

**“Do the Next Right Thing”**  
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Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Sometimes, a movie surprises me with its wisdom. Many of Disney’s recent films seem to be doing this, especially *Frozen II*. This film takes place in a world similar to ours, in what appears to be the early Renaissance, and in a country called Arendelle that is meant to imitate Norway. The film has two main characters: Elsa, the queen of the country Arendelle, and her sister Anna. It begins with everyone in the country happy and blissfully ignorant of their history and the history of the world around them, and with a song that celebrates the idea that some things will never change. But, for various reasons, the spirits of earth, air, fire and water seem to grow angry at their country and, because of the upheaval they cause, all of the inhabitants are forced to evacuate. The people are safe, but they must flee their homes into the wilderness with almost no supplies, and no knowledge of when, or if, they’ll be able to return. And, although they are familiar with some magic in their world (their queen, Elsa, can magically manipulate ice and snow), the elements of the earth have never acted in a magical fashion before. So, you can imagine how terrifying and confusing it would be for us if it turned out that fire or water had minds of their own and decided to kick us out of Grand Ledge.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

In this moment of terror and confusion, Anna and Elsa seek the advice of some wise creatures in the area, telling them that this is such new territory and so confusing that they don’t really know what to do next. When you find yourself in that position, say the wise creatures, all you can do is focus on the very next step that you will take and just do the next right thing.

Do the next right thing. I honestly think that this is one of more profound pieces of advice I’ve ever heard a children’s movie provide. When you can’t see far into the future, when your life is in turmoil, when you are in some kind of wilderness—physically or emotionally, literally or figuratively—your best response is to just take one step at a time. But each step should be the next right thing.

But how do we know what that is? Our scripture teaches us what that is: “God has told you, oh mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you? But to seek justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

So, we find that that’s exactly what Elsa and Anna do. They realize that their next step should be to find out why the spirits are angry, so they go on a journey to discover that. They basically wing it, each step taking them further and further into the unknown (which is, not coincidentally, the title of the film’s hit song). They find that there is a land not far from their home, which has been magically separated from the rest of the world by a fog. Years ago, Anna and Elsa’s grandparents signed a treaty with the native peoples of that land, the Northuldra, but something happened right after that treaty was signed. Violence broke out and the leaders of both nations were killed. Elsa’s father, who was a child at the time, was rescued by a Native child—who later became Anna and Elsa’s mother--and brought back to Arendelle. But the rest of the people were magically trapped in this timeless space.

This is a clever representation of what happens when violence breaks out between peoples and it isn't reconciled. Although the rest of the world may continue to unfold, those two peoples remember the violence. They hold onto it and the anger associated with it, passing that anger and hatred down from one generation to the next. It's as if they are frozen in time, their minds fogged with the memory of this animosity. To get out of that fog, the true history of violence needs to be understood by both sides.

Violence has occurred and those who love kindness and seek justice must find out why. So, the next right thing is for Anna and Elsa to discover how and why the violence was caused. The journey to learn this information is dangerous, since the spirits are so angry and unstable. But it's also dangerous because Anna and Elsa must discover something painful and horrible about their country's history. And this means that they must be humble enough to be willing to learn it.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Elsa and Anna become separated. Anna and one of her friends become lost in a deep cave, while Elsa finds the truth. In what is probably the best example of colonialism I've seen in a children's movie; we learn that her grandfather had never intended to keep the treaty with the native peoples in the first place. He had built them a dam, saying that it would provide them with energy—that it was a gift. But his real goal was to harness the power of the spirit of water and, once the dam was built, to kill the native peoples and take their land. Anna and Elsa's father kills the native leader and sparks a war. This is the cause of the spirits' anger.

The effect of learning of this family guilt and horror literally freezes Elsa in place. She turns into ice and, we believe, may be dead. Symbolically, this is a clever representation of what happens to so many of us when we learn about ways that we have failed as a nation. So many of us grow up believing that our country is great or that we live in the best nation on earth. And although there are some wonderful things about the United States, there are elements of our history that are truly horrific: slavery and the destruction of the native peoples are two of them. For many of us, when we learn about these things, we—very naturally—become horrified. Many of us feel guilty, even though we weren't the ones who committed the crimes. Part of us might not be able to believe what we're hearing. A part of our mind wants to just say that all of this was in the past and, though it was awful, it's over and done with now. But as this film shows us, there's a legacy to corporate evil. There's a long-term effect to injustice that separates people and that even the earth remembers. It can cause a seething anger and resentment in those who have been wronged, and a self-righteousness that is actually born of guilt in the descents of perpetrators. But we cannot let the guilt or the horror of this past freeze us in place. We need to respond somehow.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Right before Elsa turns to ice, she is able to send a message to her sister, telling her about her country's history. For Elsa, the next right thing is making sure that the true history of her people is known. But if just finding out this family history wasn't bad enough, Anna realizes that her sister has probably died finding this information and, at that same moment, she loses another friend. She is overcome by grief, literally weighed down so much by it that she almost cannot stand. And this is where I think this film makes its most important contribution. As Anna is struggling even to lift her head, she sings these words:

I've seen dark before, but not like this  
This is cold, this is empty, this is numb  
The life I knew is over, the lights are out  
Hello, darkness, I'm ready to succumb

But a tiny voice whispers in my mind  
You are lost, hope is gone  
But you must go on  
And do the next right thing

I don't know any more what is true  
I can't find my direction, I'm all alone  
The only star that guided me was you  
How to rise from the floor?  
But it's not you I'm rising for  
Just do the next right thing  
Take a step, step again  
It is all that I can to do  
The next right thing

The effect of putting a moment like this in a children's movie cannot be overstated. This film recognizes that our children and young people might experience overwhelming loss in their young lives. Or they might learn something about their country, or their family, or themselves that devastates them. They might experience severe depression that numbs them or weighs them down. Letting our young people see that even their heroes struggle with these things, and giving them one way to cope, is powerful. At these moments, suggests the film, all you can do is take one step at a time and to focus on what is right.

More importantly, Disney is making a rather bold statement, considering what they suggest the next right thing is.

Anna is able to climb out of that cave of despair and lead her people to destroy the dam, since the dam is a symbol of her grandfather's desire to steal and control the native people's land. Doing so will cause a tidal wave that will completely destroy her city. So even though her people are on high ground and won't be harmed, their land and their entire way of life will be destroyed. But this is what Anna believes is the right thing to do in order to truly repent for what her people had done.

What a choice to make. Recognizing the severe injustice her people caused, Anna is willing to take something important away from her own people, and willing to relinquish their power.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Of course, this is Disney movie and it cannot end in destruction. Anna's righteous act magically melts Elsa. This sort of thing happens to many of us, as well. We might become paralyzed by the weight of the earth's griefs, by the weight of injustice that we see, or by the weight of injustices our people have committed. But when we see how others respond, it frees us to take our own next right step.

In the story, since Elsa has been freed, she asks the spirits if just Anna's act of reconciliation is repentance enough, and if her country might be spared. Indeed, in many cases, those who have

been wronged don't seek retribution as much as they seek repentance. Our willingness to admit our mistakes and even to sacrifice something of our own as a sign of reconciliation will often elicit grace.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

The spirits agree and, with her magic, Elsa is able to protect her kingdom from the tidal wave. Her people are able to return home, the native peoples are able to live at peace in their own land, and all of them live peacefully together with the spirits of the earth.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Sometimes, the future is unclear. We can become lost in a wilderness of change, or grief, or guilt. We can be overwhelmed, weighed down, and even frozen. But we know, oh mortals, what is required of us in moments like that. It is to humbly and lovingly do the next right thing. Amen.