Sitting Bull’s Purpose at Little Bighorn

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can Sitting Bull’s bold defense of his territory inspire you to be dedicated to your own purpose?

- **Virtue: Purpose**

- **Definition** – Purpose is my answer to the question "why do I exist?" It is the reason for which I exist; it is my goal, that thing to which my actions are directed. It is our answer to the question “what are you for?”

- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will learn about the Sitting Bull and his role during the Battle of Little Bighorn. They will see how he fulfilled his purpose throughout this battle and through his example, learn how they can pursue purpose in their own lives.

- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze Sitting Bull’s performance during the Battle of Little Bighorn
  - Students will understand how Sitting Bull’s actions show a dedication to purpose
  - Students will apply this knowledge to the pursuit of purpose in their own lives.

- **Background**
  - Sitting Bull was born in 1831 to a highly-respected Hunkpapa Sioux family (part of the seven Lakota tribes) who lived along the Missouri River in modern-day South Dakota. His father, Jumping Badger and later named Slow for his deliberative manner, was a mystic who grew up as a warrior. At twenty-five-years old, Sitting Bull was a leader of the Strong Hearts, who were elite warriors. He was known to be brave, generous, strong, and wise.

  In the late 1850s, the seven Lakota tribes met to address the growing threat posed by the western expansion of the American settlers onto tribal lands. At the special council in the Black Hills, 5,000 Lakotas pledged their resistance to white encroachment. They sent a message to the President of the Americans “that they could not be allowed to come into our country...All they asked of the white people was to be left to themselves and let alone.”

  By 1864, Sitting Bull was driven by the purpose of resisting what he considered the white invasion. He refused to sign any treaties or enter a reservation. “We do not want to eat from the hand of the Grandfather [the President]...We can feed ourselves.” He also joined the fighting against white armies sent to the Dakotas and assaulted forts that were built there.

  In June, 1876, Sitting Bull had small pieces of flesh ritualistically taken from his arms followed by hours of dancing during a Sun Dance ceremony, the most sacred of Lakota religious ceremonies. Suddenly, he stopped dancing and held his gaze to the heavens receiving a prophetic vision while communing with the Great Spirit Wakantanka. He described the vision that included white soldiers and their horses above an Indian village falling upside down (signifying death). Some of the Indians in the village were falling upside down but not as many. It was a great victory over the encroaching enemy. The forty-five-year-old warrior would soon ride out to lead and encourage his Indian warriors to fulfill the prophecy at Little Big Horn.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Mystic
  - Elite
  - Expansion
  - Resistance
  - Ritualistic
  - Commune
  - Instrumental
  - Chaos
  - Mobilize
  - Dismount
  - Initiative
  - Endure
• Introduce Text
  o Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

• Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions
  o As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    ▪ What challenges are you facing?
    ▪ What fears or concerns might you have?
    ▪ What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

• Observation Questions
  o Who was Sitting Bull?
  o What was Sitting Bull’s role during the Battle of Little Bighorn?
  o What do you think is Sitting Bull’s biggest contribution during the Battle of Little Bighorn?

• Discussion Questions
  o Discuss the following questions with your students.
    ▪ What is the historical context of the narrative?
    ▪ What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    ▪ How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    ▪ How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    ▪ How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    ▪ What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    ▪ Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    ▪ How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

• Additional Resources
Handout A: Sitting Bull’s Purpose at Little Bighorn

Background

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Narrative

Sitting Bull was lying in his lodge in the tribal circle when he received word that the American army was attacking. He was in the middle of a massive encampment of with thousands of men, women, and children staying in a thousand teepees. He was instrumental in ordering the screaming women and children to move off away from the battlefield while dozens of warriors rode their horses and whipped up a large dust cloud that would cover the movement. His nephew One Bull had already raced to the large herd of horses and ponies to recover their mounts. Sitting Bull helped One Bull prepare for battle, arming him with his battle club and rawhide shield, and buckling his cartridge belt with a few encouraging words. Sitting Bull climbed atop a black horse and rode out to encourage his warriors who plunged into battle intent on killing the Americans who slaughtered their people and took their lands. Sitting Bull was pleased to have such a strong army of Cheyenne, Hunkpapa Sioux, Lakota Sioux warriors to face the Americans in battle. He must have been relieved to hear the screams that “Crazy Horse is coming!” though he wanted the lion’s share of the glory.

Major Marcus Reno had charged at the Indian village at about three o’clock in the afternoon heat in the hills of southern Montana. Reno was shocked when he saw the unexpectedly large village. He thought it was going to be easy to ride through the village, slaughter its inhabitants, and force the surrender of any survivors. That was not to be the case. Changing plans, he ordered his cavalry troops to dismount and charge the hundreds of painted, screaming Indian warriors. The worries were mobilizing quickly to defend against the American “bluecoats” attacking them. Reno’s troops quickly lost their discipline as the line wavered and their fear grew. The attacking Americans were overwhelmed and retreated in chaotic fashion. They hid in some nearby woods but were picked off by Indian riflemen and bowmen. Deadly projectiles zipped by from every angle. Reno galloped off as the situation descended into chaos, and the panicked Americans were picked off in the pell-mell retreat.
The Sioux looked at the battle so far as a “buffalo chase” and pursued the Americans as they tried to cross the Little Bighorn River and retreat southward. Sitting Bull shouted encouragement to his warriors whose blood was up in the thick of battle and took prizes from the growing trail of dead American soldiers. He came across one enemy soldier that he knew and magnanimously told his warriors, “Don’t kill that man, he is a friend of mine.” He even dismounted and gave the wounded man some water before riding off back into battle. The decimated Americans clambered atop a hill and formed a rough skirmish line. They were low on ammunition, water, and morale. But, the Indian warriors thankfully peeled off and engaged the enemy elsewhere.

At that moment, General George Custer surveyed the battlefield and prepared to launch the bulk of his army to the northwest toward the Indian village while a subordinate moved forward in a feint to draw the Indians into a place where Custer would wipe them out. Frederick Benteen was ordered to relieve the pressure on Reno’s men and advance up the river valley to reinforce Custer. With the plan set, General Custer advanced beyond the Indian village to what became known as Last Stand Hill. Meanwhile, Sitting Bull urged hundreds of warriors to flood the hills around Custer’s army and surround them.

Custer’s army was quickly surrounded and suffered withering fire from Indians riding on horseback firing rifles or crawling seemingly everywhere from behind rocks on the hill and standing up to fire an arrow before disappearing. Custer organized a force to break through to the Little Big Horn River below, but there were too many Indians, and it turned back up the hill. Custer lost the initiative, and the men of his army were sitting ducks.

Myles Keogh was supposed to be protecting Custer's right flank when a skirmish line on the ridge collapsed. White Bull and hundreds of Lakota warriors were overwhelming the Americans when Crazy Horse joined him and challenged White Bull to a “bravery run.” They charged into battle and engaged in desperate hand-to-hand fighting. The American troops were all slaughtered and most of the bodies were mutilated.

The same fate befell Custer as he deployed his men on the summit of the hill and ordered all the horses to be shot so that they could create a grisly, primitive breastworks for protection as they fired. He sent out a skirmish line to drive the Indians back but few returned alive. Custer’s men fought desperately for their lives and killed many Indians. However, Custer was then shot in the left breast and another bullet slammed into his head taking his life. Some of his men committed suicide rather than submitting to a tortuous death at the hands of the Indians. Soon, they were all dead. The enemy captured their battle flags, stripped the dead soldiers, and put on their clothes in celebration.

To the southeast, Benteen's men met up with the remnants of Reno’s force at the southeastern mouth of the valley. Sitting Bull ordered his warriors to the hill to kill the last of the Americans and soon 1,000 Indians assaulted the hill. The Americans were desperately thirsty and frighteningly low on ammunition as they endured the attack. Their comrades were dropping constantly as the brilliant colors of the setting sun filled the valley. Soon, darkness fell and the rate of enemy fire finally dropped. As the din of battle calmed, the screams and lamentations of the wounded were all that was heard by the survivors. No one could sleep, and the men dug in with spoons and plates to build shallow trenches for the battle that was expected in the morning.

At dawn, Benteen called the trumpeters to sound reveille as the hail of fire commenced. All that day, the two sides exchanged deadly fire, and the American numbers gradually diminished. Benteen inspired his men: “When the bullet is cast to kill me, it’ll kill me, that’s all.” Reno for his part led a charge that drove off a massing of Indian warriors. Water parties were sent out and somehow returned. They miraculously held out while the Indians decided to depart and a massive procession marched off. Another frightening and sleepless night passed as the men expected a ruse and thought the enemy would kill them in the darkness. Finally, a relief column of Americans entered the valley the next day and found the grisly scenes of battle. Eventually, they found Custer's body and buried 204 soldiers. Sitting Bull’s vision had come true and his purpose fulfilled at Little Big Horn. He had one, at least for a short time, the independence and freedom he desired.