

Thank you Chadwick Bose Man: A Tribute to A Real-Life Hero and to All the Heroes Inspired by Him



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Abstract

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the international protests for racial justice, suddenly the news came that Chadwick Boseman passed away. Boseman is internationally famous for his role in Black Panther (2018) and for many he is the first Black hero on screen. A major milestone when it comes to representation. But there is more that makes his story remarkable. Boseman is not only a hero on screen, but a real-life hero as well-with a story to keep in our hearts. When his death was announced, it appears that he was diagnosed with cancer, but continued to work on various films, including Black Panther. Heroes are often characterized by courage. To be courageous means to accomplish goals when facing difficulties, and that is exactly what Boseman did. Stories about heroes like Boseman can inspire us and our children to find and fulfill our purpose in life, especially during these difficult times we are living in. These stories help us to remember that darkness is always a call to put our strengths into action. In this tribute #ThankYouChadwickBoseman, we describe what is known about this topic and provide new directions for future research in the field of positive media psychology.

Keywords: Meaningful stories; Heroes; Representation; Life purpose; Character strengths; Courage; Perseverance

Purpose and Legacy

For most of us the year 2020 has been challenging in more ways than we could have ever imagined. For some it has even been harder than for others. The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, the racial injustice-despite the support for the Black Lives Matter movement increased this year [1], and of course climate change. As we were struggling to find a way to combat today's and tomorrow's challenges, a devastating Twitter message was sent out to the world on August 29. Actor Chadwick Boseman passed away at the age of 43 after a four-year battle against cancer. One might wonder why, in the light of the current public health, economic, and racial threats, the death of an actor whom we have never met mattered so much. Boseman played iconic and memorable roles in films like 42, Marshall, Da 5 Bloods, but internationally most of us will remember him as superhero King T'Challa in the Avengers film Black Panther. It was not until his death that we learned that he shot this and other films while battling cancer privately. The tweet that announced this news described Boseman as being a true fighter and is the most retweeted tweet of the year 2020 and the most-liked tweet ever [2,3].

At heart, stories of heroes are always journeys by which the hero is striving for a better world in which many challenges have to be overcome, with the stakes getting higher and higher [4,5]. Heroes are characterized by courage, indicating that they persist towards their goals despite of the difficulties and setbacks [6]. Boseman dared to challenge the situation in which Black people were stereotyped and he worked hard on changing this perspective, during and between a myriad of surgeries and chemotherapy. He contributed to our collectively uttered need of true representation, both in media and real-life. Boseman served a higher purpose and encouraged others to do the same. In his own words: "Purpose is an essential element of you. It is the reason you are on the planet at this particular time in history" [7]. Boseman spent his valuable and precious time to motivate and inspire others through his stories. Many people, including ourselves, were deeply moved by his story. His impact, especially on the next generation, was beyond our awareness. In the days following his death, children started holding funerals and memorials with their Avengers action figures as a tribute to their superhero. It was

heartbreaking to see those of Black children mourning the loss of a King, a superhero with a face that finally looked like them.

The Importance of Inspiring Role Models

Growing up many of us have had questions like “Who inspires you?”, “Who do you look up to?”, or “Who do you admire the most?”. These may sound as cliché questions, but the underlying reasoning is still relevant. Having a role model can have positive influences on our motivation and the realization of our goals. Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters [8] have identified three distinct functions that role models can serve. They can act as:

- a) Behavioural models = facilitate skill acquisition through vicarious learning
- b) Representations of the possible = increase motivation by changing self-stereotypes
- c) Inspiration = adoption of new goals by identification and admiration

One of the simplest ways to act as a role model is by helping somebody achieve an already existing goal. The focus here is on learning how to do something rather than noticing that something is possible. For instance, a father showing his son how to shave for the first time, or a high school mentor coaching a student on time management. It is through social learning that the other person acquires skills and knowledge [8].

Role models can act as representations of the possible as well. The value of role models in underrepresented and misrepresented groups is even more important than for others. For instance, for Black people-who are more likely to be portrayed as criminals [9], and for women, who are not only underrepresented [10,11], but also stereotyped as merely being responsible for child care [12]. These examples of false and incomplete images in the media are known to have a negative effect on children's perception. A study on the representation of Black females in popular media and how these media outlets are viewed by Black adolescent girls, confirmed the former notion [13]. The young Black girls believed that Black females and girlhood were negatively portrayed in the media using the following examples: being judged by their hair, being described as angry, loud, or violent, and being sexualized and objectified. Accurate representations of the possible, both in the media and in real-life, can help break with these stereotypes.

Having a role model with shared attributes, such as similarity or shared group membership, can help to change perceived barriers and self-stereotyping. Boseman is such a strong character as well with representing what is possible: you can become anything you want, even a superhero. The extent to which this will take place depends for a large part on attainability. Attainability is defined as the degree to which someone can see him or herself being like the role model in the future [8]. Believing that you have the potential to be like your role model will positively contribute to

the process of breaking down barriers and changing stereotypes, and increases the motivation to reach an existing or new goal. A good example of this is the “Obama effect”. The accomplishment of being the first Black-American president in the United States, resulted in a powerful impact of in-group role model [14]. More importantly, previous literature has shown that emphasizing, the sometimes unknown, shared attributes can stimulate positive behavior. Findings of a study by Lin-Siegler, Ahn, Chen, Fang, and Luna-Lucero [15] revealed that enlarging shared attributes-such as the experience of failures and struggles-between well-known scientists (yes, even Einstein struggled) and students had a positive effect on students' motivation and academic performance.

Role models can also function as inspiration in the adoption of new goals through identification and admiration. A beautiful example of this is the “Batman effect”, which is based upon a study among young children that revealed that pretending to be Batman can lead to improved perseverance [16]. When Black Panther (2018) hit the theaters and people all over the world were dressing up as they went to see the release in cinemas. To be honest, we regret not doing the same. The dressing up was a way of celebrating not only its enormous success, but merely its existence as it was one first time that the beauty and accomplishments of the African nation were fully portrayed instead of focusing solely on the struggles and the suppression of Black people. Black children now had King T'Challa with whom they could identify and Wakanda suddenly embodied our strive to something new and better, a thriving African nation. People felt inspired. Recent findings suggest that stories with strong characters can increase recipients' beliefs being in control of their own lives [17]. In his last tweet Boseman celebrated his support for senator Kamala Harris in the presidential election of the United States. He encouraged others to use their right to vote. Sadly, he did not survive to see Harris became the first woman and person of color elected as vice-president. Harris, a new inspiring role model for (Black) women and girls, praised Boseman shortly after his death for helping paint a new picture of what is possible. In her first speech as vice-president elect Harris expressed her own helping hand in changing the narrative, as she said: “But while I may be the first woman in this office, I won't be the last”.

Stories to Help us Find and Fulfil our Purpose

Pioneering studies from the field of positive media psychology have indicated that the entertainment industry and other media sources can offer stories that are truly moving and encourage us to reflect on life's purpose [18-23]. Both the film stories and the life story of Boseman can encourage contemplation and help us to think about the purpose of our own life: Why am I on this planet? Next to helping to find our purpose, good stories can help us to fulfil our purpose by giving inspiration for character strength development. Stories often move us deeply with beautiful portrayals of love, kindness, courage or other strong

displays of virtue [21,24-27]. Just like our favorite characters put their strengths into action while the challenges getting more extreme, we can also bring our strengths to life. It would be fascinating for future research to examine whether stories with strong protagonists can inspire to have faith and a drive to never give up, especially during challenging situations. After all, for the virtue of courage difficulties and setbacks are needed in order to display this strength [6]. In line with the study from Lin-Siegler and colleagues [15], we argue that stories can inspire or strengthen a growth mindset—a mindset that is based on the belief that our abilities are attributes we can develop through our efforts [28,29]. A growth mindset allows us to thrive during the most challenging times in their lives. To highlight this idea with Boseman’s words: “Whatever you choose for a career path, remember, the struggles along the way are only meant to shape you for your purpose.” [7,30,31].

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