



## FAMILY DISCUSSION GUIDE

### INTRODUCTION

After overcoming personal tragedy, widowed father and champion musher Leonhard “Sepp” Seppala steps up in the midst of a diphtheria outbreak in Nome, Alaska, to deliver the anti-toxin to the hospital. With his own child's life on the line, Sepp battles the impossible, accompanied by his pack of sled dogs, including his legendary lead dog, Togo.

*The Great Alaskan Race* is an inspirational family film that celebrates the triumph of the human (and canine!) spirit, the heroes in our history, and the necessity for hope and courage in even the most trying times. The following is a series of conversation starters to spark discussions around *The Great Alaskan Race*.







*The Great Alaskan Race* tells a story that boggles the mind. If it weren't based on true events, some of the elements of the story would seem ridiculously over-the-top. Temperatures dropping to negative eighty degrees, a dog sled team racing over 674 miles, and one man enduring most of that? There's no way that can be humanly possible! But it was...and it is.

We live in an age of cinematic superheroes. Caped crusaders and masked avengers flood our pop culture streams from graphic novels to blockbuster films to the latest binge-worthy series. Many of these are truly entertaining stories, but do they *really* inspire us to do and be better? Do they *really* show us our true inherent strength and potential?

People like Leonhard Seppala couldn't fly or shoot laser beams out of their eyes, but they possessed a strength of will and a love of their fellow humans (and canine companions) that was downright super-heroic. And what *The Great Alaskan Race* shows us is that our collective histories are full of heroic feats and figures that remind us of just how great we can be.

### Questions for Consideration

1. Who inspires you? Who is a real-life hero to you?
2. In what ways have you been a hero to others? Was there a moment or a time in your life when you went "over and above the call of duty?" What was that and what did you learn about yourself?







The world of *The Great Alaskan Race*, Nome, Alaska, late 1910s and early 1920s, is simultaneously close to and another world away from our own. In just about a century, we have come to take for granted technologies and a connectedness that seemed alien to our grandparents. The telegraph and hand-cranked telephone seem like stone age technologies to us, much like sledding seemed like a stone age technology to Thompson (the airplane advocate in the film).

Now technology, overall, has made life better for humanity (speedier transportation and better medicine are two examples relevant to the film). Consider that the United States reported 206,000 cases of diphtheria in 1921. From 2004 to 2017, only two cases were reported nationwide. With such improvements, we will not likely be called to endure a struggle the likes of which Seppala and the other mushers faced. But no matter who we are or where we live, we can all sacrifice for the betterment of others.

We all know or see people in need, whether they are next door or around the world (and even people around the world are much closer to us than ever before). There are countless ways in which we can make small sacrifices to make their lives better. Sure, Seppala exhibited almost superhuman strength, but without his *sacrifice* and his *willingness* to put himself in harm's way, many more children would have died.

### Questions for Consideration

1. Think about your own life. Who has sacrificed for you? What have they done? How have they inspired you?
2. Look around your community. Who is in need? If you're not already helping them, what sacrifices can you make to do so?





Early in *The Great Alaskan Race*, tragedy strikes Seppala's family with the untimely death of his wife. This plunges him into a time of mourning and wandering. He is grief-stricken and angry. In an early scene, he roars out a lament—that may or may not be directed at God—which expresses a question that is now at the core of his being: why did this happen to me?! Later in the film, we will see other parents cry out in grief over the deaths of their beloved children. This grief is completely understandable. But Seppala's sadness and anger separate him from the rest of the community. He shows up at church for a Christmas Eve service, but is a detached observer, not an engaged participant. When others, like Constance, express concern for him, offer to help him, or love on his daughter Sigrid, he impatiently brushes them off.

No one can replace lost loved ones. No single act of kindness can wipe away the pain of grief like some emotional magic wand. Tragedy, in one form or another, will strike all our lives, both individually and through our relationships with family members and friends. Films like *The Great Alaskan Race* remind us to both receive the care of our surrounding community and to be embraced by them when we need it and to be active members of that loving community for others when they suffer loss and pain.

#### **Questions for Consideration**

1. Think about a moment in your life where you have known tremendous grief or pain. Who stood by you during this time? What did they do best that saw you through this time?
2. If you haven't known great loss or pain, you can likely find people in your community who are in the midst of it. How can you serve them best?







Near the end of *The Great Alaskan Race*, Harry Davenport, the news reporter keeping the rest of the country up to speed on “The Race Against Death,” says that Seppala’s journey proves that with a little hope and courage, anything is possible. We see this played out throughout the film. People like George and Governor Bone had hope in the musher’s ability to get the serum to Nome. Their hope stood in stark contrast to Thompson’s doubt and disbelief. Seppala and the other mushers had the courage to make the treacherous journey. Without it, the children in their town would have perished.

Davenport’s statement about hope and courage might sound trite in the weary times in which we live, but we need this message now more than ever. It is easy to lose hope when we are bombarded by bad news on an almost minute-by-minute basis. This hopelessness drains our capacity for courageous action. We say to ourselves, “Well, if it’s as bad as it seems, what can I, one person, do?” And so, we do nothing and problems worsen.

But what if Seppala and the other mushers thought the same thing? What if George and Governor Bone lost the courage of their convictions? These men knew that the impossible could be possible if they worked together...if they each played their smaller, albeit still dangerous, part, they could save the children of Nome.

We too must have hope that our contribution to causes much greater than ourselves can have a cumulative positive effect. And we must have the courage to keep acting accordingly on this hope, even when the world makes us feel otherwise.

### Questions for Consideration

1. Think about your capacity for hope. Is it strong? Weak? What gives you hope? What drains it?
2. Think about a crisis facing your community or our world. Who are the people working to address it? What can you do to help them?





Seppala and the rest of the mushers exhibit great strength and determination in the story of *The Great Alaskan Race*, but Togo and the other sled dogs are the real stars of the show. Their ability to endure those freezing temperatures and to bring the serum through treacherous landscapes and blizzard conditions is truly awe-inspiring. It's also a reminder that we really do have best friends—and so much more—in dogs like these.

As the film tells us, the legendary Iditarod Race is run every year to commemorate the serum run of 1925. Mushers that compete in this race have a very special bond with their dogs. The care taken for their well-being knows no bounds. In many ways, the race is a celebration of their strength, endurance, and ability to serve.

We all have likely have experience with, or at least have seen, dogs at work. Whether they are sniffing out danger at our local airport, guiding a blind person, or providing joy for patients in hospitals, dogs can be so much more than just our pets. And even when they are “just our pets,” they’re really part of our family. In very real ways, *The Great Alaskan Race* reminds us of this connection between people and dogs and our responsibility to promote their well-being, even as they contribute to ours.

#### Questions for Consideration

1. Are there dogs at work in your community? If so, who are they and what do they do?
2. Think about the pets in your life. Did they (or do they) have a special place in your family? What made them unique and special to you?

