

## Black Panther: Wakanda Forever: More Than a Marvel Adventure Movie

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"Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" is a rare sequel -- one I found to be even better than its predecessor, "Black Panther," in terms of the depth of its message and themes even though the Marvel Cinematic Universe film is minus its former lead actor with the 2020 death of Chadwick Boseman.

The movie is a typical Marvel film complete with lots of action, superhuman feats and high-tech wonders. "Wakanda Forever" also continues to emphasize the theme of diversity, but expands this focus more powerfully to highlight gender, age and Hispanic/indigenous culture along with that of Black culture. As good as this is, though, it is not the real power behind the film.



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What makes the movie particularly poignant are timely and highly relevant themes that stand out for today's world. Foremost is the focus on forgiveness vs. revenge. This leads to the closely-related issue of the meaning and power of love over hate that enables one to genuinely forgive. The final theme is the role of women as peacemakers.

What enables these themes to stand out is the context of age that is subtly present throughout the film. It took about 30 minutes before I realized that most of the main characters are part of the millennial generation. As an educator and minister, I found this to be a significant feature of the movie because of the issues the characters are facing. All this makes for a more sobering film this time around.

The death of King T'Challa (Boseman, the original Black Panther) is never far from the hearts and minds of the main characters and is woven into the storyline as the film begins with Wakanda mourning the death of its king despite his sister, Princess Shuri's frantic efforts to save her brother. This sets Shuri (Letitia Wright) on the path of having to deal with her grief and anger over this loss, leaving her to question love, forgiveness and eternal life.

Soon after her brother's memorial service, several pivotal events take place that become the catalysts for Shuri and several key women to come to terms with these important themes. One lingering question that hangs in the air from the first film concerns T'Challa's previous offer to share Wakanda's knowledge about vibranium with the world now that the Black Panther is gone. Are world leaders wise and mature enough to handle such an offer without greed and violence? Unfortunately, we know the answer to that question all too well.

In the year following T'Challa's death, Queen Ramonda (Angela Bassett) and the Dora Milaje security forces find themselves protecting Wakanda from those forces seeking to gain access to vibranium. Some

efforts led to violent confrontations that were wrongly blamed on the Wakandans. So each event increases the tension and fear for the future of Wakanda in the heart of Ramonda and Shuri.

At the center of this struggle comes a new threat, whose very existence came about centuries earlier because of vibranium -- an underwater culture known as the Talokan. Their leader, Namor (Tenoch Huerta), sets things in motion by confronting Ramonda and Shuri when he finds them alone on a beach preparing for a final family ritual to end their year of mourning T'Challa.

Noting who and what he is, and most importantly, his connection to vibranium, Namor gives Ramonda and Shuri an ultimatum. They must find the young scientist who created a special device that can detect vibranium so he can destroy her before other forces find her and build additional machines that can detect the Talokan underwater world and its rich deposits of vibranium. If they refuse, Talokan warriors will destroy Wakanda and its people.

Shuri subsequently begins a journey that ultimately takes her to the young scientist and to the Talokan underwater world. On learning the full story of the Talokans, her young heart resonates with the sorrow they have experienced and feels drawn to finding a solution beyond violence and revenge. As she tells Namor, destroying the "surface world" will not soothe their heart or ease their pain. At the same time, she is still battling her own demons and pain, wanting revenge against those she believed were responsible for her brother's decline in health and ultimate death. The rescue and return of Shuri and the scientist from Talokan, unfortunately leads to the promised war between the Talokans and Wakanda.

The attack on Wakanda is disastrous, resulting in the death of Queen Ramonda, the one remaining family member that anchored Shuri to a sense of love, forgiveness and an awareness of an eternal existence. The loss of her mother leaves Shuri emotionally adrift and drives her to take a drastic step that ultimately leads to her becoming the next Black Panther. This is a bold cinematic step to take; choosing a young woman as the next Black Panther.

As part of her trip to the ancestral plane, Shuri meets with Erik "Killmonger" Stevens (Michael B. Jordan) who encourages her feelings of revenge. She chooses to listen to his voice, which completes her change from a young woman who had the opportunity to be the peacemaker and show the world the way of love and forgiveness to a young woman with power filled with anger, eager for revenge and ready to wage war to avenge her family and people.

Three main themes make this a meaningful and sobering film.

*Forgiveness vs. revenge:* At a time when our world is faced with so much violence, hatred and division, "Wakanda Forever" reminds us that the true path to peace lies in forgiveness and not revenge. The visible difference between Shuri in the original Black Panther film -- a woman filled with excitement and promise -- and in this sequel, a Shuri filled with pain and anger, were like two different characters. That is the challenge of a heart filled with revenge. It changes an individual emotionally and physically.

We do not recognize the psychological and physiological damage that such feelings can do to our bodies and minds. Like a cancer, revenge eats away at one's body and soul, preventing one from acting out of their original nature. Revenge continually feeds one's fallen nature by blocking one from connecting with and feeling the restorative and healing love of God that flows within each person. Revenge does not allow one to move forward because it keeps one tied to the actions and behaviors that were harmful. Our minds are forced to dwell on those actions, words and behaviors that hurt us; revenge makes one a prisoner to angry thoughts and feelings.

This also harms the body physically as it generates cortisol, a chemical that adds to our stress levels and eventually damages the neurons in our brain and other cells throughout our bodies. Harboring revenge feeds this harmful process until it is released through forgiveness.

That is the reality of revenge. We can often see the effects of revenge on others more easily than on ourselves. Shuri recognizes the effect of revenge in Namor but not in herself.

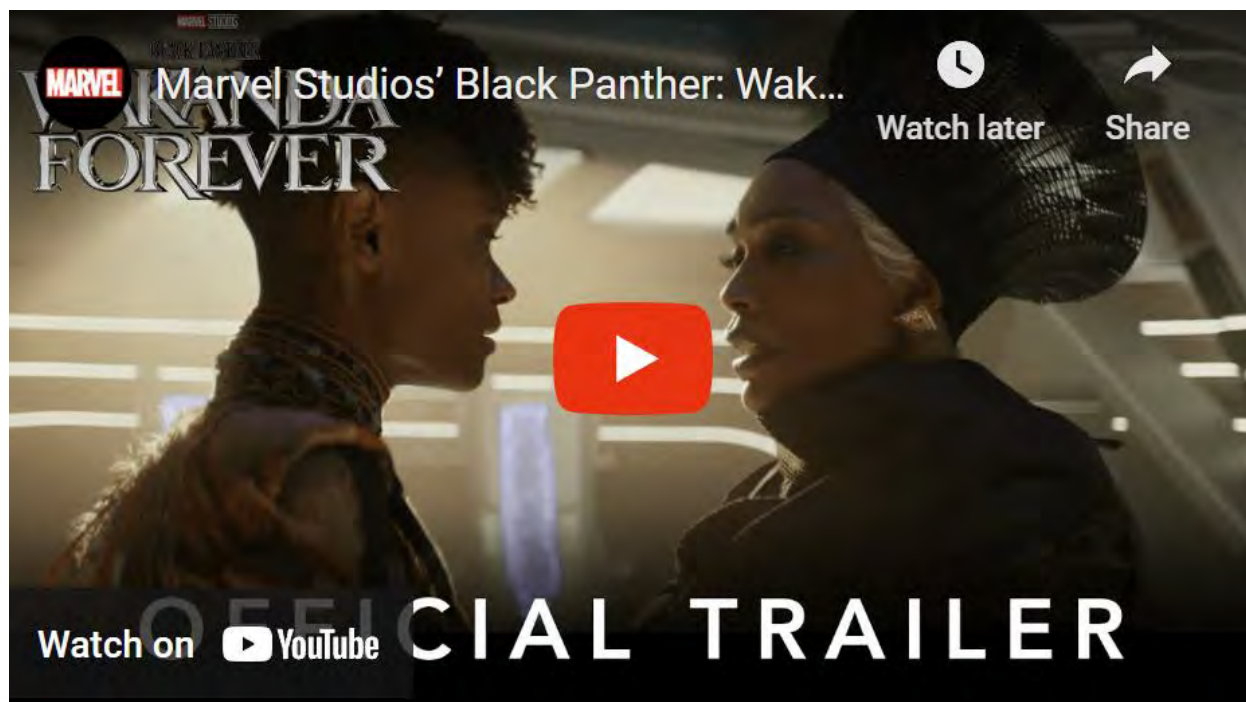
This is why forgiveness is for those offering it. It is to free them and their hearts from being continually tied to the wrong done to them so they are able to move forward in their life and heal. Forgiveness stops the endless conversation one has in their mind about the pain and hurt they experienced. Forgiveness helps one stop the mental playback function we experience when we have been hurt by someone so our higher order thinking can be heard and guide our thoughts and action. In other words, it is forgiveness that allows one's original nature to be heard and to acted on.

At the same time, it also frees the person who committed the wrong to atone for their actions and behavior, giving them the opportunity to change their behavior as well. Without feeling continual anger from those they wronged and hearing about the pain they caused, it leaves space for them to hear the voice of their conscience and original mind that can guide them in the direction of atonement and correct

behavior as well. At least forgiveness creates the possibility for this type of change to take place. We just might see this level of forgiveness in the third film in the Black Panther franchise.

*The power of love:* There are multiple levels of love and forgiveness needing to be faced by different characters. Namor is given an opportunity to lead the Talokans to forgive those who have harmed them throughout their history and to love surface people again. However, instead he chooses to encourage revenge within the hearts of the people. We see this when he proudly tells Shuri that his name means "child without love" and that he "has no love for the surface world." What is paradoxical is that Shuri recognizes the need for Namor to develop a forgiving heart and to be a peacemaker who can love others again, though she cannot see the same in herself.

It is this need to hold on to one's feelings of hate and anger along with the inability to feel and give love that underlies this struggle to forgive. The film is an excellent visualization of the hardness that develops when one lives a life around seeking revenge and in protecting oneself and loved ones from being hurt -- living a life without authentic love and a forgiving heart. The bright, creative heart and spirit that was witnessed in the Shuri of the first Black Panther film have now been replaced by an angry, somber Shuri intent on revenge who seems convinced that love no longer exists in the world. She is pragmatic, scientific and living in the here and now.



*The official trailer for "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" (courtesy Marvel Studios).*

*The emphasis on women and their unique role as peacemakers:* It is so timely to have women in the central roles in "Wakanda Forever." These are strong yet caring, intelligent, confident, and creative women. Having such women in the role of peace-builders is especially crucial at this time providentially. But even more important, all of the women, with the exception of Queen Ramonda, were millennials. This I found to be particularly poignant.

Many of today's younger adult women are searching for effective role models who have found a sense of balance and meaning in life, love, purpose, and spirituality in our high-tech world. "Wakanda Forever" presents a central character who, having grown up surrounded by such advanced technology, exemplifies these same struggles faced by today's millennial women. Here is a brilliant woman who can do amazing things with technology but cannot reconcile that with an equally powerful understanding of spirituality and an eternal existence until she comes face-to-face with its reality. What a powerful visual message for what is now, numerically, the largest and potentially most influential generation.

One of the most prophetic and dramatic images of the film comes toward the end after Shuri has her spiritual awakening, so to speak, realizing she has let vengeance consume her and takes on the role of genuine peace-builder after joining hands with Namor. This was the culmination of the major themes coming together -- forgiveness and women as peacemakers. Of course, this can only be the beginning and not a Hollywood ending. Peace-building is not an end but a beginning process.

Thankfully, the film does not hype this moment. At the very end, we witness Shuri recognizing her limitations and need to reflect on all that her mother had tried to teach her. She does so by going to Haiti to see T'Challa's wife, Nakia (Lupita Nyong'o) and completing the initial ceremony of burning her funeral clothing for her brother that she had refused to do in the beginning -- a sign that just maybe she was learning to forgive herself and move forward.

Overall, "Wakanda Forever" takes on deep and relevant themes that are not for the faint of heart. That's why I recommend this film. In fact, those especially between ages 16 and 40 should see the film. After watching it, I encourage viewers to take the time to reflect, talk about it and see what you got from the movie besides having watched an exciting adventure film. For me, I'm glad I chose it as my end of the year movie as it was the perfect way to begin 2023!

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*"Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" (rated PG-13): Running time: 2 hours 41 minutes. Directed by Ryan Coogler; written by Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole. Main cast: Angela Bassett, Lake Bell, Danai Gurira, Tenoch Huerta, Daniel Kaluuya, Lupita Nyong'o, and Letitia Wright. See IMDb for full details. The film is still in some theaters and will be available to stream on Disney+ beginning February 1 and on DVD/Blu-ray on February 7. (Yes, there is a post-credits scene!)*

*Photo at top: A movie still from "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" featuring Angela Bassett as Queen Ramonda (courtesy Marvel Studios).*