

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Fear in a Flash Drive

Driven from their home.

### Longing for Shelter

And finding it in America.

### The Hero

Meets his guide.

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The first and second ones.

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Heroic pawns unite!

# My Name Is Tani

## And I Believe in Miracles

BY TANITOLUWA ADEWUMI WITH KAYODE AND OLUWATOYIN ADEWUMI AND CRAIG BORLASE · THOMAS NELSON © 2022 · 224 PAGES

“My name is Tani, and my family likes to say I like to ask a lot of questions. They’re right. I like puzzles. I like riddles. I like trying to figure out why things happen and how things work.

But things have been different lately. Instead of asking the questions, I’ve been the one trying to answer them. A lot of people have wanted to know all kinds of things about me and my life. They want to know what life was like for me and how I feel about the way things have changed. They want me to tell my story, and I want to tell it, but there’s never enough time to say everything that’s in my head.

So this book is going to be my answer.”

~ Tanitoluwa Adewumi from *My Name Is Tani*

Last weekend, Emerson and I had one of our boys-only, weekend chess tournament trips.

This one was to Houston for one of the bigger tournaments of the year: the 90th annual Southwest Open.

On the second morning of the tournament, we took the elevator up to the fifth floor of our hotel with a boy/young man with GREAT energy who was dripping with sweat. I asked him if he just worked out. He said he had just gone for a 5-mile run. I was impressed and asked him if he ran track at school. He said that he just loved to run. I was even more impressed.

When we got out of the elevator, Emerson told me that he thought that awesome kid was a chess prodigy named Tani. As it turns out, that awesome kid WAS Tani—one of the greatest young chess players in the country whose story is truly Heroic.

“I believe in miracles.”

~ Tani Adewumi

We ran into Tani again later in the tournament and I told him how much we’ve loved watching him on ChessKid with FunMasterMike as we celebrated his pre-match protocol and chatted about Emerson’s. In addition to that morning run, Tani does 20 push-ups before each match and was impressed that Emerson does 33 burpees before every one of *his* matches.

Then I grabbed a picture of him and Emerson to capture that special moment—knowing that in 5-10 years it will be really fun to look back at these two great boys who are committed to being Chess Grandmasters. (Check it out [here](#).)

I knew Tani had a book, so I immediately got it. I basically read in one sitting. I also knew that his story was inspiring but I had NO IDEA it was as *incredibly* inspiring and Heroic as it is.

This book captures that story. It’s written by Tani, his mom Oluwatoyin (who we also met in the elevator that morning) and his dad Kayode (rhymes with *coyote!*) along with Craig Borlase.

The SUPER-abridged, one-line summary? Tani is a Nigerian refugee who won the New York State K-3 Championship while living in a homeless shelter.

It’s hard to put into words JUST how inspiring the book is. We’ll discuss the details in a moment but I was in tears throughout much of it. I HIGHLY recommend it. Get a copy of it [here](#).

The book is packed with wisdom and I'm excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas, so let's jump straight in!

*"When my wife and I named our sons, we chose carefully. Our firstborn, Austin, named Adesina. It means 'God opens doors to us.' The world now knows our son as Tani, but Tanitoluwa means 'Who is like God?'"*

~ Kayode Adewumi

P.S. We recently featured wisdom from another great chess player: [Maurice Ashley](#). In \*his\* great book, *Move by Move*, Maurice tells us about his Heroic quest to become the first Black chess Grandmaster. We'll talk about his story a bit more in a moment...

## FEAR IN A FLASH DRIVE

"Kayode, my husband, knows very little about chess. But he knows all about sacrifice. He knows that sometimes you must be willing to lose something precious in order to protect what you hold closest to your heart. He knows what it is to face an opponent who is ruthless, brutal, and hungry for your destruction. And he knows that in life there are moments when the only way to make it through to the victory that lies ahead is to be prepared to stand and fight until the very last breath."

In the first chapter, Tani shares his recollection of "The Day School Closed Early." In the second chapter, from which that passage above is taken, Tani's mom, Oluwatoyin, shares the story of what drove Tani and their family from Nigeria.

The chapter is called "Fear in a Flash Drive." Here's the short story...

Tani's mom was raised Muslim. His dad was raised Christian. They are practicing Christians.

Tani's dad ran a successful print shop with 13 employees in Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria. One day, four men came into his shop to get 25,000 (!) posters printed.

Those men were part of the terrorist organization known as Boko Haram—which has killed hundreds of thousands of people in Nigeria over the last two decades.

As Tani's dad puts it: *"Ever since a group of militants abducted 276 girls from a high school in northeast Nigeria in 2014, the whole world has known the name Boko Haram. As the Nigerian Taliban, the West African cousin of ISIS, Boko Haram's aim is to establish an Islamic state or caliphate in my homeland. Ruthless and wicked, Boko Haram fighters are the type of people who post videos online of men they have captured being decapitated."*

The posters they wanted printed featured their notorious logo with *"two AK-47s on either side of a thick book with a black-and-white flag flying over the top. There was not a single person in Nigeria at the time who would not have recognized it."*

In Arabic, above the logo, it said: *"No to Western Education"* and *"Kill All Christians."*

Kayode, of course, refused to print the posters. But the local police couldn't be trusted and he needed to figure out a way to handle the situation. He came up with a plan. The next day, when the men from Boko Haram came back to his print shop expecting a quote for the work, he tried to convince them that his machines had stopped working so he couldn't do the job as he gave them the flash drive back telling them he hadn't opened the file. They didn't believe him.

He fled out of his print shop. They found him at his house and tried to break in through the front door. The family then fled to another city where they stayed for weeks. The men from the terrorist organization followed them, broke in again and held Tani's mom at gunpoint. She survived. They fled again. This time, to America...

## LONGING FOR SHELTER

"Twelve hours after we arrived at PATH [Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing], after we had seen so many different people and sat at so many different desks, we received the news that we had been hoping for all day. We had been offered accommodations."

*"My father would look at me, place his hands on his hips, and lock eyes on mine. 'I am teaching you how to make it in life. You are a prince, but do you want to be a king like my father? Nobody will ever choose a lazy person to be king. Never rely on your family name alone. Work hard, always.'"*

~ Kayode Adewumi

I called Pastor Phillip. He cheered and thanked God. 'We have been told that we are going to be housed at a shelter. Is that like a tent?'

'No,' said Pastor Phillip. 'A shelter is good. You will be with lots of other people who are homeless. There will be staff there who can help you find schools for the boys, find work, and progress your asylum claim.' 'That's good?' 'Yes, it is. Did they tell you where it is yet?'

'Yes,' I said, looking at the piece of paper. I did not recognize the address. 'Where is Manhattan? Is it near Queens? My wife and I hope so. We really want to be near you and the church.'

'Manhattan? They're putting you in a shelter in Manhattan? That's good, my friend.'

'It is? Why? Is it near Queens?' 'No. It's better than Queens, believe me. Manhattan is the center. You're going to be in the center of the greatest city on earth! What's the address?'

I looked again. 'Thirtieth Street, Park Avenue.' There was a small pause, then I heard him exclaim, 'Whoa!' 'Is that good too?' 'Is it good? Yes, it's good, Kayode! It's really good. God is blessing you mightily. Park Avenue is the best road in the whole city. And you're going to be living there. Praise God!'

We waited another hour before the bus arrived to drive us from the PATH office to the shelter. We were all tired by that point, and perhaps a little nervous, too, as we sat with our bags on our laps and by our feet. But as we drove along the great canyons of concrete and glass and bright lights, I remembered something my father would say when I was younger. It was good advice, and I wanted to pass it to my sons.

'Know where you come from,' I said. 'Whatever lies ahead in the shelter on Park Avenue, let us not forget who we are or where we come from. Let us choose always to be polite and respectful, to be kind and generous. Let us not forget that we are Yoruba, that we are the grandson and great-grandsons of a king. Let us show our appreciation for this blessing by being a blessing to others. Do you agree?' 'Amen,' said Oluwatoyin, Austin, and Tani. 'Amen! Amen!'

That's from chapter #22. It's written in Tani's dad's voice. It's called "Longing for Shelter."

I read it nearly weeping. The book is an incredibly inspiring integration of a bunch of love stories: The family's love for one another. Their love and faith in God. Their son's love of chess. Their love for all the people who have supported them along the way. And their love for America.

It made me incredibly proud to be an American. And equally proud to serve the U.S. military forces we've been blessed to serve who protect our freedoms and help defend the helpless from terrorist organizations like the Boko Haram.

It also made me incredibly humbled by the good fortune with which we have been blessed and that much more committed to doing everything in my power to give back to those less fortunate.

The night before they moved into the shelter that Tani called "The Hotel" he said: "Before we went to bed, we did what we always do and prayed for a half hour. Mom and Dad usually start, and then Austin and I join in. We sing some songs, then thank Him for all the good things He has given us. There was a lot to thank God for that night."

A couple nights before that, Tani's mom shares a story about a conversation she had with his dad after a new friend told him: "You are in America now. You have to forget that you were the CEO back in Nigeria. You have to put aside the part of you that was chairman of your company. Here you just have to do whatever you can."

She asked him how he felt about that. He said: "I will do whatever I have to do to move my family forward." She asked: "Even if that means taking on a job that you would not ever dream of doing back in Nigeria?" He said: "Whatever it takes. No job can be beneath me if it means I can provide for the people I love."

*"Wow," said Kayode as he looked out the window at the buildings towering above us. 'What kind of country pays for its homeless people to live in a hotel?' 'A country that knows how to care for its people,' I said. 'A good country, run by kind people.'"*

~ Oluwatoyin Adewumi

I read that with tears in my eyes. Beneath that passage I wrote: “PROTECTORS.”

P.S. Check out our Notes on [Maurice Ashley’s \*Move by Move\*](#) for the story of HIS mom’s Heroic sacrifices.

*“In chess, the people who work hardest are the ones who do the best. Regardless of your circumstances or resources, anyone can be good. All you need is the will and the passion.”*

~ Coach Shawn Martinez

## THE HERO MEETS HIS GUIDE

“My school was P.S. 116, and it is on East Thirty-Third Street. It takes ten minutes to walk there from The Hotel, and the percentage of not nice people there was maybe the same as The Hotel but probably lower. There were a lot more people at school than there were at The Hotel, and I didn’t know all of them. Mom has always told Austin and me to be polite and friendly and to say sorry if we do anything wrong and not to keep being mean to someone if they’ve apologized to us. If you act like that at school, then hardly anyone will have a problem with you.

But in the same way that Miss Maria was the nicest person out of everyone in The Hotel, there was one teacher at P.S. 116 who was even nicer than the others. His name was Coach Shawn Martinez. He didn’t buy me doughnuts or give me sneakers, but he gave me something even better. He taught me how to play chess.”

That’s from chapter #19 called “My First Chess Lesson” in which our young Hero meets the Guide who would change his life. Coach Shawn and Coach Russ (another one of Tani’s coaches) are jaw-droppingly AWESOME. Truly Heroic. More on them in a moment.

Right before Tani tells us about Coach Shawn and his first chess lesson, he tells us about Miss Maria—the kind woman who worked at the homeless shelter.

One day Miss Maria gave Tani a gift: new sneakers. As I read that story, I immediately thought of a moment in MY life when a kind woman in my grade school bought ME some new shoes.

Although I was infinitely more blessed to be born in the United States and never faced the life-threatening dangers and abject poverty that Tani and his family endured in their Heroic quest to America, I did experience my own financial hardships as a little boy.

My father worked in a grocery store and didn’t make a lot of money. As the youngest of five kids—all of whom went to Catholic school for 12 years—we were always worried about money. My Mom cut so many coupons and shopped so precisely at multiple grocery stores, that I vividly remember both her coupon box and the fact that there was always *as much red ink on the grocery store receipts* as there was black—indicating that basically EVERY ITEM had been purchased with a coupon.

Side note: [Maslow](#) once said that THAT type of creativity was as powerful as any other. (I just got tears in my eyes typing that. Bless you, Mom.)

In addition to cutting coupons, we NEVER shopped for clothes. My Mom *made ALL* of my clothes other than my sports uniforms. But... When the sports season arrived, I’d always wear old cleats until the sales started a few weeks into the season, then I’d always get HUGE shoes that were way too big that required multiple socks so I could grow into them.

One day when I was probably about 11 or 12 years old, I forgot my shoes for basketball practice. I was about to ride my book home to get them when an incredibly thoughtful P.E. teacher (I can picture her kind face but I can’t remember her name!) took me to the local department store (Mervyn’s!) and bought me THE NICEST shoes I’d ever gotten. I couldn’t believe it then and I still get emotional thinking about it now. That woman couldn’t have made any more money than Miss Maria made, but I imagine she knew that a young boy would be incredibly thrilled and her act of kindness remains an indelible memory nearly four decades later.

With all that in mind... Let’s take a moment to appreciate the Guides and benefactors who helped us on our Heroic quests as we commit to giving back in equal measure... TODAY.

*“Besides the chess program and Coach Russ’s words, Tani had another reason to be happy. I had bought him his own chess set and had just given it to him that morning. It cost five dollars, and it was a lot of money, but I figured I could take it out of that week’s food budget, buy less meat, and hope that the boys didn’t notice. Seeing the joy on his face as he opened the chess set made Kayode and me happy too.”*

~ Oluwatoyin Adewumi

*"People are kind. Sometimes you find someone who can be mean to you, but most of the time people are kind."*

~ Tani Adewumi

## TANI'S FIRST (AND SECOND) TROPHY!

"I won the tournament! Everyone was really, really excited for me, and I was soooooo happy too. People were saying, 'Wow! You've only been playing for two months, and you've just gone 3-0!' I liked it when they said that. I liked it when Coach Shawn gave me a massive high five and Coach Russ told me, 'I'm so proud of how hard you're working,' and when Mom gave me a big hug that lasted forever.

But do you know what I liked best about it all? I won my first *ever* trophy. The second time I got a trophy, I didn't really win it. It was at a tournament that Coach Russ organized. I finished eleventh, and because it was probably only my sixth or seventh tournament, I didn't know that people who finished eleventh don't usually get trophies. So I was feeling sad when the top ten players who finished above me were all invited up at the end to receive theirs.

Just when people were about to leave, Coach Russ came over to me and said, 'What's up?' I told him that I was not happy because I had not won the trophy, and he said, 'Wait here.' I waited. He came back a few minutes later. He was holding a trophy and a pen. I watched him write something on the trophy and hand it over to me. It said:

**TANI—MOST IMPROVED PLAYER. NEVER STOP.  
AND NEVER ASK FOR A TROPHY AGAIN.**

I looked back at Coach Russ. He was smiling at me. I decided then and there I would never ask for another trophy. If I was going to get any more, I'd win them myself."

That's from a chapter called "My First Ever Trophy." Tani played in his first tournament a month after learning how to play. He finished 46th out of 57 kids. He drew two games and lost one. His provisional rating after that tournament was 105. The lowest possible rating is 100.

I got goosebumps typing that because I created a +1 based on a conversation I had with Emerson RIGHT when he REALLY got into chess and decided that he wanted to become a master. The theme? Well, the +1 is called: [To Become a Master, We Must Start as a Beginner](#).

Fun fact: You can see Tani's progression since that FIRST tournament when he was a 105 ALL the way through the tournament he played last weekend where he was a 2444 (!) [here](#). You can ALSO see Emerson's progression on US Chess [here](#). If you look closely, you'll see that Tani started playing in tournaments 6 years ago while Emerson started about 18 months ago but they both went from 0 to 1500 in their first year. Exciting!

The other REALLY (!) important point from this Idea? Tani's coach PERFECTLY embodied the wisdom of "wise feedback" and the "mentor mindset" [David Yeager](#) talks about in his GREAT book [10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People](#). He let Tani know he has VERY high standards \*while\* letting him know he expects him to hit those standards and will be his biggest supporter in making that happen.

*"One thing about Tani, he never gives less than 100 percent to anything he's interested in."*

~ Oluwatoyin Adewumi

## HOW MIRACLES HAPPEN

"We ate well that night, and we filled the apartment with laughter, too. ... And as I looked around at them all, Jews and Muslims, non-believers and Christians, it struck me that even though our story started with hatred and division, it was now about unity. As I mingled and laughed and talked with our guests, so many of their words stayed with me.

'I've been writing for a long time,' said Nicholas. 'But I've never seen anything like it. No news lasts more than twenty-four hours in America. But this story just kept on going.'

'Your son has been an angel in my life,' said Coach Shawn.

'People want a counter to all the negativity these days,' said Coach Russ. 'And that's what Tani's

"Coach Shawn pulled all the players from P.S. 116 together and told them to listen up. To be a champion you have to have the mindset of a champion. Remember what Magnus Carlsen said when the journalist asked him if he was going to win the tournament? All five players answered as one, chanting the words together. 'I'm not worried about winning. I'm worried about playing my best.'"

~ Oluwatoyin Adewumi

story does. It reminds us that good is stronger than evil, that we *can* be kind, that we *can* be generous, that people *do* care. It's the American dream all over, a reminder that this country was built for good. It shows that God exists, and I really believe that the idea of Tani can create a positive change in this world.'

I remembered the article that I read about Coach Shawn in the *New York Times*. Right at the end it described the way he approached chess, saying that he played in an aggressive style and liked to use his pawns as attackers. 'When you put pawns together, there's no stopping them,' he said. 'You put two or three together and they practically control the whole game.'

Looking around at the apartment that night, I could see there were some powerful people, men and women with fame and influence in the world. But there were others, too, the kind of people who don't have great wealth or great recognition. Immigrants, people who worked hard, educators, and pastors. People who go quietly about their lives, just moving forward day by day. People like Kayode and me.

In other words, pawns. I thought about all those small gifts to the campaign. What can five dollars buy? What change can ten dollars make in the world? Not much, it would seem. But put them together with the generosity of four thousand other people, and these dollars can add up to something significant. That's how miracles happen."

Those are the final words of the book in a chapter called "Paying It Forward."

After winning the NY state chess championship at eight years old WHILE LIVING IN A HOMELESS SHELTER (!), Tani was introduced to the world via a story in the *New York Times* by Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Nicholas Kristoff called [This 8-Year-Old Chess Champion Will Make You Smile](#). (He also wrote a couple follow-up articles: [Our Chess Champion Has a Home](#) and [Remember the Homeless Chess Champion? The Boy Is ...](#))

After that first article, Coach Russ created a GoFundMe page for Tani and his family to help them get out of the homeless shelter. They hoped to raise \$10,000. They raised over \$250,000. AND... An anonymous Hero paid for their rent for a year and bought Tani's dad (who was now an Uber driver) a new car.

With all that extra support, you know what Tani and his family did with the \$250,000?

They created a foundation and GAVE IT AWAY to *other* refugees and homeless people. This family is HEROIC. They're making a movie on Tani's life and I can't wait to see it.

For now... I'm reminded of Margaret Mead's wisdom: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Let's remember how miracles happen as we give the world all the love we've got... TODAY.

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**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of [Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential](#). He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).

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