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## CrossFit: A Sisyphean Endeavor?

Dr. Jane Drexler asks who we are between the first rep and the last.

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By Dr. Jane Drexler

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Kim Bellavance

“He is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.” —Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

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### The Moment Between Rounds

If you want to wax philosophical about CrossFit, few better moments will capture your attention than the Dog Sled event of the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games.

Look at the now-iconic image of Chris Spealler, and you see an unforgettable moment: all eyes were on a man whose whole being was focused on the Herculean effort of pushing a way-too-heavy-but-somehow-not dog sled across an arena floor.

The dog sled was part of the second half of a multiple-round workout that included three rounds of overhead squats and double-unders, and then three rounds of handstand push-ups and a 385-lb. dog-sled push from one end of the arena to the other, 40 feet at a time. After each 40-foot push, we watched Spealler and every other athlete stand up, turn around, and walk back to the beginning in order to earn—through HSPUs—the right to push the sled again.

We don't usually pay much attention to the time in between rounds, when not a whole lot is going on. What's to look at? It's people walking, resting or catching their breath. We don't usually see that as worthy of sustained attention. But I want to linger on that moment.

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*Man versus sled.*

I want to linger on the moment because, like Speller and the others, we all do workouts in which, at the end of one round, we turn around and walk back to begin the next. It's a component of every AMRAP. It's that minute in Fight Gone Bad between the row and the wall-balls. Every fiber of our being knows we are about to re-start something grueling, and our exhausted minds and bodies are readying themselves to do it all again.

I want to linger on that moment, too, because I think Albert Camus could say a lot about it. Indeed, Camus, the French existentialist philosopher who wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus*, thought that kind of moment—the moment “in between” the struggles—was the most important moment in Sisyphus' life, and, by extension, our own lives.

Camus did not see merely rest. He did not see only a man catching his breath and readying himself to begin again his struggle. Rather, in that pained expression and wearied walk, Camus saw the face of freedom, triumph and agency.

### The Myth of Sisyphus

So who is Sisyphus?

Sisyphus (pronounced SIS-uh-fuss) is a tragic figure in Greek mythology and in general owns one of the worst fates the ancients could come up with: an eternal existence of “futile and hopeless labor.”

Having angered the gods for several reasons, Sisyphus was cursed to spend all of eternity pushing a rock up to the top of a steep hill, only to have it roll back down each time. Camus describes it well:

*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; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass . . . . At the very end of his long effort measured by sky-less space and time-without-depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it back up again towards the summit. He goes back down to the plain.*

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus repeats this series of events for all eternity.



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**Jenny LaBaw, preparing herself for the next round of rope climbs.**

### Sisyphus as Existentialist Metaphor

Sisyphus' fate is a metaphor for our fears about life generally (and for existentialist philosophers, including Camus, it's not just a fear; it's a reality): “What if this is all meaningless? I get up every day, I go to work, I come home, I do this, I do that, not much changes. Not much alters the path of the rock that I push up my own hill, only to do it again the next day.”

We have probably all quietly felt, at one time or another, Bill Murray's bar-soaked question in the movie *Groundhog Day*: “What if you were stuck in the same place, and every day was the same, and nothing you did mattered?”

Existentialism can seem pretty damn depressing at times.

But actually, existentialism as a philosophy can often be profoundly hopeful. Existentialists like Camus spent a good chunk of their philosophic efforts trying to show us that, even when it seems it never stops and never means anything, life is momentous and meaningful. Even when it seems we are cursed by the gods to live out drudgery and never feel finished, we are not victims. Even in those darkest moments when we feel that “our whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing,” we are still agents in our world. Even “Sisyphus is happy.”



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*We gain strength, both mental and physical, when we return to a challenge, take a breath and try again.*

So, how does Camus try to explain these points? Precisely by lingering on that seemingly insignificant moment when Sisyphus, having watched the stone fall back down the hill, turns around and walks back to retrieve it. Camus says, "It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me."

Why? Because at that moment—in between the feats of struggle—Sisyphus is conscious. While this moment of consciousness ensures the tragedy of his fate (after all, truly knowing that your fate is something horrible is a key part of what makes it horrible), this awareness also "crowns his victory" for Camus.

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"That hour is like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering," and in that hour's knowing, in that hour's accepting, lies the key to a person's triumph over his or her struggle. It is the moment of clarity, resolve, willful stepping that breaks up the fog that is the struggle. At that moment—in those steps—"He is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock."

### **Stronger Than the Rock**

Anyone who has done Fight Gone Bad, an AMRAP or five-rounds-of-whatever probably knows a little bit about what it means to call something a "Sisyphian endeavor": immersed in the fog of the struggle, it seems to never end, it seems to be utterly grueling, and it seems to repeat itself over and over again, with each element seeming insurmountable at the time.

What goes through our minds during the last rep of one round of Fight Gone Bad and the first rep of the next? Who are we in that moment? Stumbling off the rowing machine between rounds and walking back to start again, desperately hoping the minute break will pass slowly, we are at that moment Sisyphus.



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***CrossFit proves to us again and again that we are stronger than the task before us.***

And particularly between rounds 2 and 3 (or gods forbid rounds 3 and 4 of a 5-round Fight Gone Bad), we do not find our struggle pleasant. The rock is not an easy burden, and we know this. We know the next round will hurt. Sometimes we smile in resignation or camaraderie, sometimes we cuss in panic. But Camus would tell us that neither are acts of defeat. Both are acts of defiance.

In that act of turning around and walking back to begin the next round, we have beaten the rock. We have said to the rock, "You don't own me. I own you. You do not conquer me. I conquer you." At those moments, we are stronger than the burden, stronger than the worry, stronger than the mundane.

We are stronger than the rock.

Camus believes we are not powerless in misery—even if we are cursed to live lives of suffering, monotony or despair, for 17 minutes or for an eternity—because we are free and triumphant in between rounds as we walk consciously and willfully back down the hill to again take up our burden.

One need not imagine the scene as looking all that triumphant. Camus doesn't kid himself: Sisyphus walks down "with heavy but measured step." Indeed, we can often look wearied and frayed. And there are times, too, when "the boundless grief is too heavy to bear. These are our nights of Gethsemane," when faced with melancholy or overwhelmed with suffering we ask the cup to pass from us. We wonder if we can keep doing it. But, even in weariness and doubt, in the middle of it all, we still push on, taking each step willfully.

And that's Camus' point: While it may be true that a fundamental quality to our lives is that we are never finished, we are often plodding along in drudgery and we are often in suffering, we are also not defeated if we remain conscious and willful in our steps back into the fray.

This is why Camus speaks to me as a CrossFit athlete. For Camus, Sisyphus was a metaphor for meaning and agency in a life full of struggle. And Camus lets me imagine Fight Gone Bad, AMRAPs or five-rounds-of-whatever as metaphors for life. What if, like Camus, we saw the walk back—the willful stepping—as the key to our success and our joy?



Kim Bellavance

***There is triumph in struggle, no matter how grueling.***

What would matter then would not be the PR last week or the disappointing score on yesterday's WOD, because those are only brief stops on the rock's path and "the rock is still rolling." Even competitions are not end points, only moments in an unfinished journey. Hell, even Chris Spealler can't retire!

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What would matter, then, would be all those moments when we've decided to head back into the fray, all those moments when we have summoned the will to keep going, even and especially when it has felt unbearable.

It's easy to see how Camus' point here applies in the middle of Fight Gone Bad or a Dog Sled workout. But what if we thought of our other life activities like that: the going-to-work, paying-the-bills, grounding-the-children, eating-the-right-foods, cleaning-the-kitchen activities? What if we imagined that some of the most important moments in our lives are those moments in between—those vulnerable and quietly triumphant moments—when we, with heavy but measured step, choose willfully to continue walking?

### References

1. Camus A. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage Books, 1955. Text of last chapter of *The Myth of Sisyphus* available here: <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/keefe/hell/camus.html>. Last accessed Feb. 26, 2013.

### About the Author:



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*Jane Drexler is an associate professor of philosophy at Salt Lake Community College and holds a Level 1 CrossFit Certificate. She has published essays in several books and professional journals, primarily on political theory and ethics. At 43, Jane has a Fran time that's an awesomely average 7 minutes, and her clean-and-jerk max hovers around 135 lb.*