

Stronger Than Our Rock
by Peter Millspaugh

“The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus) In the Greek myth of Sisyphus, when Sisyphus was an older man, he devised a plan to test his wife’s love, which she failed, resulting in his death, whereupon he departed earth and entered the hellish underworld. Having been a great man, the gods allowed him the rare permission to return to earth, but only to scold his wife. However, upon returning to earth and enjoying its bright pleasures, he refused to go back to the underworld, against the gods’ demands. To punish his disobedience, the gods sentenced him to an eternal torture. He would push an enormous boulder up a mountain, only to see it roll back down. That process would repeat forever.

The lesson this story communicates at first seems quite simple. Sisyphus was granted a privilege, acted greedily and defiantly, and was punished deservedly. However, philosopher Albert Camus takes a closer look in his piece *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He writes,

One sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it, and push it up a slope a hundred times over... At the very end of his long effort, ... the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward the lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down... Sisyphus, ..., powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy... His fate belongs to him... The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

“One must imagine Sisyphus happy.” It was this line that echoed in my head when I first read this passage in high school. Happy? But how? How on earth could this guy that has to push a rock up a hill forever be happy? What Camus argues is that, even though Sisyphus must continue this terrible punishment without end, he has a mental choice. He can choose to be happy despite his awful punishment. This guy has everything to complain about. He has no sliver of hope that his suffering will end, but his best option is to scorn the gods – to mock them – and to mentally overcome the mountain. That is, by deciding to be happy, he takes away the gods’ wish to see his misery. He cannot change his circumstance, but he can control his own thoughts. Sisyphus has a choice, and so do we.

Every day, we do things that we might think are boring, annoying, uncomfortable, or difficult. Here at camp, we wake up each morning to a piercing bugle. Most of us would like to hit snooze and sleep some more, but instead we scurry down to stand under the coldest water source on the hillside during the coldest part of the day. After breakfast, we scrub pots, sweep cracks, cake our hands in kerosene soot, and plunge toilets. On expeditions, we walk until our legs scream, swat mosquitos until our limbs are more bitten than not, and we eat pasta with more

trail spice than the recipe calls for; sometimes we do all of these things in the pouring rain. So, how is it that we come to cherish these challenges? Of course, it is consensus that we learn from hard work and adversity and grow because of those experiences – that we can look back and say, “I’m glad I did that.” But, I would argue that it is not only afterward that we can appreciate and enjoy seemingly unenjoyable things; we can also revel in them and have fun.

Think back to that kitchen duty when you cranked the tunes and scrubbed gleefully until Mem Hall sparkled, or at body circuits when the group’s motivation overpowered the scorching burn in your muscles, or last summer when big groups of you ran around upper camp with brooms to help finish other boys sweeping duties efficiently and enthusiastically. We all have a choice. What’s often much more important than *what* we are doing is *how* we are doing it – our approach, our mindset. We can choose to be happy, patient, reflective, or enthusiastic. One night this spring during my final exam week, I emerged alone from the inmost depths of Alderman Library after spending the entire day there, unaware of anything beyond my work at my desk. It was past midnight, and I stepped outside to discover a torrential downpour – the type of rain that you must surrender to, raincoat or not. In my loopy, exhausted state, my ten-minute walk to my apartment loomed much longer. Maybe it was my lack of sleep or mental fatigue, but something in me clicked as I immediately thought back to expeditions and to the rainiest day on Long Walk 2013, an 18-mile jaunt around the Notchpost loop. Outside the library then, I took a breath and said, “packs on boys,” loud enough for any confused bystander to hear. To anyone that I passed on my way home, I must have looked crazy walking late that night in the rain with that oddly wide grin on my face. I smiled and returned home with a healthy mindset, which helped me through that stressful exam period.

In a speech delivered to college students at their graduation, author David Foster Wallace spoke about the conscious choice we have in the less appealing parts of our everyday lives. The following is an excerpt from his speech:

The point is that petty, frustrating [stuff] like this is exactly where the work of choosing comes in. Because the traffic jams and crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I'm going to be miserable every time I have to food-shop... Look, if I choose to think this way, fine, lots of us do... Thinking this way is... the automatic, unconscious way that I experience the boring, frustrating, crowded parts of life... But if you've really learned how to think, how to pay attention, then you will know you have other options... The only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to decide how you're going to try to see it. You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't.

I think Wallace sums it up very realistically. Sure, some days we will find it difficult to enjoy or see meaning in our morning duties or hikes. But, on other days, we can turn that dreaded duty or hike into something fun and satisfying. We always have the choice. We get to decide how to approach any situation. Like Wallace says, it is automatic and unconscious to go about “boring” things being bored. Once you have in the front of your mind, readily available, the tool of choice, you can combat your boredom, angst, or frustration. And while we can consciously choose how

we approach a given situation, it is also very important to know that there are things we can and cannot control.

The reality is that although some things are out of our control, we still have a great deal of choice in our lives. This idea is well illustrated by a story I read about earlier this year. A woman named Joanne Hill suffered an unimaginable amount of loss over a four-year period. Hill lost her brother, stepfather, mother, aunt, two uncles, two cousins, her cousin's partner, her stepmother, and, finally, her son, who died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 38. Now, picture yourself in Joanne's shoes after such unrelenting misfortune. Given the circumstances, it seems likely that with this unbearable grief she would stop her life in its tracks and choose to crawl under a rock – and who would blame her? It's hard to imagine how we would respond to such severe adversity. However, despite all that tragedy that occurred in just four years, Joanne Hill chose to persevere with extraordinary strength, grace, and resilience. Not only did she deal with the complicated legal issues arising from these family deaths, but she also travelled to Europe, went back to college, and wrote a book about her story. In her book she writes,

Today, in spite of one trauma after another for several years, I am healthy in body and whole in mind. Not because of Lady Luck, but because I decided to make different choices... choice, like breath, is something that is part of us. We always have a choice... the Power of Choice is an empowering remedy that truly makes the difference whether we survive and thrive, or wither and die.

Joanne Hill's story is a moving example of just how powerful choice can be. Of course, hers is an extreme example that serves as a dramatic illustration of mental strength. But, the message we take away from it rings true no matter the degree of challenge we face. We always have a choice.

I like to return to Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* now and again. If he were to allow the torture to cause him only sorrow and burden, then the rock would win. But, when Sisyphus chooses to be joyful in his punishment, "he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock." (*The Myth of Sisyphus*). Sisyphus's challenge is his rock. And we all have our own rocks, our challenges. Every day we take on these rocks; sometimes they are small and we push them aside with ease, while other times they are larger and require greater effort. Here at camp, we often hear, "too many rocks on the hillside." I'd argue there are just enough. We face small rocks like refilling the milk or getting in a cold shower. Then there are larger ones, like sweeping a dirty dorm or participating in an activity outside our comfort zone. We tackle larger ones even still when we go on expeditions or when we have to repair a friendship after a disagreement. Not only can we defeat our rocks, but we can enjoy ourselves while we push. These rocks on the hillside prepare us for the unending supply of rocks that we will confront when we leave Pasquaney. Fortunately, we have a choice in how to approach these challenges. We can choose to exercise our positive mindset as best as we can in each of these otherwise boring, annoying, uncomfortable, or difficult moments. We have the choice. We can be stronger than our rock.