for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for 18 months before taking a leap of faith to market myself as an independent contractor. I was hired by Pete Fernandez to become a functional lead person on a new PeopleSoft 7.5 installation for Syntel, Inc. in Troy, Michigan.

Syntel, Inc. of Troy, Michigan was a bigger company both in sales and personnel, but like TPMC, was also owned by an Indian, billionaire Bharat Desai. At Syntel, I went center stage with PeopleSoft. I was in the spotlight, perhaps more than ever for the first time with this particular product. I interfaced directly with users to configure all human resource control tables and acquired good working knowledge of PeopleTools and PeopleSoft 7.5.

After the implementation, Syntel subcontracted my services to a General Dynamics PeopleSoft project at Providence, Rhode Island, managed by Computer Science Corporation, CSC. On the project, I worked as a PeopleSoft developer using Structured Query Reporter or SQR and PeopleTools on a multi-faceted project. The project included upgrades, enhancements, and custom development. The gig allowed me to engage in requirements gathering, analysis, design, documentation, programming, and testing in an Oracle database-driven PeopleSoft environment. At the end of the project in December 1999, CSC offered me a position as a PeopleSoft Consultant which I accepted.



*The new Maduka House built to honor Mr. Basil Ukwu
{Powered by PeopleSoft}*

In February 2000, I flew to San Diego, California to start my first project as a CSC full-time employee. The project was designed to analyze a portfolio of eight hundred County of San Diego applications, tools, and utilities. The objective was to determine which of these applications and tools would be included in an Information Technology outsourcing contract with CSC and its partners. I did not realize at the

time that this project was the beginning of a relationship that would last for over twenty years with this single client, the County of San Diego. Between the years 2000 and the end of 2003, I first flew from Raleigh, North Carolina, and subsequently, flew from Dallas, Texas just to go to work in San Diego, California. The skies were a lot friendlier then than now, with frequent flier upgrades that provided frequent travelers like me first-class comfort.

Although I worked for several companies from 2000 to 2023, including CSC, BearingPoint, Attain, Hewlett-Packard, Northrop Grumman, Hewlett-Packard Enterprises, DXC, Perspecta, and Peraton, the two factors, and features that remained constant in my IT career until January 5, 2023, were PeopleSoft software and the County of San Diego. Who would have predicted that a product I studied at my own time in 1996 would retain such staying power that it took me to retirement on January 5, 2023? How did I know I had found the one?

It is notable that after a hostile takeover of PeopleSoft by Larry Ellison, CEO of Oracle Corporation, Mr. Duffield, the owner of PeopleSoft, quietly walked away from PeopleSoft to craft another bestseller ERP software called Workday. I considered leaving PeopleSoft too, but I had already invested too much in PeopleSoft. I also needed to do other things, including telling this story, to encourage young people to learn something from my story and experience.

Thank you, David Duffield, for creating PeopleSoft!

You are probably wondering about my family life after Valerie passed away, and rightly so. In 2002, I was already flying weekly from the East to the West Coast doing ERP work and continued thereafter. Only more intensely. Rather than be paralyzed and bogged down with depression, and asking myself why me, I took my revenge on work. Work was my refuge.

As expected, after the loss and burial, I was emotionally numb, perhaps frozen in place. This emotional state allowed me to channel most of my energies into traveling and transitioning

to ERP while managing the affairs of the children as a new single parent. Or was it the children that managed me? A little bit of both, perhaps.

It was not easy.

This condition persisted for eight years when I received a call from a family friend in 2010. Over the years, before this call, many had been asking what kept me single. But I wasn't single. I was married and in a serious relationship with Information Technology work. I was also enjoying the relationship, making it harder to recognize the passage of time.

The latest call was different. So much time had elapsed, and the pain of the family's loss much less.

I followed up on the call. The call was from a friend, Ms. Efora, who knew me well when I lived in North Carolina. She thought I had been single long enough. Another friend of hers, Ms. Chinenye Akajiaku, whom she'd known for many years, would be a good match for me, she said. Chinenye had also been in a previous marriage but under a different circumstance. Our ages were not too far apart, as I found out later.

Without much delay, Chinenye and I began with a series of phone conversations to get comfortable with one another, and perhaps build a relationship. Our mutual friend, Ms. Efora, further urged me to travel east to North Carolina to introduce myself once I feel ready to do so. In reality, Chinenye and I exchanged visits between the west and east coasts of the United States to reach our comfort zone.

Everything worked exactly as planned. This outcome is not normally the case for many. As I write, my marriage to Chinenye is in its thirteenth year. The children, Nneka, Ebele, Adaora, Nneze, and Chukwudi have successfully grown and left the proverbial nest egg. Each of them has enough learning, education, and training to support them for the rest of their lives. Enough said.

Before Chinenye agreed to marry me, I had a very interesting meeting with her mother. At 81, Mrs. Akajiaku was gutsy and even spunky, some would say. Not knowing what to expect, I was nervous during our meeting. Her request was direct and simple.

"Charlie, Nwa'm, Chinenye is completely responsible for my life and upkeep," she said.

"If the marriage will interfere with what she does for me," she continued. "I don't want any of it."

I promised Mrs. Akajiaku that Chinenye would not skip a beat. The promise still stands.

How I Stayed Alive and Well

Some people considered me a health freak. A health freak is someone that is highly conscious of their health. If this is true, I make no apologies, although I do not recall when and how my health consciousness began. What I have are anecdotal memories of an active lifestyle, rather than a conscious, deliberate effort to focus on my health. Nonetheless, once old age is upon us, very few have the choice not to pay regular and constant attention to their health. I am no exception.

Before I turned eight and while living at my grandparent's home at Akama-Oghe, I broke my left arm at the elbow joint while participating in the high jump, a track and field sport. There was no X-ray service to determine the nature of the injury or an attempt to use Western-style medical procedures to fix the arm properly. Instead, I was taken to an herbalist who attempted to stretch, align the bones, and hold the bones, broken or not, in place with splints. The movement of the left broken arm was controlled by a string of cloth that held the arm in place and strung around my neck. Herbal analgesic oils were also applied for pain relief. The injury earned me a nickname among my playmates at that time and location.

"Aka nko", or the dangling arm, fellow kids used to call me.

Those kids apparently had no consideration for my feelings.

Although the left arm was never corrected, it did not keep me from doing most activities that I needed to do, but the left arm always felt like a weaker arm relative to the right arm. I still feel a little bit of its weakness when I do push-ups today.

* * *

As an avid sports fan, I am interested in most sports except wrestling, boxing, and American football. What isolates those three sports is the propensity for pain and suffering, and the ease of getting injured.

Among my sports of interest, I would rather be playing than watching a sport. Rarely would I be found watching any game for hours and hours as many sports fans tend to do, except maybe, the finals or semifinals of different tournaments, especially tennis.

My record in actual sports participation is scanty. Like most children that I grew up with, I took part in tracks and soccer in primary school, but I was not exceptional in any of them. In High School or Secondary School, I deliberately chose academics instead of sports unless the particular sport was mandated. I had decided to pour all of my energy into academics because I reasoned that academics was more durable than sports, and rightly so. But even with participation only, in mandated sports activities, I managed to pick up a strong interest in running.

Previously in an earlier chapter, I referred to the RUN system and Runbook whereby students ran 1,2,3,4, or 5 miles depending on the severity of their transgression. Even though I was not a repeat offender and a regular guest of the RUN system, the frequency and amount

of my personal and group runs combined were sufficient to make a runner out of me. Soon running became my personal exercise of choice. I ran in Bloomington, Indiana, College Station, Texas, Houston, Texas, London, England and everywhere we lived. Some of my running highlights include San Diego Rock'n Roll Marathon of 2005.

Rock 'n' Roll Marathon: [Information & Comments](#) | [Press Releases](#) | [News](#) |
 Rock 'n' Roll Marathon Results: [2018](#) | [2017](#) | [2016](#) | [2015](#) | [2014](#) | [2013](#) | [2012](#) | [2011](#) | [2010](#) |
[2009](#) | [2008](#) | [2007](#) | [2006](#) | [2005](#) | [2004](#) | [2003](#) | [2002](#) | [2001](#) | [2000](#) |

Search Results - 1 Result(s) Found

Race	Last Name, First Name (Sex/Age)	Time	OverAll Place	Sex Place / Div Place	DIV	Net Time	City, State, Country	AG Time*	BQ*
Rock 'n' Roll Marathon 6/5/05	Ukwu, Charlie (M55)	5:20:26	9741	5558 / 184	M55-59	5:08:47	Santee, CA, USA		

*AG Time = Age-Graded Equivalent Time.
 *BQ = Boston Qualifier (unconfirmed). Note, Boston Marathon qualifying times must be achieved on certified marathon course and are based on the age on the day of the Boston Marathon and not on the date of the marathon run. For these reasons, BQ status may not be properly reflected for all results.

I participated in many 5K and 10K races within a 2 hour drive of Raleigh-Durham in North Carolina. Between the late 1980s and late 1990s, I ran in the following races,

Rock-n-Roll Marathon in 2005 , San Diego, California, ...without training

1. YMCA/Community Hospital, 5K Run, Rocky Mount, NC, 1989
2. First Federal/Nissan, 10-mile Run, Raleigh, NC, 1989
3. YWCA Halloween, 5K Run, Raleigh, NC, 1989-1996

4. The Old Reliable Run, 10K Run, Raleigh, NC, 1989-1997
5. Bow Ties Run For the Roses, 5K Run, Raleigh, NC, 1990
6. Centura Chase of Champions, 10K Run, Rocky Mount, NC, 1990-1995
7. The Great Raleigh Road Race, 10K Run, Raleigh, NC, 1990-1997
8. Hooters Run For the Roses 5K, Raleigh, NC, 1991
9. The Cary Road Race, 10K, Cary, NC, 1992- 1996
10. The Great Civitan Road Race, 10K Run, Research Triangle Park, NC, 1993
11. McPherson 5K Run, Research Triangle Park, NC, 1993
12. Western Wake Medical Challenge, 5K, Cary, NC, 1993
13. The Big Sur Marathon 46th 5K Run near San Simeon, CA, 2006



Marathon attempts...I did not like them

When I visited Nigeria, I ran from Ukwu compound in Umuawulu-Abor to Christ High School Abor—from Ukwu compound in Umuawulu-Arbor to my sister’s marital home at Umulumgbe; from Victoria Island, Ikoyi, Lagos, and across Eko Bridge to a friend’s home in Surulere.

I used to describe my quick morning runs as ‘kicking, or checking the tires’. Going for a three to four-mile run early in the mornings always gave me a good indication of my level of wellness. It didn’t matter that this fallacy made me a hypocrite because I also constantly challenged my wife not to check the severity of a child’s fever by just touching the child’s forehead.

* * *

Over the years, I have tried to compensate for my overindulgence in academics while in secondary school by pursuing other sports activities apart from running. Tennis, table tennis, biking, swimming, and gym memberships were not uncommon at various stages of my life. Perhaps this was a desperate attempt to claim my athleticism.



Taking a break on a bike ride With an E-Bike at American Tobacco Trail

Biking stands out in this list as the leader because I taught myself to ride my dad's bike with the *monkey style* at the age of eight. Back in those days, people didn't ride bicycles for fun; bicycles were, and are still a major means of transportation. Only less so, at the time of this writing. A bicycle was the most advanced means of traveling owned by my father. During the Nigerian civil conflict, my biking skills became a means of livelihood and survival as I traveled over 32 kilometers to Ugwogo, Nike, near Enugu, Nigeria to purchase bags of salt for resale. Trading in salt at this time was called *Afia Attack* or the Attack Market almost akin to Pablo Escobar of Medellin Cartel smuggling drugs across the Americas. Trading in salt during the war was considered illegal because it took the traders across enemy lines and gave a temporary advantage or means of livelihood to one side of the war. But the trade also supplied nourishment to children of war suffering from *kwashiorkor* or iodine deficiency.

Now that I own an electric bike, I have the flexibility to switch between manual, and also to electric when I feel exhausted and unable to pedal vigorously. Now I can truly ride for fun. It has not always been this way.



Tennis Was Fun

May the good Lord protect his gentle soul so that we may play again whenever and wherever we meet again..

But while he was alive, we played many games together, and it didn't matter who won. He would call and ask,

“DiAnyi...we are playing table tennis tonight, right”.

To which I would reply,

“Sure, anytime....”

My former classmate had a harmless but domineering style that I have grown to accept. He didn't usually ask —he often demanded, or ordered that we play! For the love of the game, I didn't mind being ordered to play. I think Table tennis will always be part of my life, until — I'm not really sure.

Tennis, table tennis, and gym memberships much later, have always been part of my life, off and on. Tennis was less ubiquitous than the other two because I could not always find a matching partner and because it had more logistical drawbacks. But I played plenty of tennis, especially at college, and subsequently from the comfort of my living room couch, watching celebrities like Billy Jean King, Arthur Ashe, John McEnroe, Bjorn Borg, Martina Navratilova, Chris Evert, Roger Federer, and of course the Williams sisters, Venus and Serena. Usually during the finals and semifinals.

For table tennis, I personally own a Kettler Champ 5.0 table tennis table made in Germany. It was once shipped across North America, from the state of Michigan to San Diego, California just so that I could play with a former secondary school classmate who is no longer with us, as of this writing.

* * *

...When I could find good partners.



Like table tennis, another sport activity that has become increasingly dominant and indispensable in my life is swimming. It is hard to recall when and how it all began. For sure, I never went swimming in Nigeria before I left the country at twenty-five, because there were no swimming pools near me. Children were not taught to swim, at least in the circles that I grew up. After arriving in the United States, I vaguely remember taking an elective swimming class at Indiana University, and one summer class at North Carolina State University. Regrettably, both classes did little to improve my swimming skills even though I think — I'm not sure—I passed both classes.

What I recall clearly is teaching myself, after age fifty, to swim at three different swimming pools and locations in San Diego, California, including one swimming pool at a group of Townhouses in La Jolla, near UTC in San Diego, a swimming pool at a group of Corporate Offices in Sorrento Valley, off Highway I-805 intersection with I-5

North leading to Los Angeles, and finally a swimming pool at Toby Wells YMCA at Kearny Mesa, San Diego. I visited each of these pools at different times, depending on where I was living in the city of San Diego.

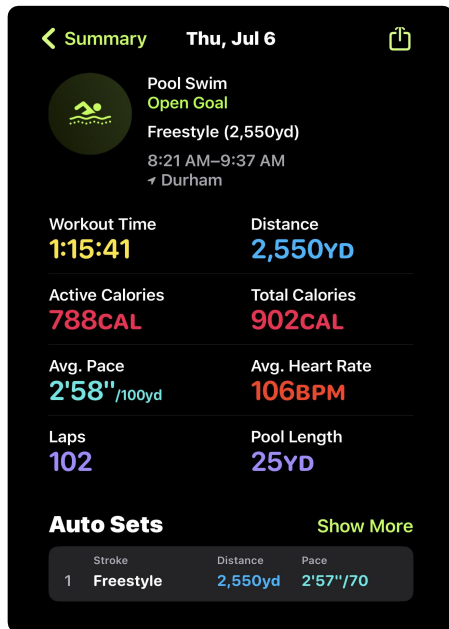
I would typically wake up at 5:30 a.m. and arrive at the pool by 6 a.m. to fight with the water. It would be misleading and absurd to call what I did back then 'swimming'. Most of the time I would be the first person to get into the pool, swim for one hour, and depart for work from there. I gradually improved over time and soon began to finish a full pool length of twenty-five yards. I continued to swim and swim and continued to improve over the years. Every time I planned to visit other places, including vacations, I would make sure there was a swimming pool close by. During one of my rare visits to Enugu, Nigeria, my quest for swimming took me to Nike Lake Resort, near Enugu. Despite logistical challenges, I logged six swimming visits in two weeks at that location.

My swimming rose to the next level after we moved 100 kilometers North of San Diego to a town called Temecula, California. The town had a facility called Community Recreation

Center or CRC that hosted a 22.86-meter outdoor heated swimming pool with a depth range of 3.5 feet to 12 feet or 1 meter to 3.7 meters at the deepest end.

Whoa!

By this time, I had mastered my breathing techniques and could do laps repeatedly without stopping to rest. Within four months of arriving at Temecula, I could complete one mile or 72 pool lengths at the CRC without stopping!!! I did not stop there. On some good days, depending on how I was feeling, I was swimming over 100 lengths.



Non-stop free-style lap swimming for over 75 minutes. Felt so good

By far the crown jewel of my swimming experience, so far, was at the American Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida. The indoor pool, located inside of the Base Gym on Gillis Road in Bldg. 614, is 50 meters by 22.86 meters with a graduated height depth of 3.7 meters. Huge and scary pool!!!

Swimming at this pool was like swimming in an ocean without the waves. With a high level of trepidation, I found I could not relax enough to enjoy this unique swimming experience. Swimming is not worth the effort if one cannot relax. I don't recall if there were any lifeguards on duty. In the end, I safely managed to log one hour of a unique swimming experience at this giant pool of all times.

Without a doubt, swimming has emerged as my all-time favorite and dominant sport. Although It may seem like an exaggeration, I feel more comfortable and peaceful in water than on land. It is reassuring to know that swimming is a sport one can stay with until the end of life. Swimming, to me, is the

last frontier.

* * *

As I got older, I began to visit doctors for annual physical checks. Following each physical were lab tests that gave statistics and measurements of the current state of my body for the first time, including Lipid Panels, Hemoglobin A1C, Comprehensive Metabolic Panel, Echocardiogram, PSA, Uric Acid, and others. In studying my lab results over time, some stubborn test values repeatedly refused to improve even when I ate better and exercised more. My doctor suggested that those unchanging or hard-to-change values were very likely inherited from my family. This meant that one could do everything right, exercising regularly, eating well, sleeping well, have great social, spiritual, and intellectual health, and so on, but still fall short of optimum health. That was a frustrating discovery for me.

When one cannot move the needle to promote optimal health due to genetics, the only choice left is to focus on minimizing the risk factors for any stubborn conditions. This is done by

treatment. One can continue to measure success, or the optimal healthy state for the individual, by how successful they are in moving farther away from the risk factors.

In contrast, when I suggested that a relative over fifty years old go for a physical examination in Nigeria, it was rejected.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” he retorted.

“We have to eat first before going for medical checkups.”

When I asked him to have his blood pressure checked, he also forcefully rejected the idea. Later I learned that in many parts of Nigeria, people engage in false equivalency comparisons between high blood pressure and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome or AIDS. What an apples-and-oranges juxtaposition. This discovery was very disturbing because there is absolutely no comparison. High blood pressure can occur in our body system at any time for various reasons. According to the National Health Service in the UK,⁷¹

“...You might be at risk of High blood pressure if you:

- are overweight
- eat too much salt and do not eat enough fruit and vegetables
- do not do enough exercise
- drink too much alcohol or coffee (or other caffeine-based drinks)
- smoke
- have a lot of stress
- are over 65
- have a relative with high blood pressure
- are of black African or black Caribbean descent
- live in a deprived area...”

So, who’s the health freak now? Not me. Rather, what my story suggests is that I had a sense of duty to protect the one single body that I was given so that in the end I could happily and proudly return that physical body in the best condition possible. Our bodies come as a philanthropic loan to us; it is everyone’s duty to pay back the loan by returning their bodies in the best shape possible. If you ever rented a car, you know what I’m talking about. No one wants to show up or return scratched or dented rental cars. When, and if you do, be sure to have your wallet or proof of insurance.

* * *

PART II ...*Matters Arising*

This section, "Matters arising", is a collection of topics that unwittingly and inadvertently emerged to influence my life, shaping and expanding my thinking positively. There are lessons to be learned through these topics..

Learning and Education

“Learning is a lifelong process of transforming information and experience into knowledge, skills, and behaviors...” [and perhaps wisdom].

....

Education is a process whereby a society passes on the knowledge, values, and skills from one generation to another.” (Syla, 2022)

These formal definitions set some boundaries to guide the reader’s understanding of this topic. The reader is also advised to be aware of the repetitiveness in the chapters, Learning & Education, and Money Disorder. The repetition is deliberate. It is an attempt to reinforce the important concepts that may be needed to understand these life-changing topics and concepts.

A car cannot run without fuel. By the same token, a person without learning is like an empty vessel; a *zombie* without much substance to offer themselves or the world around them. The story of *Young Man In A Hurry* would not be without the fuel from Learning and Education. Learning and Education provided the power that propelled the engine used to produce everything recounted in *Young Man In A Hurry*. Learning and Education dragged me from where I was born in Iva Valley to so many destinations around the world as you just read.

Learning and education are fundamental for understanding who we are, and who we can become, to build a successful life. From knowing who we are, we graduate to learn about other people, the world immediately around us, and the world at large. Knowing the world around us establishes the bridge to offer services to, and receive services from, the rest of the world. A Nigerian poet and writer, Dike Chukwumerije, once said, “The moment we lose sight of education, we lose the ability to relate to the rest of the world at all levels” (Chukwumerije, 2021).

It is only after you know who you are and what you can do that the real journey of life begins. On your own terms, you can now interact with the world outside you to market yourself, start a business, get a job, build relationships, and assemble what you need to live a good life. The more you learn and educate yourself, the more you can do in life. There are potential pitfalls and unfavorable consequences when this process of learning and education is not followed as prescribed.

* * *

Before we go too far ahead of the topic of learning and education, it is most appropriate to start the discourse from the beginning of life.



Babies must cry at birth. Why?

Wah! Wah! Wah! Wah!

Wah! Wah! Wah! Wah!. . .newly born babies cry!

All babies cry within seconds of birth, except for a few unusual medical cases. The baby's cry is proof that oxygen is flowing to the baby's brain and to other vital organs of the body so that life may begin outside the comfort of the womb (Kapate, 2022).

Another interpretation of why a baby cries, right after birth, is the baby asking itself the following, and other vital questions,

Where am I?

Who am I? (the baby has no name yet)

Why am I here?

We are born into the world instantly curious and eager to learn. Eager to be educated. Hence, learning and education are fundamental for life.

As the child grows, the discovery and learning process continues. The new baby attempts to engage and interact with anything and everything in its way. These curiosities include items and things that are potentially harmful to the child. They don't know the dangers yet because they have not learned.

Babies are constantly putting things into their mouth, both safe and unsafe, a practice called *mouthing*. ". . . baby's mouthing is not only a healthy form of discovery, it's also a sign of advancing physical and cognitive development" (Kristen M. Moyer & Noreen Iftikhar, 2020) (Lovevery, 2022).

It is therefore evident that learning and education are completely intertwined with life, from the very beginning. They go hand in hand. Ignore learning and education and you do so at your own peril. The less you learn and educate yourself, the less you know about yourself and the world around you, and the less you can give or receive from the world. You might as well forget life.

Why many seem to forget and lose awareness of these critical basic facts as we get older in life is baffling. Going to school, such as primary, secondary, and university is a continuation of the same journey that began with a baby's cry. Where am I? Who am I? Why am I here?

As adults we continue to seek answers to these same questions, leading to discovering ourselves, what we are best at doing, and where best to make our contributions. We become professionals in different areas and continue to learn. Albert Einstein once said, "When you stop learning, you start dying" (Einstein, 2022). Even when your current profession is not suitable, or just not working well for you, you can make changes through learning and discovery of what else is most conducive to your personality.

* * *

Shifting attention to my own life in *Young Man In A Hurry*, it would appear that I understood the significance of learning and education. Initially, it appeared I had no control over my fate as I repeatedly moved like a military child from Iva Valley to Akama Oghe; from Akama Oghe to Owo, Nike; from Owo to Akwuke; and finally from Akwuke to Nkalagu. All within the ages of 6 to 12. But by the time I arrived at Nkalagu, I was fully prepared to learn and to be educated. Nothing and nobody could stop me. I went through GCU purposefully shying away from sports, arguably another form of learning. I chose to focus on the longer-lasting academics. Then came the Nigerian Civil War to slow down the momentum for three years. But the war created new circumstances and new opportunities to learn.

It was learning and education that led me to discover a love for music which most likely drew my attention to my first real job ever, broadcasting. While I enjoyed hiding behind the microphone in the studio and addressing thousands of listeners as an announcer, I knew it was not the end game. I needed more. That was how learning at a higher level began. From the University of Lagos to Indiana University and Texas A&M University across the Atlantic. At the professional level, learning and education continued with CEs or Continuing Education Credits, certifications, and licenses. Learning and Education never ended for me. It was my learning efforts that drove me to study an application software called PeopleSoft on my own, after eight hours at my regular job. PeopleSoft is a human resource management system or HRMS. My investment in learning PeopleSoft lasted 27 years, paying top dollars, until I retired on January 5, 2023. Forty-two years after I was hired by Andersen Consulting!

Guess why I retired?

Many reasons. One reason is that I was getting old. I thought I should do other things, such as, write this story, and give a testimony of what learning and education did for me.

* * *

After I left Nkalagu for Umuahia for high school, my dad attempted to marry a third wife. What alerted me to this unexpected event was my unpaid school fees. A new school term was underway and the money was not sent as expected. I promptly took an overnight train to return home to find out why. Lo and behold, a young woman that I had not met before, was sitting in my mother's kitchen cooking dinner.

Provoked by what I saw, I immediately launched into an outburst of wailing and screaming as if someone had died. . .

Chineke-e-e,

Gbatakwanu-o-o,

Alu emekwanu-o-o,

Nwanyi-a egbukwanum-o-o. .

My God,

Please come to my rescue,

A terrible thing has happened,

This woman has killed me...

I shouted at the top of my voice, prompting all the surrounding neighbors and relatives to abandon their dinner preparation and rush towards my mother's kitchen. Indeed, I sincerely believed my journey with learning and education was at an end.

Dad was out of town. So, there was no immediate risk of an altercation. It was just me, crying and wailing to get attention. Everyone was flabbergasted and confused over what the alarm was about. To cut a long story short, I received my school fees and returned to school within three days, and the expected third wife never settled into our family.

This fight was in defense of learning and education. Learning and Education had won. Have you ever missed an opportunity to fight for learning and education in your life? Don't be afraid to face the fight head-on. You will be glad you did.

* * *

My dad's repeated efforts to increase our family size were based on a fading African polygamist culture practiced during the agrarian era. At that time, non-mechanized farming and agriculture called for larger families. The larger the family, the more people the family could feed and deploy to work on the farms to boost farm production. The larger the family production, the wealthier the family.

However, the gradual emergence of industries, such as coal, and the development of human capital through learning and education were replacing the agrarian culture. Perhaps my father did not take notice. His boss, a manager at the Nigerian Coal Corporation, got a manager position that afforded him a car, most likely because he had more education than my father did. My father, perhaps, did not know enough to make the connection. It became incumbent upon me to push for change in my family. Abruptly coming home from school was necessary to fight for education and to vote "No" for an increase in family size. My region of Nigeria was transitioning from an agricultural-dominant economy to the early stages of an industrial economy. Such a transition demanded aggressive development of human capital through education, and I was on the frontline.

* * *

This chapter concludes with an essay I wrote in 2020 to inspire friends from my town of Umuavulu-Abor to contribute generously to the rebuilding of St. Theresa's Primary School, Umuavulu-Abor. The project was a huge endorsement of education. It was sponsored by Umuavulu Abor Association, USA, Inc, or UAAUSA, Inc. Contributions came from UAAUSA members and hundreds of generous friends and family. The project was a resounding success. At the time of this writing, I had been an active member of UAAUSA for 13 years.

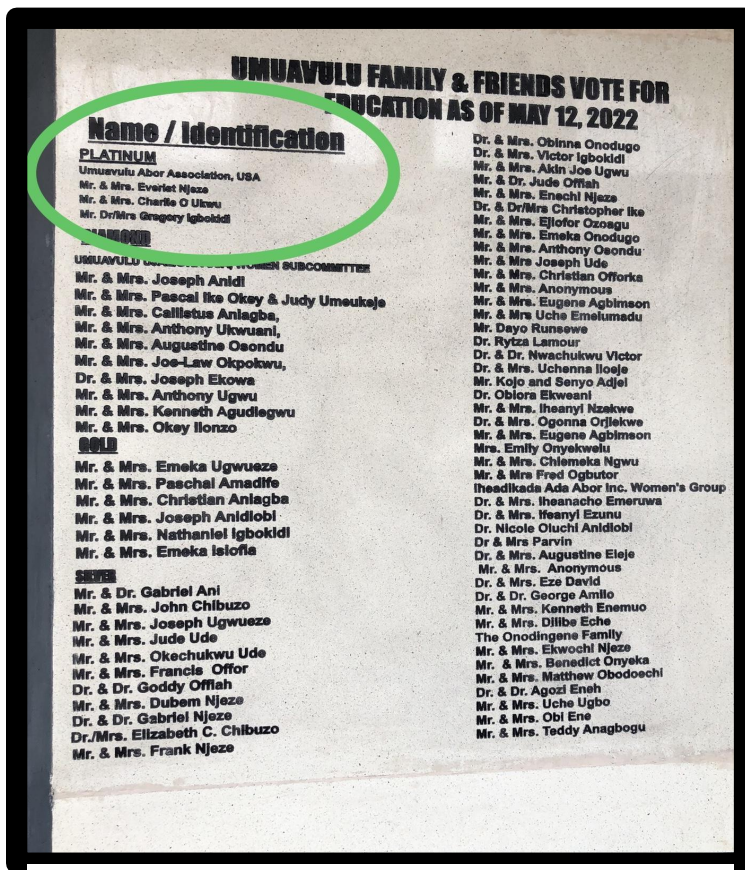
The essay starts here:

“. . .I did not have the privilege of attending primary school at St. Theresa's Primary School, Abor, the location of the upcoming education project in Umuavulu. Nevertheless, the primary school education that I had was adequate to prepare me for subsequent educational experiences. Those educational experiences combined have influenced my life tremendously and in such positive ways. Unquestionably, education must receive the biggest credit for who I have become.

Without education, I would not have attended Government College, Umuahia, where within four years I was completely transformed, rewired, and placed on a trajectory of near excellence that has guided my entire life. The ubiquitous influence of Umuahia was all over me, ranging from physical fitness to academic excellence, morals, and discipline. Education gets the credit because the son of a poor coal miner from Umuavulu-Abor would not, ordinarily, have shared the same classrooms with Okwesili Nwodo, Nnaemeka Okpara (Ukwu C. O., Nnaemeka Okpara, 2023), Nchewi Imoke, and Edet Akpan, the children of government ministers called *Ndi-Ukwu* or Big People in the sixties. It was exposure to education and a little bit of luck that earned me a seat and the opportunity to mix with other students who were chauffeured to school in long Chevrolets and Pontiacs, the luxury cars of the sixties, when I could only afford to ride the coal-dust-infested Nigerian Railways train from Enugu to Umuahia.

Even after high school, the Umuahia spirit and experience still ruled my life by guiding my lifestyle of fitness and wellness, and by giving me the confidence to venture into a relatively new and unknown field of Computer Science. Without education, I could not have attended the University of Lagos, Indiana University School of Journalism, Texas A&M University, or walked the hallways of major American companies, such as Andersen Consulting, Duke Energy, Computer Sciences Corporation or CSC, BearingPoint, Hewlett-Packard, Perspecta and Peraton Corporation.

The indebtedness for what education has done for me is so far-reaching that I have vowed to give away some of what I have earned as Warren Buffet and the Bill Gates Foundation did—although on a much smaller scale, relative to the size of my assets. That is why we created bmpUnited, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation that has already started providing services in Nigeria.



Proud to be a Donor for the Education Project at Umuavulu-Abor, my hometown.

Within six months of its existence, the company has financed the training of solar installation engineers, financed home solar installations in Umuavulu, financed 2 million Naira in agricultural projects, and deposited 2.2 million Naira into people's bank accounts in Umuavulu and surrounding communities, for COVID-19 palliative care. The COVID-19 intervention was modeled after the Covid stimulus package in the United States. Learn more about bmpUnited by visiting <https://bmpu.org>.

In contrast, some of my friends who did not have the foresight, or were not fortunate enough to embrace education as I did, or did not have the means to do so, had a totally different type of life experience. Many of them are still challenged to make major life decisions and to achieve their goals. Some seem to need financial assistance all the time, not knowing that *money is*

not the problem, or the solution. Learning and Education is.

Above all, some people lose their lives prematurely because, as the Bible says, "...my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge (My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, YouVersion Hosea 4:6)". Examples abound. Such as when people in certain Nigerian villages choose to go to herbalists for a stroke, instead of rushing to the nearest hospital to see a doctor. Many cases of high blood pressure, abnormal levels of glucose, and excessive amounts of fat or cholesterol, can be reversed or managed by early intervention (Ferdinand, 2020). People are repeatedly dying of these conditions, primarily due to a lack of education and knowledge.

One may ask why education has not made some of us financially wealthy. But wealth is determined by many factors, not just money. Nevertheless, the probability of becoming wealthy, if that is the desired objective, is higher with education than without. Speaking for me, I am content and self-sufficient. And, if I had to do it again, I would still vote repeatedly for education. In fact, more of it, not less. I strongly urge everyone to stand up and vote for education because the lack of education and its consequences affect us all equally..."

End of essay.

Racism

The story of a black man outside the continent of Africa would be incomplete without addressing the topic of racism.

Racism, in this context, consists of attitudes and practices surrounding the superiority of one race over another and their application socially to degrade, and economically to give preferential treatment based on race. Racism in this context is also the same as prejudice, a part of life. We all have preferences because human beings are incapable of knowing all things or experiencing all things. Human nature tends to gravitate toward the familiar because it is easier on us.

When people ask if I experienced racism at school or in professional life, I often hesitate to answer. When I finally answer, I am usually quick to admit naivety on racial matters. I indeed lack the knowledge and sensitivity to recognize every derogatory remark or “dog whistle” directed at me during my long career. Contrary to what you might think, I welcome and accept such a deficiency as an advantage. Therefore the disadvantage of sharing my particular experience with racism is that my report on this subject might be shallow and inept. The reader is advised.

The first truism about racism or prejudice is its ubiquity. It is part of human nature. In an article published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, Arne Roets and Alain Van Hiel of Ghent University in Belgium concluded that prejudice often comes from “a strong need to make quick and firm judgments and decisions to reduce ambiguity” (Hiel, 2011). Unfortunately, this view risks trivializing serious societal and institutional deficiencies in racism that need to be corrected to achieve balance, equity, and fairness, especially in the workplace.

Racism and prejudice, conscious and unconscious, subtle and overt, do exist; whether we like it or not. Perhaps my first experience of what appeared to be racially motivated was during my college days at Indiana University when Valerie was pregnant with our first child, Nneka. One Sunday evening as we took a walk on Indiana University campus, a couple of eggs were thrown at us from a fast-moving truck.

My heart pounded rapidly as I turned quickly towards Valerie.

“Are you OK?”

“What just happened?” I asked as I watched the slimy content of the crushed eggs drip down her right cheek and shoulders.

“I’m fine, just scared and wet from the cracked eggs,” she replied.

The eggs directed at me had missed their target. Later, when we spoke more about the egg incident, Valerie thought it was a racial incident, while I saw the incident as a bunch of college kids having fun at our expense.

“It was a prank,” I insisted.

This small and benign incident revealed how my view of the world often differed from other people’s on the issue of racism.

My next racial incident, if it could be so described, occurred while I worked for Arthur Andersen in Houston, Texas. I had been selected to join an ongoing project at a Texas location close to Vidor, Texas, about 153 kilometers, north-east of Houston. At the time, Vidor, Texas had over ninety-five percent white, non-Hispanic population. The manager of the project thought that I would not be a good fit for the project. Pressed further by his superiors, the manager speculated that the client would probably not like me. He thought the client might be prejudiced. “But, Mr. Manager, I was simply going to Vidor to work, not to be liked,” I said silently to myself.

Even if the people of Vidor hated black people, I never had a chance to do something that might have helped at least one person to rethink their feelings towards black people. An Igbo proverb reminds us that “Ejigi mgbagbu ghalu ugu”, or that wars were never abolished because people get killed.

My so-called racial incidents remain just that, “so-called”, not blatant; nothing like what I often heard from other people. I went to Indiana University in the mid-seventies, not expecting to see white and black students, but students. Most of the classes that I attended at IU rarely had any black students, and I hardly noticed.

Coming from Nigeria, I had no prior preconceptions or expectations of injustices, prejudices, or racism. I did not find, or experience racism firsthand, in that sense.

On the contrary, Valerie, just freshly arrived from Nigeria, was guided by a white student to the Office of International Students. There, she was offered a part-time job on her very first visit. This job helped us immensely when we decided to pull our resources together for survival.

When things appeared not to go my way, I never blamed it on racism. What I knew and believed was that if I wanted to distinguish myself from the competition, I had to work harder. Perhaps twice as hard as everybody else. If I missed a promotion, I never blamed it on racism or prejudice. I just concluded I didn’t make the cut this time, and life went on. My unique personal experiences do not imply other people are not denied promotion due to racism every day. It just never happened to me, or I was too naive to recognize it when it did. Perhaps my naïveté shielded me from racism.

Philanthropy

Philanthropy earned a space in this memoir to prevent others from writing the final chapter of me, for me, after I am gone. The objective is to share my stand on the issue of “giving”, or assistance before others make inaccurate conclusions that I may not have the opportunity to correct.

Most people will agree that it is good to assist others in achieving their life’s goals by giving money, called grants, or philanthropic loans with little or no interest charged. The question is how best to do so. When one gives without a commitment from the other side, it is considered a charity. Charity giving creates dependency and never ends. According to various sources, too many to list, giving, as well as foreign aid, tend to create dependency.

The more you give in this manner, the more you are expected to give because it is assumed you have it to give. This method is harmful to the cause of eradicating poverty and dependency. It is disabling to the receiver. More importantly, philanthropists do not always have the resources to follow through to manage how gifts are used or consumed, or to determine their effectiveness.

I have assisted people for years, by giving to charity, in an attempt to do good. In most cases, the expected results were not met. Recipients kept missing their goals and kept coming back for more. This method of giving proved to be unsustainable, forcing me to search for better ways.

For giving in general, one must define the terms of the gift, by extracting a commitment. Depending on the type of gift, the giver may need to form a partnership with the recipient. The partnership ensures that the defined goal is feasible, sustainable, and can be accomplished. The giver can trust but also have a way to verify that the shared objective is completed as promised. Without terms, the gift may not achieve the intended purposes, creating the need for repeated requests and wasting society’s scarce resources in the process. If this sounds too academic, it is the only way I know to say what needs to be said. When this method is not followed, the giver risks becoming an enabler, reinforcing the dysfunctionality, or circumstances that gave rise to the need to give.

People seeking assistance from me need to be as hungry as I was when I planned and executed my journey. The full story of this journey is the subject of *Young Man In A Hurry*. Being hungry is that nagging feeling one gets that does not go away until that hunger is quenched. Being hungry means that the quest is not over until something more satisfying emerges to take the place of that hunger.

When I worked at the Nigerian Broadcasting House in Enugu, Nigeria, as a studio manager in the early seventies, several of my colleagues were sent to Lagos for training that I had not yet received. Not yet schooled in office protocols, I caught the next available bus and landed at the training site in Lagos. During the class introduction, I was notified that my name was not on the class roster and that I needed to go to Ikoyi Broadcasting Station to see the Program Division Director before I could join the class. When I arrived at Ikoyi, Mr. Sunny

Young-Harry was meeting with another staff member. I took a seat in his secretary's office and waited. Meanwhile, the secretary was kind enough to step into her boss's office to announce my presence.

Within another ten minutes, a tall middle-aged man who instantly reminded me of blues singer Nat King Cole steps out to see off his last visitor. Glancing in my direction, with a deep baritone voice, he asked –

“What brings you here, young man?”

“Sir, sir, I was asked to come and see you, Sir,” I replied. “I just came from the training school at Oshodi, Sir.”

“Right, you must be the fella that came to training school uninvited -eh?” he said with his lips and face suddenly growing tighter as if he was angry at me—like a father whose child just broke a favorite coffee cup.

“Please explain how this mistake happened, “ he continued.

In a low apologetic voice, I shared my story about having been hired for over two years without any training since then.

“And so, you decided to take the law into your own hands eh?” he said, cutting in before I could finish.

“You must be one *young man in a hurry*, aren't you?, he continued, this time feigning a little smile. He reprimanded me, letting me know that he could easily have sent me back to Enugu without approving the training. Instead, he had decided to allow me into the class, with a warning, because, although I did the right thing to get management's attention, I did it the wrong way. I thanked him profusely for his kind decision and rushed back to Oshodi to join the other students.

At twenty-two, this was the story of a hungry young man on fire. ‘Being on fire’ is the next level above hunger. Granted that I could have been sent back to my radio station in Enugu without the training, my aggressive move would still have resulted in someone taking a second look at the equity or inequity of the corporation's training policies.

Another *being hungry*, or *being on fire* experience took place after I arrived in the United States. I had momentarily considered changing courses to return to my Government College Umuahia dream of majoring in the sciences, Physics, Chemistry, and Zoology, and possibly becoming a physician. That would have required me to seek approval from my sponsors, the Federal Ministry of Education in Lagos, Nigeria, for a second time. One must not forget the agony I went through to have the venue of my studies amended from Nigeria to the United States.

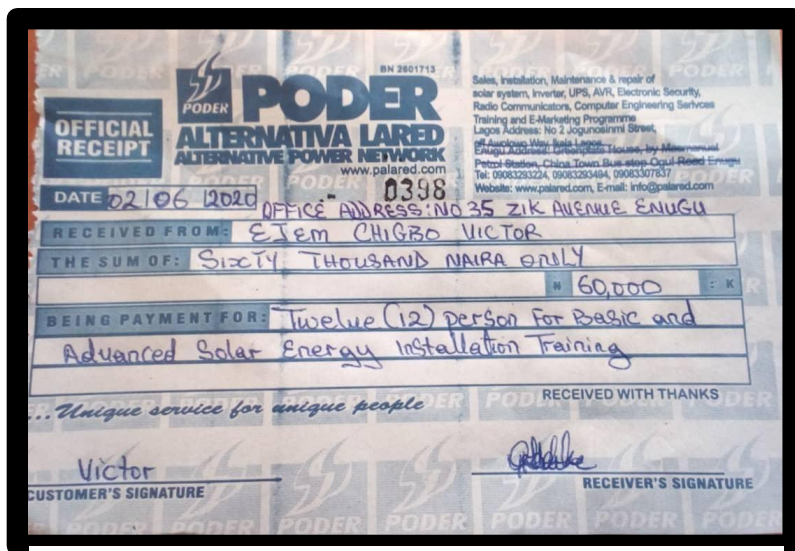
Requesting such a change would probably be twice as difficult when requested from abroad. Changing courses would also force me to abandon six years, from 1969 to 1974, invested in broadcasting. In comparison, I spent only four years, from 1963 to 1966, at Government College Umuahia. To top it all, acceptance into medical schools in the United States was not

guaranteed. Admission to medical schools in the US was so competitive that some students traveled overseas to the Caribbeans to get a chance. For all these reasons, I concluded I had to stay with the media – Journalism and Mass Communication.

Once decided, the degrees followed in rapid succession – 1975 to 1977, Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Journalism/Economics; 1978 to 1979, Master of Arts (MA) in Economics; and 1979 to 1980, Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Computing Science. In six years from 1975 to 1980, I had completed a series of studies that would have normally taken eight years to complete. That is the definition of being hungry. And the momentum would have continued, for there was discussion again, over a possible PhD program in Computer Science. Remember that I skipped the Ph.D. program in Economics at Indiana University to pursue my passion and dream of Computer Science.

Something more urgent had emerged to replace my hunger in search of more education – I had a wife, and two children, to care for, and student allowances were no longer sufficient to cater for their needs.

* * *



The challenge that I constantly face attempting to assist people, from late boomers to generations X and Y, is that they lack the hunger or fire as demonstrated by the preceding stories. When I sent twelve young men to train as solar engineers in Enugu, Nigeria, on February 6, 2020, at no cost to them, only one person stayed in the business. A receipt of the training is attached for the reader's reference.

Training the Foot Soldiers for Africa's Future Energy Solution: Solar

My lessons learned from the experience was that one could take several horses to the water, but couldn't make them drink. Notably, the individuals who dropped out of the solar career have not come up with bigger and bolder ideas better than what I offered them. Some of them have returned to make repeated requests for money to start a business without any commitment or accountability.

Accountability, in this context, is the practice of doing what one said they would do, when and how they promised to do it, and achieving the results, without equivocation. In its most rudimentary form, accountability is a composite of two words: "account" and "ability" meaning, having the ability to account for something you did. This concept is so fundamental in the world of business that three disciplines, bookkeeping, accounting, and auditing, were

created to make sure everyone understood and practiced accountability. Bookkeepers and Accountants are responsible for keeping, reviewing, and interpreting financial data and records, while Auditors come behind them to make sure the books are kept under generally accepted accounting principles, or GAAP, and government rules and regulations.

As a student of economics, I am also interested in the relationships between society's resources, production, output, and consumption. Resources are always scarce, and part of my job is to make sure that they are not wasted and that they are used where they are needed the most.

Accountability is key in ensuring that resources are used in the right amounts and where they are needed, especially in the face of scarcity. Accountability requires one to keep receipts to support material transactions and satisfy the world and the benefactor that one did what one promised to do. Accountability teaches us the discipline to properly utilize other people's resources better than we would ours. Without accountability, it would be difficult to succeed in the world of commerce.

Ironically, many young people desire to go into business for themselves instead of advanced education. The demands for discipline and accountability happen to be more critical and necessary to achieve a successful business career. Putting education first, before going into business would be a better idea for a more successful future.

Money Disorder

*Author's Note: This was the most difficult chapter to write. I persisted because of society's apparent obsession with "money". My specific contribution to the discourse of money disorder, I think, is the following: Many seem to ignore and bypass the analytical and other *je ne sais quoi* that are necessary for any successful endeavor or project, and outsource or delegate that function to others, who, in many cases, are also expected to pay for those endeavors. What is bypassed are learning, education, and experience that the beneficiaries must acquire to undertake the endeavor.*

Some of the sections of this chapter may seem repetitive in my attempt to thoroughly explain the concept of money disorder as used in this chapter. This is still a work in progress as I learn more about money, and human behavior around money. In the end, the journey of learning, education, and growing, is much more exciting than stressing about the money that comes with it.

Learning and Education in Chapter 32 suggested there would be consequences when society's expected learning and education progressions are not met or followed. To establish a baseline, the standard and most common paths for learning as we know them today include,

Primary-> Secondary/High school->OND-HND or Polytechnic /University,

or

Primary->Skills-training/Trade-school/Vocational-school/Technical-college->OND-HND or Polytechnic / University.

There may be alternative ways of learning. But in following the alternative ways of learning, one must be careful not to overlook the testing, employment, or business market requirements. Otherwise, the candidate may not be qualified for the marketplace. Bad examination results or unemployment may be the result. For example, a home-schooled student who ignores the syllabus of the testing body, such as WAEC or NECO, may not pass the WAEC exams because they don't know, or have not studied what is tested.

One of the consequences of not following the aforementioned learning progressions is *money disorder*. The literature on money disorder defines the term as "self-destructive " financial behaviors that cause significant distress and hinder social or occupational well-being (Daask, 2024). The use of the term *money disorder* in this chapter is an extension of the existing definition. The use is also consistent with money disorder as a behavioral disorder and not a clinical disorder.

Money disorder is used in this chapter to refer to the tendency —

- To want or desire what you cannot afford and expect others, who do not have that responsibility, to pay for it;
- To decide that money is the solution to all things and all problems and expect others, who do not have that responsibility, to pay for it.

Parents and close relatives are responsible for their children's education, at least until graduation from secondary or high school. The desire of such children to be educated does not constitute a money disorder. When those children exclusively focus on money as the only solution to their needs, that becomes a money disorder.

It is not considered a money disorder when an individual has the resources to pay for what they desire in the above situations, without involving others. It is also not considered money disorder when a giver decides to give to others voluntarily, without prior expectations from the receiver. Money disorder afflicts only people who seek to live a life or to acquire stuff that is above and beyond them, or their societal level of development and progress while depending, on or expecting others to foot the bill. It is a money disorder when the receiver feels entitled and makes demands.

It is called 'money' disorder because it is caused by, and is a symptom of, a lack of money. It attacks when a perfectly healthy individual, who can remain healthy at the current level that they chose, or was chosen for them by their circumstance, seeks to upgrade at other people's expense. The problem arises especially when the individual considers money as the only way to get to the next level. Money from other people, family, or friends. They appear to delegate or ignore the learning, research, and strategy that may be required.

"Just give me money," they say, "and all my problems will be solved".

Not so fast. In my experience, money being only a tool of exchange, did not solve the problems. The problems persisted long after the money was spent,,and the requester comes back for more.

There is nothing wrong with a desire to upgrade or pursue a project. It just takes preparation such as training, learning, and education. Money disorder victims become oblivious to this requirement. They therefore seek an external source to fulfill their need through *dependence*. In a widely distributed publication, *How money works - Secrets to Financial Success*,⁶⁸ Primerica declares that "... one of the biggest financial mistakes most people make is *dependence...*". "...Dependence on others allows 'outside' factors in people's lives to control them."

One cannot go from being a high school dropout to becoming CEO of a major corporation, without upgrading themselves. This is a mismatch that causes money disorder. The Igbo

people also have a saying that one cannot go from being a porter, or *Onyeburu* at Ogbete market and receive a paycheck from Oloko. Oloko is a siren used, back in the day, to alert factory workers, railway employees, or coal miners that it is time to start or end their shift work. A job at one of these places meant big money as well as a regular paycheck.

In contrast, the porters at Ogbete market have irregular and unpredictable income, and in many cases, Ogbete porters live from hand to mouth. Thus, Onyeburus cannot make Oloko salaries. For them to seek such salaries, is a mismatch that causes money disorder, unless they acquire the necessary training and credentials.

Other examples that may cause money disorder include, a primary school graduate demanding a car from family; or a friend, or family member asking others to start a business for them without being trained for that business.

Each of these scenarios will cause money disorder for different reasons and create states of dependency.

For the primary school graduate, the request for a car is premature. Not that some parents would not grant such requests. But it is not the best way to help a child grow. To avoid money disorder, primary school graduate must patiently complete the learning process successfully to get the car of their dreams by themselves. This method would not create dependency.

The individual seeking to start a business is a more complex example. What is apparent is that they have not successfully processed their childhood original questions by themselves: *Where am I? Who am I? Why am I here?* Another way to diagnose the situation is to consider the candidate a dropout, or one that has not followed or completed their learning progression successfully. The solution is to return to the learning journey to determine how the journey can be resumed and completed successfully. If this is not done, the money disorder lingers and reoccurs each time the candidate seeks things outside their level. The proper solution is to determine and address the root cause. Doing so avoids repeated and reoccurring money disorder and dependency.

But wait a minute.

Not that everyone has to drive a car. Not that everyone has to run, or own a business. Life has adequate room at all levels for everyone. Not everyone has to be President or CEO of a company or country. It is up to each of us to choose our preferred level, work towards that level, and stay content at that level to avoid being afflicted with money disorder and dependency. **The problem lies in choosing, or settling at a level, and expecting other people to pay for you to enjoy a different level that you are unqualified for.** This is not sustainable and ultimately leads to failure, causing anguish and stress. The level of your learning and discovery must be commensurate with your desired level of consumption, investment, and indeed your entire image and existence, to avoid money disorder. It is the

mismatch between where you are in life, and what you want or desire while you live that life, that causes money disorder.

The 'patient' or the afflicted, often loses sight of their true learning and development level. What the patients often see are the successes of others around them, especially contemporaries, without understanding the learning, discovery, and hard work that took place behind the scenes. **"If only I had money, I would do this, or do that", the patients say to themselves."**

Notice that the issue has suddenly doubled down on *lack of money*. The patient has already forgotten how they arrived at the current situation or level of life. They have completely forgotten they dropped out of school or dropped out of vocational training. Above all, they forgot they have not acquired the qualifications, experience, and savvy to face and transact with the real world at the new level that they seek. Once this happens, the patients start to exclusively see the lack of money as the problem instead of a symptom of the problem. Getting money becomes the goal and total solution. But money remains just a tool. The patients begin to chase after money: begging, borrowing or even stealing, if necessary. The original money disorder condition just became chronic.

The 'chronic' nature of this new level of *money disorder* comes from the patient's inability to recognize the 'true root cause of their affliction'. The patient is blinded. For example, the high school dropout who contracted money disorder initially by going for or requesting things above their level has now been out of school for a long time. This long period of being out of school has given them adequate time to meander and wander in society looking for opportunities. The dropout sees both 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' people in their daily interactions. The successful people are observed to be spending money more freely and more plentifully, while the non-successful ones are not. The high school dropout, not knowing the history of successful people, and not knowing how they got to their status in life, starts to associate their success with the amount of money the successful people are seen to be spending.

Voila!

"Money must be the source of their success," the dropout erroneously concludes.

In reality, the source of their success, in most cases, is the sleepless nights, long hours, days, weeks, and years of dedicated training, learning, and education. The 'successful' people have invested in discovering themselves, who they are, what they are good at, and above all discovering the world around them, and how best to leverage and position themselves to get to the top.

Unfortunately, all that our high school dropout sees are the fine clothes and jewelry, beautiful cars, beautiful women, and indeed the freer spending of cash that came through hard work.

That is how the dropout, already suffering from money disorder, starts chasing after money as the sole solution for everything. That is the beginning of *chronic money disorder*.

Even when the dropout finds out what it took to get to the top, they might not be willing to work as hard or invest the amount of time it took to get to the top. For example, some people have been known to visit the United States and quickly return to their places of origin because they are unwilling to dedicate themselves to the hard work and all it takes to live and be successful in the United States. As Mark Twain is credited with saying “...People who love sausage and respect the law should never watch either being made” (Luxenberg, 2005). Our school dropouts may see the successes, fame, and money of their successful contemporaries, and choose to ignore or refuse to learn how they (successful people) made it happen.

It is much easier to go straight for the money and avoid the work. And when one focuses exclusively on money, they are disappointed. Money is just a tool whose value depends on what one does with it.

Money disorder is sometimes induced by family, or people around us. If you are a fan of Nigerian movies, nagging questions such as these are common from mothers —

“Emeka, when will you get married so that I can hold my grandchild before I die?”

Or

“Ngozi, when are you going to get us a bouncing baby boy, we already have enough girls.”

Under pressure, young men start families that they are unprepared for. The expectation, sometimes, is that a brother or sister who is “doing well “ will pay for hospital bills, and pay for school fees as the child grows older, on behalf of the money disorder-afflicted young man. Could this be the correct manifestation of the African saying “It takes a whole village to raise a child “ made popular by Hilary Rodham Clinton? I think not. There is nothing wrong with helping a brother or sister, but the gesture is usually not sustainable and often doesn’t end well. It also enables endless dependency.

The most worrisome aspect of this variant of money disorder is that it has the potential to create cycles of poverty that continue for generations.

Elsewhere in the series of tales, *Young Man In A Hurry*, I revealed how I, often, felt differently than other people in my immediate space. Not better, just different. This idiosyncrasy is aptly demonstrated by my views and relationship with “money”. Note that the topic of money belongs in this storybook because in my experience as a philanthropist, the nonprofit, bmpUnited, attracted a variety of applicants for different purposes. In analyzing these

requests, we discovered people did not understand that money is only a tool for exchange. They believed money was the solution that guaranteed they would achieve whatever they wanted.

bmpUnited concluded that many of the applicants suffered from *money disorder*. Apart from asking for things above their levels, as previously described, one can also suffer from *money disorder* by always seeking money as the solution to their needs. bmpUnited experience suggests that throwing money at poorly conceived projects is equivalent to applying a band-aid to a wound. To properly heal a wound, it is necessary to determine its etiology so that when it is treated it will not reoccur. Similarly, if an applicant requests money, it is necessary to determine why, what, and how the money will be used. Even after a loan or grant is approved, bmpUnited follows the transaction using a process called Follow the Money or FTM.

An example that demonstrates the delicate relationship between learning, education, and money is instructive. bmpUnited once attempted to persuade a client to embark on additional education or skills training, instead of supporting “going into business”, as they like to say. After the consultative conversation, the candidate wrote back to us demonstrating a severe affliction with money disorder:

“God in heaven knows that *my first choice of what I want to do in life is business*, but your company refused to support me because *you want me to pass through the same pains and humiliation that you experienced* before you made your wealth...”. This is a direct quote.

After reading this note from the client, we, at bmpUnited immediately remembered the cry of a newborn baby exiting the warmth and comfort of the amniotic fluid of the womb into the harsh cruel world:

Where am I?

Who am I?

Why am I here?

It was self-evident the client had not advanced sufficiently in their learning. So, unless he was born a genius, there is no way that he would have satisfactorily answered the above questions. Coming to bmpUnited for assistance was already an indication that those questions had not been sufficiently answered.

The second red flag in the note is that the client described my long process of learning and education as “*pains and humiliation*”. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I admit to working hard to learn who I am, where I am, and why I came to this world. Although it was hard work, it was not painful, and no one humiliated me. In fact I had so much fun learning

that it was only the arrival of my second child, Ebele, that forced me out of the university into the workforce at Arthur Andersen. This is the absolute truth.

Another important point that our client had not learned was that the pain or hard work that comes before one earns or receives money is part of what teaches and influences better usage of money. No pain, no gain. (Sophocles, 409BC) Also, success does not simply come from having money, but from what one does with the money they have. There is ample evidence that when people receive money without working for it, the money is often used less effectively. According to the National Endowment for Financial Education, “70% of lottery winners go bankrupt within a few years” (Dunlap, 2023). The statistic may appear to be an exaggeration, but having lots of free money is not the panacea that most people think it is. The solution still lies in the remediation of the learning and growth process to cure money disorder and determine the appropriate level to operate in society.

In a widely circulated article, Eric Roberge, a Forbes magazine contributor defines money more bluntly: “Money is a tool, So Stop Treating it as the Goal” (Roberge, 2015). In this article, Roberge tries to debunk expressions that we listen to every day, including the following:

“I want more money.”

“I need to save more money.”

“I wish I had more money.”

Roberge explains that when more money is considered the ultimate goal, it creates stress around money because we will never have enough money. Constantly chasing after more money is tantamount to a dog chasing its tail. The more money people have, the more money they desire to acquire. Unfortunately, it is not “how much ” money you have, but what you do with the money that makes the difference. More and more, or too much of anything is not the answer as Midas found out in Greek mythology:

“Midas, like many kings, wanted to be rich—or, rather, richer. Wealthier beyond all imagination. So he asked Dionysus to grant this wish: that anything Midas touched would turn to gold. Dionysus kept his promise and granted Midas his wish, but the King would soon discover the flaw in his idea. Whenever he touched food to eat it, it immediately turned to gold, becoming inedible. Even the wine, as Midas raised it to his lips, turned to gold.” (Tearle, 2023). Money, or gold cannot be everything.

According to Ayn Rand in *Atlas Shrugged* (Sweatt, 2023) :

“Money is only a tool. It will take you wherever you wish (to go), but it will not replace you as the driver.”

“It will give you the means for the satisfaction of your desires” (that is, goals and objectives), “but it will not provide you with desires.”

Deep diving into the above quote:

“...wherever you wish (to go) ...and ...your desires...” are all the things we want to do with money in life.

Ayn Rand seems to be saying that we have to be “in charge” of where we wish to go, and also “in charge” of defining our desires, not delegate the responsibility to money or to other people. To be “in charge” can be accomplished by acquiring the right level of learning, education, and knowledge relative to your desires. Money helps to implement the direction we wish to go and what we intend to do (desires or goals) once we get there. But we must first define the direction as well as the desires.

Money is only responsible for “closing deals,” not for researching or negotiating the deals.

One final metaphor. When one goes to a restaurant and orders a dish, money is only responsible for paying for the food or closing the deal. It is not responsible for your choice of dish, except to the extent that money influences how much you can spend. But if the dish turns out to be bad, it is not the fault of the money. Money only paid for the food that you chose. Money only closed the deal. Money does not make decisions for you. Money is like a whore, it sleeps with anyone, wherever it is tendered.

Some people who suffer from money disorder are very persuasive. They don’t give up easily. They are good beggars too. When they want money, it is like a drug craving. The begging becomes addictive too.

In life, it is said we are what we eat, and we become what we do.

If we beg all the time, we become great and better beggars.

We also observe that young men who do ten to twenty repetitions of bicep exercises about three times per week build bicep muscles that rival the size of thigh muscles. This is how we become what we do. The same principles would apply to begging under the influence of money disorder.

Money disorder is contracted by seeking to use other people’s money to do projects or accomplish one’s goals when one cannot afford it. Spending money, especially other people’s money, can be compared to a game of darts. To be done right, one has to hit the bullseye all the time. To hit the bull’s eye —

1. Money must not be diverted
2. Project must be performed perfectly, so well that the dart hits the bullseye, and nowhere else.

This is how goals and objectives are met to escape money disorder . Anything outside the bullseye just sacrificed other people's sweat and tears, whose real cost you will never know. To make matters worse, even the requester has not accomplish the desired results. So, you go back for more money. The world would be a much better place if you had hit the bullseye the first time. What a waste to the world.

A Better Way to Give

Despite the stated importance of learning, education, discipline, and accountability, most people would rather continue to request, and accept monetary gifts, and ignore the necessity to account for them—even when demanded. I have foolishly played along in the past to please people, and by doing so became an enabler. These mistakes cost real money without achieving the required results. The beneficiaries still kept coming back for more, endlessly. Because of these failures, I concluded that continuing assistance in this manner is wasteful and unsustainable. Nobody wins. The beneficiaries never achieved any observable progress in their lives to justify all the support.

A better solution and model for giving, I discovered, is through a nonprofit organization. I created such an organization with a mission to conduct medical advocacy interventions, give educational assistance, award agricultural philanthropic loans, and grants, give infrastructural and philanthropic loans and grants for solar energy, and perform random acts of mercy and kindness.

People seeking assistance are required to apply under one of these categories to benefit. Each of the first four areas of assistance, when implemented correctly, required a thorough knowledge of the field and how to meet the accountability requirements. Random acts of mercy and kindness serve the sick, elderly, and poor, also called SEP, by using appropriate selection criteria and giving limited one-time fixed amounts. Random acts have also been used to assist with widespread emergencies or pandemics, such as COVID-19.

The nonprofit company I work with, bmpUnited, is a government-regulated entity with record-keeping requirements. The benefit of using the nonprofit company model is that it standardizes the process, and ensures fairness towards everyone. It maintains a transaction history that provides the basis for consistent and equitable decision-making to benefit its customers. The same rules are used to evaluate each request. The expected result is that assistance goes to the people who deserve it the most while minimizing waste.

Using the nonprofit model did not eradicate all the challenges encountered in giving and assisting others. People who are familiar with the philanthropist, or know them in person, may still make requests with an “entitlement mentality”. With this approach, people ask for more loans when the first one was not paid back, or ask for another grant when the goals of the previous grant were not met. The good news is that the rules, procedures, and documentation of the nonprofit make it easier to say ‘No’ when it is necessary to do so.

The nonprofit structure formalizes giving by providing business data used to evaluate each request to achieve equity and better allocation of resources. The nonprofit, as in other forms of giving, is also challenged by repeat requesters. Repeated requests may be made because people are novices on the job, or because the expected results are not reached. bmpUnited resolves this issue by establishing a limit or cap for each channel of giving and for each client. Once the customer reaches their limit or threshold, then it is time to give other customers a chance.

The nonprofit justifies this policy by reminding those we serve that God created us all equal and that no one person should have a monopoly on our services, or have exclusive rights to achieve success. Everyone deserves a fighting chance to succeed. The applicants can also do what this author did: invest significantly in learning and education such that there is no need to seek assistance from anyone. When one falls on hard times and must get assistance, learning, and education still provide the best tools for recovery.

Unexpected Award

I have had reason to question my true origin in this place called 'mother earth'. As ridiculous as this skepticism may sound, sometimes I really questioned where Charlie O Ukwu came from. Was I adopted? Was I the victim of a planned, or accidental child swap at the hospital? Am I even Nigerian, or African?

Some current research suggests that not all blacks are of African descent, giving, albeit small, credence to my skepticism. On a personal level, observable differences between my peers and I, in many attributes, including musical tastes, fashion, attitudes, life choices, and overall likes and dislikes, give further credence to these uncertainties about my true origin. The differences often made me feel like a minority in gatherings where it was often safer to keep quiet than to say or do something that others considered strange or out of the norm. Living in a minority land and feeling isolated as I moved or was moved constantly, like a member of a military family, at different phases of my life, is a subject that has been highlighted severally in this tale.

As a result of these differences, when many Nigerians seem to crave titles and big names, I do not. If you are searching for someone to bestow titles such as Dr., Sir, Engr., Atty., Comrade, Chief, and other titles, Charlie O Ukwu was not your candidate. Whether I earned those titles or not did not seem to matter. Imagine then my surprise and consternation when a relative sent me the following message on October 30, 2022, at 11:25 a.m.

"Good afternoon, Sir. Umuavulu-Abor people have decided that you will be among the chieftaincy title holders in Umuavulu-Abor come December 17th, 2022"

At 12:30 p.m., I responded.

"Unfortunately, this is not my style. Thank you."

At 3:51 p.m., he replied.

"The new Igwe picked you out, while Orobor picked you out also. No going back. You are qualified for it. Thanks."

At 4:28 p.m. on October 30, 2022, I countered.

"Nothing in my life, so far, is by force, except perhaps when my Lord will call me home. I know who I am. Chieftaincy is NOT part of who I am. I shall respond accordingly to the awardees when requested. Please focus your time on things that matter. This conversation is done. Thank you".

Yet, it is not unusual for one to second guess themselves, and launch into a battle of the minds in circumstances such as this one. Should I, or should I not? Will I be considered parochial,

arrogant, or insensitive for refusing a community award that is considered an honor by many? I soon took my objections and concerns about the chieftaincy to a close, esteemed cousin, Okolo, who has been a chief for many years himself.

“My brother”, I began. “I got a message that Umuavulu-Abor has selected me to become a chief; but I don’t want it”.

“So, why don’t you want it”? Okolo asked. “It’s supposed to be an honor to recognize your accomplishments,” he explained.

He then went into a detailed discourse of how the chieftaincy wasn’t necessarily about me, or for me. He asserted that in accepting the chieftaincy, I was honoring and accepting responsibility for the community. Because of me, my immediate community of Orobo now suddenly has an added voice to speak on its behalf in debates, discussions, and forums where the wheeling and dealing of the town’s businesses are done. That is, the town of Umuavulu-Abor.

* * *

Before this conversation, I had various misconceptions about the chieftaincy that supported my current reaction to the offer. The chieftaincy role and title of today is not what it used to be. That is a fact. Unconfirmed anecdotes and stories abound of people buying the chieftaincy with money, or with as little as a bag of rice, people buying the chieftaincy with ill-gotten wealth, or simply bribery. If these stories are true, who wants to belong to such a hodgepodge of individuals? That was my original mindset.

Due to the lack of a common standard or enforcement mechanism to regulate the chieftaincy establishment across Igboland of southeastern Nigeria, a population of over forty million, discrepancies will occur in the administration of the title. The chieftaincy must be a microcosm of the Igbo people that it represents. If some Igbo people are corrupt, one should expect some dishonest and corrupt individuals among the chieftaincy.

* * *

In my quest to escape the chieftaincy title, I sought for, and had conversations with other prominent individuals in Umuavulu-Abor community. But after the conversation with Okolo, it became necessary to backtrack and reverse my position on accepting the chieftaincy title as demonstrated by these subsequent conversations:

At 3:08 p.m. on November 15, 2022, I wrote,

“Hello my honorable Onowu — I am now better informed and better understand Umuavulu&’s approach and use of the chieftaincy role in our community. Now that I know better, I hereby retract my previous comments. Thank you for giving me a listening ear when it was needed. I wish I had a better understanding earlier. Thank you.”

November 15, 2022, at 3:09 p.m., I wrote, “Hello my honorable SG, or Secretary General — I am now better informed, and have a better understanding of Umuavulu-Abor’s’ approach and use of the chieftaincy role in our community. Now that I know better, I hereby retract

my previous comments. Thank you for giving me a listening ear when it was needed. I wish I was better informed. Thank you.”

* * *

As I weighed the option of accepting the chieftaincy, what my cousin said to me also got me thinking —What had I done to attract the attention of the community?

Was it the work of my nonprofit, bmpUnited, or my family’s generous donation to support the Orobo Entrepreneurship Program, a program launched to assist aspiring youth and business people of the community, or the school project, where I initially donated anonymously, using a pseudonym, “Odomagana” or Umuavulu-Abor’s masquerade. The pseudonym idea was short-lived. Thanks to a trusted friend who dissuaded me.

“Charlie O”, he began. “It is actually selfish to donate without giving your name”.

“It is much better to reveal who you are, and be proud to lead by example, so that others may follow in your footsteps to support a worthy cause”, my friend continued. These words came from someone that I have known for a long time—someone I truly respected.

All said, I still was unable to pinpoint how my name came up for consideration for chieftaincy at Umuavulu-Abor.

* * *

On November 20, 2022 at 5:48 a.m. the recently elected community leader wrote, “Good afternoon. We are looking forward to receiving your updated profile, a beautiful studio picture of yourself, and your ‘title name.’”

At 7:00 AM, he wrote again, “Please send your title name to me.”

From all indications, the train had left the station, with or without me, and what’s more, the train was moving faster than I could keep up. I didn’t know a title would be needed, let alone think of the name I wanted to be called. I was not handling this chieftaincy thing well enough or fast enough!

In my frantic effort to fully understand what was expected of me as a new Chief, on December 20, 2022, at 8:54 a.m., I wrote to another respected Umuavulu-Abor personality,

“As a newbie, I cannot resist asking if you have awareness of a codified code of conduct, rules, or expectations for the chieftaincy. Someone recently suggested and I quote ... our people actually expect a cow from you.”

While I waited for his response, I started thinking....*Oh! I get it. It is common sense to show gratitude and provide merriment, especially at Christmas.*

But the expectation is still bothersome, especially when everyone else I know is killing cows and stampeding to the brewery to celebrate their chieftaincy.

My chieftaincy should be different, I thought. It is my prerogative. If so, my chieftaincy would be interested in the Umuavulu community demographics, including who is unemployed, under-employed, census of all children in school and not in school, all widows without support, you know, those kinds of things. This information will be used by community administrators to empower the citizens to fetch their own cows.

H-m-m-m... Why am I always different? Why is my thinking almost always left field?

At 9:23 a.m., my contact replied reassuringly, "You are thinking correctly!!!"

* * *

The chieftaincy event took place almost flawlessly on December 17, 2022, without a hitch. Due to prior commitments, I could not travel to accept the title. I directed a relative to dress up with his wife and accept the title on my, and my wife's behalf.

Before the coronation day, the Ukwu family budgeted for and purchased a significant amount of food items and drinks to entertain friends, relatives, and well-wishers following the coronation. My sister, her children, and several members of the Ukwu family worked tirelessly through the night of December 16, to prepare all the meals that were served after the coronation on December 17, 2022.

I made a point to thank and give a gift to everyone who participated in the occasion. Surprisingly, the events and activities unleashed by the chieftaincy celebration turned out to be a unifying phenomenon the likes of which have not been experienced in Ukwu's compound in a long time. Funerals, which evoke a completely different set of emotions, and marriage ceremonies were the next best activity that had brought people together as much as the chieftaincy did. Based on that fact alone, my change of mind to accept the chieftaincy was a good decision for the Ukwu family as well. At a time when a handful of us are at loggerheads with one another, the chieftaincy brought us rays of sunshine and a rare opportunity to rejoice together.

At least one person, who was home in the Ukwu compound on December 17, 2022, did not attend the chieftaincy celebration. Perhaps he was sick.

"You can't win them all", says Connie Mack, an American professional baseball catcher, manager, and team owner.

Igbo Proverbs

Nigerian Culture, and by extension, African Culture, is an endangered species. This conclusion was made before I discovered a viewpoint that seems to corroborate the conclusion. I say “seems” because I couldn’t read the complete publication. “Endangered Species: African Cultures, Languages and Literatures” (Ezeigbo, 2016) by Professor Akachi Ezeigbo appears to arrive at the same conclusion through alternative reasoning and logic.

Here is the logic

1. Those who seem to do the best job of documenting and preserving cultures belong mostly in the world of academia, judging from the European and American experiences.
2. Africans are most likely to do the best job of preserving and documenting their own history and culture.
3. The literacy level in Africa is below normal expectations.
4. The number of Africans that go to college is below normal expectations.
5. The number of Africans that go on to get advanced education degrees is below normal expectations.
6. The number of Africans with advanced degrees that major in African Studies is low.
7. The number of non-Africans who could specialize in African Studies and do a decent job of studying African Culture is also low.
8. The elders who possess the knowledge of African cultures are diminishing by the day. They are taking their knowledge with them to the graves.
9. The youths of today do not visit the villages often enough to pick up stories and oral traditions from predecessors amidst the distractions from social media, fads, and other latest crazes.

Those are some of the reasons African Cultures are in danger of being extinct. This addendum of Igbo proverbs is a minuscule attempt and contribution in honor of African Culture. If every African alive would do something, no matter how small, the state of African culture will not remain static or remain as bad as it is today.

Igbo Proverb	Translation	Usage
Igwe nine na eje n'uzu	All metals visit the blacksmith	It happens to everyone, for example, when people die they all end up somewhere.
Onye nyelu ukwu nye'm egwu	Whoever I gave legs should give me a dance.	To whom more is given, more is expected.
Mmili ada ebu onye onafuro ukwu ya	You will not drown if you do not visit a river.	it's difficult to get pregnant without intimacy
Ego di na ogwu	Money or wealth is wrapped in thorns or "no pain no gain".	
Mgbe onye ji teta ula bu ututu ya	Whenever you wake up is your morning.	Never too late to get things done.
Ejiro ife eji agba n'anti agba n'anya	What's used to clean the ears may not work for the eyes.	This matter deserves special attention.
Mma nwelu isi adiro nko; mma di nko, enwero isi.	The knife with handle is not sharp; the knife that is sharp has no handle.	No one has it all.
Ngwele sina enu da, si obulu na etoro ya, ya eto onwe ya	The lizard that jumped said if no one would praise it, it would praise itself, and that's why it nods.	That's why we sometimes pat ourselves on the back.
Egwu na aka nso na akuku	Dancing is easier from the sidelines because you really don't know what it takes.	Be slow to judge
Nikita nwelu ndidi n'ata okpukpu bulu ibu	A patient dog eats the fattest bone.	Patience is a virtue. Let's learn to be patient.
Onye agu na aha njo eghe	A hungry person often makes wrong choices	Be in the best mood for different decisions.
Ebulu ozu onye ozo, odi ka ukwu nku	Someone else's corps may seem like another piece of luggage.	You never know the gravity of things until you are a victim.

Ofia sili onye afo na asa, obulu n'am afuro gi ozo, idigo mma	The woods tell the man with diarrhea that if he doesn't visit again, then he must be cured.	Something you would say to a relative who defaults on a loan payment.
Onye an'akpo nwelu ife o'nalu	When people call you repeatedly, you must be important	Take pride in what you do, don't be so modest
Onye ana enye nni, n'ewta onu	He who is fed must bring their mouth	Participation in your own rescue is critical.
Ife ana acho n'uko enu, ada-a n'uko ani	What was sought from the top kitchen cabinet has landed on the lower levels	Things just got easier
Ona adi mma ka ikuku kue, ka afu ike okuku	It's good for the wind to blow so that the chicken's rump may be exposed	It's good sometimes to expose what is hidden from view.
Anya n'eli tupu onu elie	The eyes eat before the mouth.	Presentation is everything.
Anyuko mamili ogba ufufu	When we urinate in the same spot, it foams	When we work together, we can move mountains
Oburo Onu Eji Bili Aku, k'oji akwu ya	It is not the same words used to borrow money that are used to pay it.	People will say anything to get what they want in a time of need.
Anu s'olu enwe, omajie aka.	When other animals follow the chimp/monkey, they are bound to break an arm.	Be careful of the company you keep.
Mmili dolu n'ibeju, d'olu nwa nkita	The water in a dog water dispenser awaits the dog.	Your responsibilities do not go away
Welu ile gi guo eze	Use your tongue to count your teeth	You can always figure out the obvious
Egbe belu ugo belu nke s'ibe ya ebena, nku kwa ya	The kite perches and the eagle perches and whichever refuses the other, may its wings break.	Live and let live is the key to life.

Onye kpatalu nku s'ili ahuhu bia olili	He who fetches firewood invites the ants for a visit	
Onye a'nakpo nwelu ife o'nalu	Whoever gets the calls must have things to offer.	Accept what you are worth in- lieu of modesty.
Ada alu olu n'Ogbete Eli ugwo n'Oloko	You can work at Ogbete and earn your paycheck at Oloko	Cut your coat according to your size.

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THE END

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