

From Njabulo Ndebele, Centre of Memory Acting Chairperson

Remembering Jakes

I am greatly honoured that the Gerwel family asked me to speak in memory of Jakes as a friend. One morning in August, Jakes and I flew together from Cape Town to Johannesburg for a meeting of the Nelson Mandela Foundation trustees. Never could I have imagined that only three months later, I would be speaking in his memory at this heavy moment. The shock of it is still raw. I tremble at the sense of his presence becoming memory.

I remember vividly the first time we met – it was at the inaugural conference of the Institute of Black Studies, at the Wilgespruit Fellowship Centre, in July of 1976. The historic events of June 16 had occurred barely a month earlier. I had travelled from Lesotho on a Lesotho passport, wondering if I would return to Lesotho. But my fears were far less than my desire to be with other academic activists at that conference.

The tension in Soweto seemed to freeze in the July winter. Even the black smoke that rose from burning buildings in various parts of sprawling Soweto did not give the impression of coming from heat. A desolate, grim coldness hung over the place. There was something fearsome about it. But there was also something “dying to be born”. June 16 changed us utterly. A terrible beauty was born.

That is the context in which I first met Jakes, who sported an Afro hairstyle that clearly marked him out as an activist with purpose. His Afro may not have been as captivating as Angela Davis’s at the time, but it was sufficiently well contoured to remind us of her and the Soledad Brothers. I looked at his head and his hair many times after that, and saw how the assertive hairstyle of 1976 progressively turned into a pushed-back silvery grey of enormous dignity.

I have often gone back to that conference in my mind. Some memories of that time came in handy in moments of leadership difficulty in my days as one of Jakes’s deputies at UWC, and thereafter. More recently I thought about that conference as a citizen watching the South African public space. It struck me how much we, a younger generation in our late 20s and early 30s, must have frustrated elders such as Es’kia Mphahlele at that conference with our “revolutionary” rhetoric. There could have been no other truths possible besides our “revolutionary” truths.

Alternatively, the older generation, in their wisdom, may have found in us, despite their frustration, objects of some amusement: “How hilariously serious the young upstarts took themselves!” they may have thought. Nevertheless, they indulged us.

It was in such moments, when the young and the older faced each other in tension, that Jakes’s leadership at UWC edged us toward tricky moments of transition, from frustration to wisdom. Today some public leaders, often described as “the youth”, speak in brazen impertinence and insolence in the service of “revolution”. Exasperated and frustrated, you feel like pulling out an *umshini wakho*, only to put it back again, in a fleeting moment of sobering reflection.

Some of the most formative times in leadership were when Jakes got us to offer recalcitrant student leaders and their followers victories, which we allowed them to win at the expense of our not looking good. And so we would ride the wave of having “lost”, having bought some months of peace. This happened when a brazen exercise of authority that we could exercise, we perceived to have the capacity to worsen the situation. You can be right but make the situation worse. Correctness is not always prudent.

But far more important for Jakes was the far-sighted philosophy behind it all. Young people, and students in particular, are made to test the world and push boundaries. By extension, holders of the authority of government in a democracy must have the wisdom to know that civil society, trade unions and even the corporate world are made to test the boundaries of state authority. The task of leadership is to retain visionary authority to sometimes allow the bounds of formal authority to be pushed, for tactical concessions to be made, and to retain the wisdom and the strength, and the strategic and moral authority, to hold everything together. A vibrant democracy such as ours demands no less.

Jakes, the friend who often wore an unreadable face in public, and who presided over many a crisis, developed an inner gaze that allowed him to take the pain and win the peace. He possessed the gift of nuance and the clarity of principle. In this manner, he took us along with him.

And so the determined, youthful face of 1976 slowly gave way to one marked by an inward gaze and silences fraught with presence. It became a face etched with sensitivities, deep concerns, confidentialities, agonies, and empathies of various kinds; a face of one carrying the hopes, expectations and dignities embodied in institutions he led, and the boards and committees he was chairman of. If ever Jakes bore a cross, he carried it with forbearance, without the rituals of a public crucifixion.

The incisiveness of his mind, riding on the wave of his words, told you that the inward gaze was constantly processing the world in which he lived. It must have been in that inward gaze that Jakes mapped out how he would go about bringing change in his world. Jakes's smile was in your understanding of the clarity of his thoughts, rather than in the parting of his lips and the showing of his teeth.

With this inward gaze, aided by a detailed memory, Jakes collected in his mind numerous juicy stories and anecdotes that always conveyed a pithy message. Countless Madiba anecdotes, in the service of some insight, never failed to be instructively funny. A glint and a chuckle signalled the beginning of such a pithy anecdote. Without a smile in between, Jakes would erupt into the gift of outright laughter. It was as if his inner gaze sometimes churned volcanoes.

The man who in 1990 came all the way from Cape Town to Lesotho, with his wife Phoebe, to recruit me is impossible to forget. The deepest personal impact of that gesture was in making a person feel wanted. And so must many have felt this way when invited by Jakes to join him and become part of a path-breaking institutional project.

He was determined that UWC would become a new kind of university in South Africa. And it did. It was his quiet yet intense determination that got him closer and closer to his goal.

We had a hurdle to jump when the government of the time refused me a work permit to return home to work, turning against me the prior advantage of a Lesotho passport, at a crucial time, in my attempt to reclaim my birthright. Despite a public petition, if UWC failed on that occasion, Wits won a few months later. Perhaps the government did not want another battle, this time with a powerful white institution. But I was not to stay long at Wits.

Jakes had a galvanising and focused vision for UWC to bring together a non-racial concentration of transformational talent of a magnitude not since achieved. On my part, having lived in Lesotho for 20 years, it was difficult for me to adjust to continuing racial dominance in an institutional setting. Far more than a matter of politics, it was about reliving a life such as I had experienced in Lesotho that affirmed one's being without postures of proclamation, or rejection. Soon, I was where Jakes and UWC had wanted me to be. It was to be a brief but intense period of growth.

If I began with a plane ride with Jakes – and we took several together – I will end with reflections on another one. On a few occasions we talked about the famous 7am SAA flight from Cape Town to Johannesburg. More often than not, that flight would be laden with UWC activist academics on some serious mission or other. There was always a great deal to talk about, and a two-hour flight seemed like one hour.

Many years later, Jakes and I made little attempt to sit together on the same flight. We had less interest in talking at that time of the day. It had become far more important to catch some sleep. We both agreed, on a few occasions, that the two-hour sleep on the plane to Johannesburg was priceless.

And so, that is how I like to think we enjoyed our friendship. I experienced it deeply, with mutual high regard and affection, but unencumbered by regularity. Each time we met, our friendship ignited. And we enjoyed the heat of it, sometimes in silence: two thoughtful people often at a loss for words, but in communication nevertheless.

Listen to Jakes on his appointment as Vice-chancellor of UWC in 1985. "I am from a younger generation with a good dose of Marxism as critical paradigm ... I come from a generation which says that politics always plays a role; academe and the university also have a real role to bring about political change ... I am becoming rector at a time when the crisis of authority, the crisis of validity – some people call it the crisis of legitimacy – of the state and the government is not any longer just a theoretical construction but is written in huge letters in every house, every school and the university."

To some, the words of 27 years ago may ring with disturbing familiarity today. If so, there is a big difference to note. Then, we wanted nothing less than to take over a country that others had made at our expense. Today, we hunger for a country that we South Africans want to make, and have to make, with our own minds and hands. If at the time we focused on the actions of others on us, today we have ourselves to face. Jakes's inner gaze should be the source of our future laughter after many chuckles of finding one another. We run away from ourselves to the peril of our country.

On the day of Jakes's passing, Mpho and I spent a precious afternoon with Phoebe and the Gerwel family. We thank them for letting us in. We saw so much of Jakes that day: a smile here; a nose there; lips here; a glint in the eyes over there; a gesture of the hands; a tilting of the body; silver hair there; even a familiar gait, and vast quantities of hospitality, generosity and affection.

To you, Phoebe, and the family, we are a grateful nation for one who was husband to you, a father to your children, a brother to others, an uncle to many more, and a friend and comrade to thousands more. We give you our sympathies.

May Jakes Gerwel rest in peace!