

"What a Use of His Years"

September 4, 2020

Dear Students,

I've recently been thinking a little bit about getting older. (Can you guess one reason why?)

OK, but the real reason that prompted my thinking was Chadwick Boseman's death last Friday, at only 43 years old. You probably know him as King T'Challa from *Black Panther* - if you haven't seen that movie, then I recommend trying to find it online somehow. Though he is most famous for that role, he had starring roles in other major films, several of which portrayed Black American heroes such as Jackie Robinson, James Brown and Thurgood Marshall.

There has been a huge reaction across the world in response to his death - actually the tweet that announced it had the largest number of engagements in Twitter's history. A lot of that is due to how important Boseman's acting was for many people around the world, especially Africans and Black Americans, in changing perspectives about heroism, strength, and power and who represents those qualities.

But some of the reaction was also how he died. He was young - not much more than twice your age when he was diagnosed with cancer, and only a few years older than most of your teachers. He died unexpectedly - only a very small number of people knew that he had cancer. And a lot of his most important movies were filmed while he was undergoing cancer treatment. All testaments to his amazing strength as a person, his humility, and the sense of loss felt among those who knew that he still had a lot to give.

Even in a shortened life, though, he inspired millions of people, and that inspiration will live on because it is memorialized on screen. Nigerian doctor Ifeanyi Nsofor compared Boseman's passing to the falling of a great tree, writing: "the fall is also not the end of the tree because its deep roots ensures it keeps sending out new sprouts."

Or as Barack Obama wrote on Twitter after: "To be young, gifted, and Black; to use that power to give them heroes to look up to; to do it all while in pain - what a use of his years."

So here are the two things I've been thinking about because of Chadwick Boseman. First, how can we each be role models for our people - whoever 'our people' may be? As the writer Alice Walker said, "the most common way that people give up their power is by thinking that they don't have any." So how can we inspire strength and power in those who might not realize they have it?

And second, I wonder how each of us might live differently if we knew that we would die young. Would it make us more determined to inspire other people, use our short time to lift people up? What would we do more of? What would we do less of, or not at all? Each of us probably have something that we *truly* want to do before our life ends - what is yours? And how can you make sure you get it done?

There aren't definite answers, but nonetheless I leave you to think about these questions over the coming week.

Sincerely,
James