

One Minute of Pain: Louis Zamperini, Iron Discipline, and Purpose

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can you strive to be successful by being purposeful?
- **Virtue:** Purpose
- **Definition** – Purpose is my answer to the question "why do I exist?" It is the reason for which I exist; it is my goal, that thing to which my actions are directed. It is our answer to the question "what are you for?"
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about the life of Louis Zamperini and how his purpose helped him through excruciating ordeals.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze the purposeful actions and resilience of Louis Zamperini.
 - Students will understand how being purposeful can help them achieve success.
 - Students will apply their knowledge of purpose to their own lives.
- **Background**
 - Louis Zamperini was born in New York in 1917, but moved with his family to California where they settled in Torrance near Los Angeles when he was a small boy. His parents were hard-working Italian-Americans who sought to make a good life for their children. Louis received poor grades at school and was perpetually in trouble with the law because he frequently committed petty crimes. He frustrated his father and broke his mother's heart to no end. The Great Depression hit America in the early 1930s and made life for the Zamperini family that much more difficult. His older brother, Pete, never gave up on Louis and encouraged him several times to reform his life. Finally, Pete won and persuaded Louis to try running for the track team. Louis agreed, and the decision saved his life. Running forged his character in new ways and gave Louis a fresh purpose with diligence, motivation, strength, and determination to succeed and never to quit. As the Japanese invaded Manchuria and China in the 1930s and the broader Pacific in the 1940s, and Germany seized several European nations and then launched World War II in Europe in 1939, Louis Zamperini entered adulthood facing a dangerous world in which he and millions of young Americans would need a strong purpose to face the challenges ahead.
- **Vocabulary**
 - Perpetually
 - Persuaded
 - Invaded
 - Manchuria
 - World's Interscholastic Mile
 - Juvenile delinquent
 - Olympics
 - Bombardier
 - B-24
 - Infinite
 - Propeller
 - Interminable
 - Subsisted
 - Hallucinations
 - Zero
 - Emaciated
 - Succumbed
 - Kwajalein Island
 - Stultifying
 - Interrogations
 - Rations
 - Ofuna
 - Sadistic
 - Malnourished
 - Malicious

- Post-Traumatic Stress
- POW
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
 - How did Louis Zamperini promote freedom?
 - Who was Louis Zamperini? Why was his experience significant?
 - What was Louis’s purpose as a runner? As a bombardier? As a plane crash survivor? As a POW?
 - What did Louis do to remain purposeful throughout each of his ordeals?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - Hillenbrand, Laura. *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*. New York: Random House, 2010.
 - Spector, Ronald. *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan*. New York: Free Press, 1985.
 - Van der Vat, Dan. *The Pacific Campaign: The U.S.-Japanese Naval War, 1941-1945*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991.
 - “Unbroken.” Universal Pictures, 2014.
 - Zamperini, Louis, with David Rensin. *Devil at My Heels: A Heroic Olympian’s Astonishing Story of Survival as a Japanese POW in World War II*. New York: Harper, 2003.

Handout A: One Minute of Pain: Louis Zamperini, Iron Discipline, and Purpose

Background

Louis Zamperini was born in New York in 1917, but moved with his family to California where they settled in Torrance near Los Angeles when he was a small boy. His parents were hard-working Italian-Americans who sought to make a good life for their children. Louis received poor grades at school and was perpetually in trouble with the law because he frequently committed petty crimes. He frustrated his father and broke his mother's heart to no end. The Great Depression hit America in the early 1930s and made life for the Zamperini family that much more difficult. His older brother, Pete, never gave up on Louis and encouraged him several times to reform his life. Finally, Pete won and persuaded Louis to try running for the track team. Louis agreed, and the decision saved his life. Running forged his character in new ways and gave Louis a fresh purpose with diligence, motivation, strength, and determination to succeed and never to quit. As the Japanese invaded Manchuria and China in the 1930s and the broader Pacific in the 1940s, and Germany seized several European nations and then launched World War II in Europe in 1939, Louis Zamperini entered adulthood facing a dangerous world in which he and millions of young Americans would need a strong purpose to face the challenges ahead.

Narrative

On May 19, 1934, high-school junior Louis Zamperini lined up against the best milers in Southern California under the sweltering sun at the Los Angeles Coliseum. He was anxious about making a good showing against the state record holder and at least three other runners who had logged better times than Zamperini in the race. He was scared and started to walk off the track until his coach and his brother, Pete, encouraged him to make the attempt.

The starting gun went off, and the runners jockeyed for position. After incredibly fast laps in just over two minutes, Zamperini was behind the leaders but comfortable running the race at his own pace. He finished the third lap at his planned speed of 3:17 and took the lead as the others faded. Louis thought he was all alone but then he felt another runner hit his heel. Zamperini "shot out like a rabbit" and won the race, breaking the World's Interscholastic Mile record at 4:21.2. It was quite an achievement for a young man who had been a juvenile delinquent and in almost constant trouble with the law. Pete had told his brother, "You've got to develop self-discipline," and urged him to run track. When Zamperini struggled, Pete asked, "Isn't one minute of pain worth a lifetime of glory?" Zamperini learned about self-discipline and having an iron determination through running. As a result, he related, "I applied myself with similar diligence at school" and all areas of his life as he turned it around for the better. He had found his purpose and ran for the University of Southern California (USC) and in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, where he placed eighth.

Zamperini's dream of winning the 1940 Tokyo Summer Games was shattered when World War II canceled those Olympics. When the United States entered the war, he patriotically served as a bombardier aboard a B-24 bomber in the Pacific theater of war. On May 27, 1943, Zamperini and his crew volunteered to fly a rescue mission to search for a downed plane and lifted off at 6:30 p.m. He was riding in the cockpit searching the seemingly infinite expanse of ocean with a pair of binoculars flying at 800 feet above sea level when one of the engines suddenly sputtered and quit. The crew exchanged worried glances, and the engineer tried to re-start the engine. A second engine on the same wing failed, and the propeller stopped spinning. The crew knew the situation was desperate and prepared hastily for a crash landing. The B-24 was ripped apart as it smashed into the waves, and the crew was flung in every direction. When he floated to the top, Zamperini found only two crewmates—Francis McNamara ("Mac") and Russell Philips ("Phil")—alive.

The survivors clambered aboard two rafts and took a quick inventory of their supplies. A raft repair kit, a flare gun and dye to alert rescuers, and a mirror. They also found a measly eight half-pints of water and six fortified chocolate bars. Although their chances of survival while floating on the expansive Pacific were extremely low, Zamperini later wrote, "I felt so fortunate to be alive that I was actually happy." When the chips were down, Louis reached inside and found his steely determination that could carry him through any difficulty. "I was raised to face challenges," he said, and was driven by his disciplined purpose.

Even though Mac greedily and selfishly ate all of the chocolate that night, and significantly endangered all of their lives, Zamperini reported, “I couldn’t let it throw me.” They drifted for interminable days with little relief from the sun that blistered their skin and the waves that produced salt sores covering their bodies. They fought off sharks that circled them relentlessly and waited patiently for an arm or leg to swing into the water. They lived off whatever rainwater fell though nearby squalls usually dried up before they appeared over the rafts. They subsisted off a few fish, birds that reeked with a powerful stench, and a couple of bloody livers from smaller sharks they captured. All of the meat was eaten raw. They played brain games to keep their minds sharp, fought off hallucinations, and dreamed of a real meal back home. Near-starvation caused them to drop much of their body weight and they looked like scarecrows.

Zamperini had not been a particularly religious young man but turned to faith to bolster his already strong purpose. “I promise if I get home through all this and whatever is to come, I’ll serve you for the rest of my life,” he resolved as he looked to the heavens. He would endure even worse ordeals, and his purpose would ensure his survival.

If their struggle against nature were not enough, a Japanese Zero fighter plane strafed their rafts with machine-gun fire, sinking a raft but miraculously missing the emaciated men. Only a week later, Mac finally succumbed to the ordeal and quietly perished. Zamperini and Phil buried him at sea. On the forty-seventh day of drifting, the pair was captured by a Japanese patrol boat and taken as prisoners of war.

The two American POWs were held for forty days at the Kwajalein Island prison camp. They were confined inside a stultifying six-by-six foot box and routinely taken out for interrogations during which they were beaten and tortured physically and mentally. They suffered disease and ate disgusting rations that were barely edible. Worse awaited them when they boarded a prison ship bound for Yokohama, Japan. Zamperini would have to muster all of his strength to survive.

Zamperini spent a year at Ofuna prison camp where he and the prisoners from a variety of American allies suffered abuse at the hands of sadistic guards. They were also given maggot-filled fish and watery soup to eat causing them to be malnourished and suffer a variety of maladies. When he was transferred a year later to Omori in Tokyo, Zamperini was immediately singled out for abuse by the malicious head of the camp, Matsuhiko Watanabe, nicknamed “The Bird” by the prisoners. Watanabe beat Zamperini into unconsciousness daily with his fists, a wooden cane, and a steel belt buckle. He forced the scores of imprisoned men to punch Zamperini until he couldn’t stand. Still, Zamperini refused to have his soul crushed and dug deep into his last reserves of strength and determination.

Once his Olympic fame was recognized, Radio Tokyo offered Zamperini an opportunity to tell his family he was alive. The only catch was that the radiomen then pressured him to read a broadcast of Japanese propaganda against America. “No. I positively can’t do it,” he told them.

Zamperini could not describe his relief and joy when Watanabe was transferred to another camp, and the abuse decreased. However, on March 1, 1945, he and other prisoners were transferred to a camp in Naoetsu. Zamperini was physically staggered when he saw the Bird come out of his office to address the new prisoners. “I felt my knees buckle and my heart collapse,” Zamperini later wrote, “Inside I gave up all hope.” He felt his purpose and his life ebb away. He was defeated.

But, Zamperini continued to endure a fresh wave of beatings and half-rations. The war ended in August, and the prisoners were released, mere shadows of their former selves on the outside. Zamperini had survived several incredible ordeals because of the inner purpose his brother, Pete, had taught him of winning with strength and determination. It helped him in running in the Olympics, surviving a plane crash and floating on the Pacific for seven weeks, and enduring the horrors of the Japanese prison camps in World War II. He also had the strength and determination to keep his promise to God and became a renowned Christian speaker, win a bout with alcoholism caused by Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and forgive his Japanese tormentors in the decades after the war.