

Day 28 Devotional

From *The Blue Room* by Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana; February 26, 2021:

Many years ago, during a visit to the The Art Institute of Chicago, I saw an exhibition of the photography of Gordon Parks paired with the prose of Ralph Ellison. The images and stories wove a picture of life in Harlem which they called “Harlem is Nowhere.” One photo caught my eye: a client at the Lafargue Clinic, his head in his hands. The caption read, “The Lafargue Clinic aims to transfer despair, not into hope but into determination.”

I was struck by the substitution—despair into *hope* is the common cliché, traced all the way back to St. Francis (where there is despair, let me sow hope, according to the prayer attributed to him). Yet sometimes hope is beyond our fumbling grasp; determination is the best we can do. As I wrote in *God, Improv, and the Art of Living*, “Learning to improvise means letting go of expectations—of success or positive outcomes or even progress. Our job is to respond... We don’t know where the scene is going to go; saying the next Yes is what matters.”

I was thinking about Parks, Ellison, and the Lafargue Clinic last Tuesday as [my friend Derrick Weston](#) and I unpacked the Marvel movie *Black Panther*. We talked about hope and its connection to perseverance and steadfastness, even more than any connection to a specific positive outcome. The mythical nation of Wakanda is infused with a sense of heritage, honor, and permanence. Ancestors are revered, and the society and tech are powered by an element, vibranium, which exists in abundant supply in Wakanda.

As a result, the people of Wakanda are able to take a long view of things. The brilliant inventor Shuri, always tinkering, says to her brother T’Challa (the current King and Black Panther), “Just because something works doesn't mean that it cannot be improved.” And over time, T’Challa comes to realize that Wakandans cannot stay sequestered and protected from the rest of the world, sitting by while others remain oppressed and suffering. They must enter the fray, working for justice and the flourishing of their brothers and sisters around the world.

In a number of Marvel films, T’Challa rallies his troops with the cry of “Yibambe!” which is a Xhosa word meaning “be strong” or “hold fast.” I love that, at pivotal moments of conflict, the battle cry isn’t “Charge!” or “Take no prisoners!” or “Show no mercy!” or some other swaggering Rambo-inflected line. It is simply, *Be strong. Hold the line. Stand with courage.* Implicit in that idea is to bring your best to the task, but let go of outcome. Standing fast doesn’t

necessarily mean victory or success, but there's dignity in the act. It matters for its own sake. Wakanda's mightiest general, Okoye, embodies this ideal: when another character laments that a certain battle will be the end of Wakanda, she answers, "Then it will be the noblest ending in history."

Last year, after Jacob Blake was shot by police in Kenosha, Wisconsin, the author and speaker [Austin Channing Brown](#) tweeted, "I get asked about hope a lot when talking about race in America. White folks usually mean 'are you optimistic.' But Black folks connect hope to duty, legacy, the good fight." *Yibambe*.

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