



**Discussion Questions**  
***Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand**

1. The first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights lists dignity as a fundamental right. When talking about Louie and Phil's experience in Kwajalein, the narrator says "Dignity is as essential to human life as water, food and oxygen." (p. 183) How is this borne out in the story?
2. The Ofuna camp is a "secret interrogation center" where the men are considered "unarmed combatants" at war against Japan. (p. 192) Because of this classification, the Japanese claimed Louie and the other prisoners didn't have rights under international law since they were not POW's. What problems arise when the imprisoning country determines who does or does not fall within the Prisoner of War definition?
3. At both Ofuna and Omori camps, the officers and guards steal Red Cross boxes and other rations meant for the prisoners. What should be done to monitor relief supplies and prisons to ensure proper treatment?
4. The "bird", Mutsuhiro Watanabe, was notorious for inflicting emotional and physical torture on prisoners and also for being inconsistent in his treatment of people, being "friendly" one moment and sadistically abusive the next. (p. 233 et seq.) How is this illustrative of the cycle of violence?
5. What do Louie and the other prisoners gain from acts of defiance, like sabotage, stealing food, and answering questions in English? Why do they take these risks? (See page 203, 242, 284).
6. The author cites statistics indicating that 37% of American POW's held by Japan died, while only 1% held by Germany & Italy died. (p. 315) Do you think American civilians knew about the conditions endured by POW's and other captured soldiers? What impact, if any, do you think this had on American treatment of people of Japanese ancestry in the U.S.?
7. Passing through Hiroshima after being released from a POW camp, a soldier remarks that the denuded landscape was 'beautiful.' He says "I was so insensitive to anyone else's human needs and suffering. I know it's not right to say it was beautiful, because it really wasn't. But I believed the end probably justified the means." (p. 320) After reading about the treatment of Louie and his fellow soldiers, how do we understand this sentiment? How can this sentiment be reconciled with a human rights framework?
8. The author notes that "35,946 personnel died in non-battle situations, the vast majority of them in accidental crashes." (p. 80) Louie records many mechanical problems, being forced to fly into storms and fly planes with substandard or dangerous mechanical limitations. Ultimately, the crash that precipitates his saga is caused by a plane with faulty equipment. What human rights issues do these conditions implicate?
9. After the war ends and the soldiers have returned to the U.S., one of Louie's fellow ex-prisoners, Fred, flies into a rage when a waiter serves him an entrée with a side of white rice. (p. 346) The author cites other reports of men struggling to cope with the torture they experienced as they try to "restore their dignity." (p. 349) Why wasn't there better mental health support for the former prisoners as they reintegrated into civilian life? Is support and awareness higher today?
10. Throughout the story there are individuals who provide emotional support to Louie and the other prisoners. A few examples: "Kawamura could do nothing to improve the physical conditions in which the captives lived, but his kindness was lifesaving." (p. 185); Yukichi Kano, the camp interpreter at Omori "snuck sick men away from the sadistic Japanese doctor and into the hands of a POW who was a physician." (p.245) This embodies the UDHR's exhortation to "act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood." How do we encourage or teach this to people?