

Building a Life of Character



Christopher News Notes

“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved.”

—Helen Keller

TO BUILD A LIFE OF CHARACTER IS THE GREATEST PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT WE CAN ATTAIN. No amount of worldly success can compare to the satisfaction of being a good person. We cultivate character by facing down challenges that stand in the way of our becoming who God wants us to be. No matter our station in life or what setbacks we face, we are called to work

through our circumstances to accomplish God's will. Strength of character can sustain us through difficult times, but we must also know that adversity and even failure can provide opportunity to build the life of character we seek to achieve.

Facing Adversity

"You cannot dream yourself into a character; you must hammer and forge yourself one."

—James Anthony Froude

In his book *The Obstacle Is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph*, author Ryan Holiday lists three disciplines that enable us to face adversity and cultivate character, the first two being perception and action.

Of perception, Holiday writes, "It takes skill and discipline to bat away the pests of bad perceptions, to separate reliable signals from deceptive ones, to filter out prejudice, expectation, and fear. But it's worth it, for what's left is truth." And regarding action, he writes, "Action is commonplace, right action is not. Action requires courage, not brashness—creative application and not brute force. Our movements and decisions define us: We must be sure to act with deliberation, boldness, and persistence. Those are the attributes of right and effective action."

The third and most challenging discipline Holiday focuses on is the human will. He writes, "Too often people think that will is how bad we want something. In actuality, the will has a lot more to do with surrender than with strength. Try 'God willing' over 'the will to win' or 'willing it into existence,' for even those attributes can be broken."

Holiday holds up Abraham Lincoln as a model of willpower, which was forged throughout a lifetime of adversity. He grew up in poverty; educated himself; lost his mother at a young age and the woman he loved as a young man. He suffered multiple political defeats and endured bouts of depression, an affliction little understood at the time. Holiday writes, "It came to be that every quality produced by Lincoln's personal journey was

The Courage to Rise Again

Towards the end of the film *Wall Street*, a wise old stockbroker pulls aside a young colleague who is about to be arrested for insider trading. He walks with the young man for a few paces and then stops, turns towards him, and says, "Man looks in the abyss, there's nothing staring back at him. At that moment, man finds his character. And that is what keeps him out of the abyss."

This wisdom, shared during the crucible of a young man's life, is intended to reveal a path that can turn tragedy into triumph. The abyss of despair can present itself as a result of our own failings or through tragic circumstances beyond our control. But no matter the cause, it must be fought against at every turn and met with a spirit of hope. When we fall or get knocked down, we must find the courage to rise again, and in this way we build character traits that can stand the test of time.

exactly what was required to lead the nation through its own journey and trial."

Those qualities include fortitude, wisdom, compassion, and hope. Holiday concludes, "Leadership requires determination and energy. And certain situations, at times, call on leaders to marshal that determined energy simply to endure. To provide strength in terrible times. Because of what Lincoln had...struggled with and learned to cope with in his own life, he was able to lead. To hold a nation, a cause, an effort, together."

Finding a Purpose

"Parents can only give good advice or put them [children] on the right paths, but the final forming of a person's character lies in their own hands."

—Anne Frank

New York Times op-ed columnist David Brooks devotes an entire chapter of his book *The Road to Character* to the story of Dorothy Day. As a young adult, Day lived a bohemian lifestyle, but at the age of 28 she gave birth to a daughter and experienced a change of heart. Brooks writes, "The birth of her child began her transformation from a scattered person to a centered one, from an unhappy bohemian to a woman who had found her calling."

Day wanted to provide her daughter with a sense of order, writing, "We all crave order, and in the book of Job, hell is described as a place where no order is. I felt that 'belonging' to a church would

bring order into her life, which I felt was lacking in my own."

Day was drawn to the Catholicism of the poor urban families for whom she had been advocating in her life as a journalist and activist. The discovery of faith led her to develop an ethos of personalism that would transform her work and mold her purpose for the rest of her life. She founded the Catholic Worker Movement to provide aid to the poor and marginalized of society. She opened hospitality houses and spent her days serving bread and soup to the poor, giving talks and working on her newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*, to convert others to her cause.

Day's call to live a life of holiness was fraught with struggle, but it was a struggle she embraced wholeheartedly as a path to accomplish God's will. Brooks points out that taking suffering head-on in this way builds character, but he also notes that it does not always ensure temporal happiness because it necessitates an openness to love that can leave a person vulnerable. He writes, "This way, suffering becomes a fearful gift, very different from that other gift, happiness, conventionally defined. The latter brings pleasure, but the former cultivates character."

Day realized the need to order her actions towards the good of others, which is something we are all called to do in our effort to cultivate character. In her book *The Long Loneliness*, Day wrote, "We can-

not love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship."

An Unbroken Spirit

"Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

—St. Paul (Romans 5:3-4)

In her Christopher Award-winning book *Unbroken*, Laura Hillenbrand chronicles the life of Louis Zamperini, a United States Olympian who joined the Army Air Corps at the start of World War II. Zamperini was one of only three survivors in a bomber crew that got shot down over the Pacific a year and a half into the war. He was adrift at sea for 47 days, imperiled by sharks, and starving, before being captured by the Japanese Navy. He spent the rest of the war in captivity and was targeted for brutal beatings due to his celebrity status as a world-class runner.

But Zamperini had a history of resilience. He survived poverty and discrimination in his youth. He also understood the internal battle to walk the right path, having fallen into delinquency as a young man only to be rescued by the discipline that came from training as a track athlete. This background of falling and getting back up again prepared Zamperini to have the strength of character to face relentless torture while in captivity, and his spirit

became an inspiration to fellow prisoners.

After the war, Zamperini got married and started a family, but he was haunted by memories of the torture he had endured and began to drink heavily. Then one day his wife brought him to hear Billy Graham preach and he realized the need to forgive those who had wronged him. Zamperini said, "Hate is self-destructive. If you hate somebody, you're not hurting the person you hate, you're hurting yourself. [Forgiveness is] a healing."

After his first Olympics, he had dreamed of competing again on the world stage, but injuries he sustained while in captivity made that impossible. Nevertheless, in 1998, at the age of 80, he returned to a place in Japan not far from where he had been held captive. There, he ran a leg of the Olympic Torch relay for the opening of the XVIII Olympic Winter Games.

The story of Louis Zamperini is a testament to how character is built when we have the courage to get back up when we are knocked down by the travails of life. His 1998 Olympic run in Japan may not have led to the victory he sought in his youth, but it provided the world a glimpse of the forgiveness he carried in his heart and the glory he had achieved by building a life of character.

Describing Louis' Olympic Torch run, Hillenbrand writes, "All he could see, in every direction, were smiling Japanese faces. There were children peeking out of hooded coats, men who had once worked beside the POW slaves in the steel mill, civilians snapping photographs, clapping, waving, cheering Louie on, and 120 Japanese soldiers, formed into two columns, parting to let him pass. Louie ran through the place where cages had once held him...But the cages were long gone...There was no trace of them here among the voices, the falling snow, and the old and joyful man, running."


"It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."

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"Reputation is what men and women think of us; character is what God and angels know of us."

— Thomas Paine