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The Divide Between Life and Death

Eyes set on gold at the Helsinki Olympic games, 22-year-old track star Louis Zamperini's dream was forever destined to remain fantasy, the eruption of the first bomb on December 7, 1941 condemning him to years of untold suffering in service of his country and costing him a talent he had worked so hard to hone. The first screeching wail of the raid siren would seal his fate as an airman, putting him on a plane that would plummet into the Atlantic and leave him stranded at sea for 47 days adrift a foundering raft no larger than a bathtub with two other men. Burned, starved, and dehydrated, the only comfort he could cling to on that last day was that he had survived the blood-thirsty sharks, perhaps the only enemy worse than his now captors, the Japanese. This would be nothing however, compared to the years of mental torment, abuse and inhospitable living conditions he would withstand while he spent more than two years as a prisoner of war, an endeavor which left a body reduced to skin and bones and a mind haunted by memories. Pushed to the limits of endurance, Zamperini, and others facing the challenges which have plagued their lives, were forced to discover the ability of the will to overcome all, determination incited by an unwavering sense of hope allowing them to prevail in even the most trying of situations. This unshakable impelling optimism, coupled with the support offered by deep-rooted spiritual beliefs and an innate need to best one's opponent--a drive to compete

present in every man-has allowed countless individuals throughout time to defy the limitations of the human body and survive with will alone, their drive to persevere supplementing strength when it should have so obviously faltered.

To those locked in the throes of uncertainty in the face of challenge, hope is, above all, the most significant indicator of one's ability to persevere, the absence of so essential an optimism leaving one with little to strive for and thus, no reason to continue working to best the obstacles at hand (Shiavon). To abandon it entirely would be equivalent to signing one's death certificate, the individual in that one action opting to relegate themselves to misery, seeing no way to prevail or even improve a situation. To be hopeless is thus "to close oneself off to the future of options" entirely, pessimism having prevailed to such an extent that success or even survival seems out of the question, beliefs a hopeful individual clings to having lost all else (Phillips). For Zamperini, the aforementioned ex-track star, and what remained of his crew, hope became the only source of sustenance while trapped aboard a sinking raft devoid of food and water, their very existence under threat. Stranded in what would seem to be an inescapable wasteland devoid of anything of utility, even the most remote possibility of escaping and returning home to family and loved ones enabled Phil--the now sinking plane's pilot--and Zamperini to survive 47 days beneath the sun's scorching rays, the men's bodies upon rescue blistered and pitted beyond recognition yet still rattling on. Their tail gunner Mac however, although fortunate enough to survive a crash which killed all but three, would continue to waste away far faster than anyone, he, "unable to imagine a future" beyond their floating prison, depriving his body of the nourishment which had propelled his companions long after they should have perished. Living in a world, that, to him was "too far gone", Mac discarded any possibility of salvation and, seeing

no other conclusion but death, abandoned his resolve, condemning him to a grave beneath the churning sea of possibility he had been so oblivious (Hillenbrand). His companions, although subjected to the same harsh conditions, would manage to persevere long after his body struck the sea floor, the belief that good would in fact return allowing them to remain stranded at sea twice as long as any man had before with little more than a piece of rubber scarcely able to hold air. Merely knowing that they were in fact “drifting toward land somewhere” was sufficient to kindle a saving belief that they would survive, the remote chance that the unwieldy waves would dump them back on the shore of the civilized world giving them something to look forward to, an end goal and a reason to continue fighting which Mac had lost long ago (Hillenbrand). Deprived of all else, hope essentially supplemented a faltering drive to live, their bodies lacking the fuel necessary to sustain themselves normally, effectively furnishing them with strength to endure as they anticipated the good times which were surely to come, regardless of the likelihood of such events occurring in actuality. Mac, wholeheartedly believing he was destined to spend the duration of his life lost at sea, could not extract the strength his companions had in their optimism, a failure which cost him hope, an invaluable factor in perseverance which proved to be the difference between life and death.

Simply being able to believe in the possibility of success has proven again and again--as in the case of Zamperini and Phil--to be a decisive factor in the delineation of victory and failure, living and dying, the slightest indication that there is a chance to best one's circumstance sufficient to motivate the individual to renew the fury with which they attack the trials ahead. For people suffering from terminal illnesses or chronic conditions--more commonplace yet equally severe challenges--this optimism remains just as invaluable, the ability to conceive a reality in

which they prevail over their situation making the goal seem more attainable and thus, driving them to redouble their efforts. For those without alternative, this might mean the use of a placebo to stimulate treatment when all else has failed, the act of merely receiving care--although false--in some cases, spawning a new hope for triumph as the possibility of hitting land did for those aboard the raft. If even just merely deluded into believing that failure is no longer an inevitability with the promise offered by treatment, patients have shown marked improvements in their health time and time again, this newfound hope to return to normalcy compelling them to renew the vigor with which they combat their adversary, the budding existence of hope for something greater rallying a newfound drive to win in a circumstance which previously seemed foredoomed (Breines). Their future no longer appearing so bleak, the patients were effectively given a greater aim to work for than merely a few more days of labored existence, the placebo armed with its guarantee of a cure giving them greater motivation to work as the reward created by their optimism has increased tremendously significance.

Although hope precipitated whilst in the midst of a trial is invaluable, the beliefs--especially those religious in nature--one carries with them throughout life can be equally important constituents of one's perseverance, faith often serving as something to turn to whilst in the darkest throes of despair as well as a mechanism of accountability capable of driving one to do the best they possibly can. Often clung to long after they are adopted and in many instances, even in the face of "new information that proves those beliefs wrong", these convictions will remain deeply ingrained in an individual regardless of their current situation, the challenge at hand, although able to deprive one of everything tangible while attempting to break them, unable to strip them of the driving ideals which they have assimilated, making them an indispensable

tool upon which one can rely upon even in the midst of turmoil (Vinney). In fact for Phil, his survival was due in part to his steadfast belief in God, he, a deeply religious man, believing that “if you suffer, God will always give you the grace go forward”, a reassuring conviction which, while drifting across thousands of miles of ocean, would allow him to “conjure up a protective God” that made rescue feel closer while fending off despair (Hillenbrand). For him, his faith provided the reassurance needed by a mind dwelling over the grim realm of possibilities for a man stranded in a bloodthirsty sea, total belief in a higher power providing him with evidence enough that he would be given the strength to survive this encounter. Convinced that he could, the drive to persevere would soon follow, Phil, in believing he had all that was necessary to endure, now able to compel himself to muster what little energy remained--redirecting it from pointless worry--and dedicate it all to overcoming a trial which he felt in his heart of hearts, he was already destined to win.

His beliefs not only had the advantage of reassuring him that he had the power to prevail but simultaneously helped to drive away despair as victory solidified in destiny in his mind, making it far easier to fixate on the task at hand and cast aside any worries of failure or demise, redirecting what would have otherwise been wasted energy to finding a way best to the challenge at hand. Possessing such religious beliefs additionally has the advantage of not only providing reassurance in trying times but serving as a means of accountability, a number of widely practiced faiths holding individuals responsible for their actions as it dictates they will one day be subjected to a “Judgment Day” of sorts to determine his place in the afterlife, a belief held by roughly half of the world’s population in their worship of Abrahmic faiths (Flesher). Knowing every action will influence one’s fate, believers thus strive to be as virtuous as possible in life, an

aim likely to compel them to overcome whatever obstacle which seeks to divert them from this goal. For Zamperini, this drove him, upon being reminded of the impending arrival of his evaluation, to overcome an issue with alcoholism which had consumed his life, nearly costing him his marriage and leaving a child fatherless. Recognizing he could no longer placate himself with continual recitations of “I am a good man”, a mantra he knew to be riddled with falsehoods, and still adhere to a faith he had felt saved him while lost at sea and in the grasp of the Japanese, Zamperini would sever the grasp alcohol had held for years, besting an addiction which cost him and his family so much in a matter of minutes and finally overcoming one of the few remaining obstacles barring him from a happy life (Hillenbrand). Had he not held such convictions, Zamperini’s drinking, not even deterred by the birth of his child, would have likely consumed him, costing him all of his relationships as well as his life if it was allowed to prevail unchecked, leaving his wife alone to struggle to provide for their child. Armed with faith, however, he was given the push necessary to find the drive to combat his addiction, his desire to become a good man once again in line with his Christian beliefs allowing him to emerge from the long growing solitude before it enveloped him entirely and claimed the life he had worked so hard to develop. Recognizing that it was his duty to care for his family as to him, any good man should, Zamperini was able to win a long running battle with alcohol as a result of his faith, the proffer of a nearing “judgment day” holding him to a higher standard and subsequently, compelling him to push aside any obstacle which stood in his way.

Since the dawn of man’s existence, humankind has additionally been pressed to persevere by the continual need to best one another, competition driving men to push themselves to the brink of collapse so that they might emerge triumphant over all others. Humanity’s progress is

hence owed at least in part to an incessant desideratum to outpace the ability of the other, every individual--to some degree--seeking to prove themselves superior as they match their progress with that of their competitors, the measure of a man and their constitution determined by how well they compare. In Zamperini's case, a now globally renowned runner, the intoxicating euphoria of victory would be entirely responsible for his fame, his infatuation with victory and the ensuing recognition after winning his first race leaving him "faint in realization" of his immense talent, pushing him to dedicate himself entirely to running, a drive which led him to become a world class olympian in a sport he would have otherwise abandoned (Hillenbrand). Prior to tasting the intoxicating nectar of victory, this evidently talented sprinter, had to be "herded out to train everyday" by his brother armed with a stick, running being little more than a constraint he sought to buck. Zamperini however, upon winning his first race, became a running fiend utterly consumed with the sport, his need to relish in the taste of triumph once more compelling him to push his body to beyond its limits so that he might be prepared to best any opposition he encountered, the pain of propelling his body to such extremes being of no consequence in the face of such a reward. Simply because running had been framed as a competitive event, a hobby he would of otherwise ignored subsequently became the focus of all his energy, his desire to prove his superiority to the world driving him to persevere past the initial difficulties common to new runners and continually wear down his body day after day in his perpetual lust for first place. This same strength fostered by competition would additionally later be essential to his survival as a prisoner of war continually tormented by a man of no conscience, the Bird seeking to break him so that all that remained was a subservient husk of a man. When asked to hold a wooden beam several times his size above his head in a show

intended to humiliate him and illustrate the inferiority of his wasting body, Zamperini, although losing control of his faculties, clung to one thought: “He cannot break me”, a pledge which would enable him to hold the log long after he should have collapsed, only dropping it when the Bird beat him unconscious (Hillenbrand). Compelled solely by an intrinsic need to win the exchange and illustrate his continuing strength, Zamperini was able to funnel all of his remaining energy into holding the beam, his need to demonstrate how terribly the camp had failed in its quest to best him replacing the strength he had lost long ago so that he might prove once again that he was still stronger than his opponent despite the torment he had endured. Viewing such a task as a battle of wills, he refused to lose to a man who was entirely consumed with overpowering and destroying him, the dynamic of the competition encouraging him to continue on.

Although already remarkable that it has essentially granted some their lives, the natural rivalry of man can be said to be responsible for so much more beyond that, the bulk of the world’s progress owed to this unceasing contest. In fact, were it not for competition, it is unlikely the United States would have advanced--both technologically and in terms of its global status--to its modern day standing as rapidly as it did, the push to explore space and eventually land on the moon following the turmoil of World War II fueled almost entirely by an overwhelming desire to reemphasize the nation’s superiority to the Soviet Union, their biggest rivals. John F. Kennedy, president at the time, even went so far as to confess that the majority of his motivation stemmed not from the promise of going where no man had before but from a burning wish to best the Soviets in a field in which they were supposedly superior by getting the first man to the moon, “scoring a win” in a competition they had long been enthralled in. This need to illustrate the

superiority of the U.S. would allow the nation to overcome much of what stood in their way, their efforts driven by the need to win the appropriately coined “Space Race” allowing them to successfully construct their first true long distance space craft and both land on the moon and return of the Earth, a feat which NASA itself said they had less than a 5 percent chance of accomplishing (History.com). Despite facing continually dismal odds of success throughout the whole of their labor, their rivalry would compel them to continue trying to reach what seemed to be an unattainable goal. Their efforts however, would culminate in the successful touchdown of Apollo 11 on July 20, 1969, a triumph hence owed entirely to the enlivening energy produced by competition. Such a profound accomplishment would not only emphasize the strength of America but help to cement their position as an international superpower, the country now proving that it was on the forefront of innovation, speaking to just how impactful the competitive urge of man truly is in the face of obstacles.

During the trials and tribulations which shape the lives of everyone, the difference in success and failure is often delineated not by one’s strength or intelligence, but their drive to persevere, the powerful combination of unshakable hope as well as faith in conjunction with a high congenital need to best others in competition compelling an individual to persist long after everything else should have faltered. The power of the mind once resolved to do something has proven in countless incidents to be capable of overcoming trials which mankind, without such a drive would have normally succumbed to, whether that be in the battle to survive threats to one’s very existence or the war to accomplish some aim apparently out of reach. Without a resolve bolstered by hope, faith, and competition, it is likely the progress of man would have stalled long

ago while trying to accomplish these dreams, the great leaders and workers who have propelled us to this point not having the motivation to advance in a world working against.

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