



Case Report

Lance Armstrong as Teacher

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Abstract

The American cyclist Lance Armstrong, I propose, overcame a threatening death sentence through his strength of will, not necessarily his strength of character the latter idealized by Aristotle (2004) in his *Ethics*. It was Armstrong's will to survive that made him one of the most celebrated and loved athletes in recent times. He won the Tour de France seven times. He became the achiever per se in today's achievement society that was already emerging in 90's.

The Case: Two Death Sentences

In 1996, Lance Armstrong was diagnosed with testicular cancer. This was his first death sentence. From this serious and often fatal disease he rose like the bird Phoenix two years later. Only this time, this cyclist returned in an improved way: the bird had new wings. He was leaner, thinner, and—most importantly—he had faced pain and suffering. He knew that he could beat the pain by embracing it.

The second death sentence, even more severe than the one before, happened in January 2013 when the journalist Oprah Winfrey executed Armstrong, or at least allowed him to commit *hara-kiri*: a ritual suicide performed by Japanese samurai warriors in open air. The problem—at least from the point of view of all the disappointed fans—was that Armstrong, if we remain with the samurai, either didn't cut deep enough, or didn't have a spirit that was honorable anyway. The question that remains open is, therefore, whether Armstrong did or did not release his spirit to the afterlife. Can we learn anything from Armstrong other than he used performance-enhancing drugs? These are the questions that I will circle around in this essay.

The samurai committed *hara-kiri* mainly due to personal shame following unrighteous conduct in battle, or dishonest actions or behaviors. Also, as many of us know from popular films such as *The Last Samurai*, a samurai caught in battle could be offered the chance to commit suicide as way of regaining his honor.

So, was Armstrong ashamed? Did he believe that he had acted dishonestly?

No and no. He only did what everyone else in cycling was doing at that time. He didn't invent performance-enhancing drugs, just as doping in cycling didn't end with him. He followed the code of the other samurai warriors that fought with their bikes and bodies. As social psychologist Philip Zimbardo (2007) has shown in *The Lucifer Effect*, then sometime the apples (i.e. cyclist) are bad because the barrel (i.e. culture) is bad. The individual is colored and formed by the context.

Yet, Armstrong's confession to Winfrey was probably aimed at maintaining some of his honor. He wanted to die wearing his beloved yellow jersey, but he did not. A few months before his public confession, the International Cycling

Union (UCI) president Pat McQuaid said, “*Lance Armstrong has no place in cycling, and he deserves to be forgotten in cycling.*” *The UCI president left Armstrong naked, yet McQuaid couldn’t have been more wrong in his predictions.* Armstrong is a part of cycling history. If he is out, so are Jan Ulrich, Marco Pantani, Alex Zülle, Eddy Merxx...and the list goes on and on and on.

Either Armstrong is part of cycling history, or there is no history, other than, perhaps, the last few years of clean riders. Back then in the era of Armstrong (and before), everyone was using performance-enhancing drugs, just as everyone was smoking and drinking during work in the 60s as depicted in the series *Mad Men*. These bike riders are the true mad men, testing what the human body is capable of.

So what are we missing in Armstrong’s legacy?

Armstrong won because he was riding to beat cancer. He wanted to survive, no matter how. To a large extent, he became the man of the future. Today, death has become a taboo. Many are afraid to accept that we humans are mortals; constantly we strive for eternal youth and strength. Living forever appears attractive, as if our actual form of life didn’t matter, only the amount of time. Similarly, in recent years many have been trying to enhance their capacity to live successful lives. For example, we use pills to alter our mood, hormones to maintain our muscles, surgery to cover our wrinkles, meditation to minimize our lack of attention, and transplanted organs so we can keep on drinking. We optimize our vision, our hearing, and our sense of smell. This quest has become a more or less normal adjustment to life.

Nevertheless, some fans and sponsors feel cheated by Armstrong. He was lying; they felt, when in fact he was rather being too polite to be honest. In other words, it would have been inappropriate not to lie. After all, he didn’t want to ruin the illusion that he did not create alone, and that so many needed. Many people wanted a superman who first beat cancer, then Ulrich, Pantani, Hamilton ... you name it. To tell the truth was to force people to reflect upon their own set of values, or acknowledge that they needed something in their lives, for example, a role model or ideal. To which Armstrong, of course, was just a surrogate.

Then, when he finally gave in to all the evidence and pressure regarding his use of performance-enhancing drugs, Armstrong suddenly became honest--far too honest this time. He said that he didn’t regret doping, that there was no shame, and that everyone else was doing it. The reason why he didn’t regret his drug use or feel full of shame was that drugs helped him beat cancer. His will to survive was exemplary. It was so exemplary that he became the best within a culture where only performance or achievement counts.

The drugs, however, were not his entire problematic heritage. Armstrong was also a bully, a Texan’s cowboy who was always ready to draw in a duel. This fact suggested that he lacked good character, but even someone with good character sometimes has to do what is necessary to live. Doing drugs, therefore, doesn’t necessarily turn Armstrong into a vicious person who treats other people with no compassion or care. It could easily be the other way around. Yet, perhaps there is a connection here; for example, whether a competitive culture like a capitalistic achievement culture nurtures forms of behavior that are quite the opposite of what Gandhi and Mother Theresa taught?

Still, even as a bully, Armstrong is a complex figure. After all, it was he who personalized and inspired a whole generation by showing them that cancer was not a death sentence per se. He showed that the will to win does not depend on your number of testicles, but instead on your mind. Yet, the fact remains: Armstrong didn’t pass on his good character like Mother Teresa; instead he passed on his will. This is his legacy: The will to live transformed itself into a will to succeed.

The Problem

The problem today is that many people don’t possess a very strong will or self-discipline. Self-discipline matters (e.g. see Baumeister 2013). Without it, we easily fall for all the distractions and seductive goods and products that fill

contemporary society. Yet, self-discipline without wisdom is like a boat without an anchor—it floats until it crashes into a moral rock. This happened for Armstrong. Prior to the Festina scandal in the 1998 Tour de France, no one was questioning the use of doping. Actually, investigative journalism was not part of cycling or most other sports back then; rather, journalists were more like groupies hanging out with their sports idols.

Ever since Armstrong's interview-confession with journalist and media priest Winfrey, he has been shunned. First, his many sponsors abandoned him. Once they could no longer you him as a cash cow, they dropped him like a used wristband. This, of course, is business as usual. Contrary to Armstrong, the golf player Tiger Woods (who, by the way, had his vision enhanced although his vision never has been below normal) was being unfaithful to his wife with numerous different women, here Nike calculated that he was still good business. The moral in business is related to profit.

Now, am I suggesting that Armstrong is a new Jesus? No, that would be too much, but I do suggest that his spirit, the one he released during his confession, is not as black as it seems, depending on how one looks at things. I would like to replace him, one more time.

Armstrong released most of us from the burden of carrying our sins. Current and future athletes say, "I am not like Armstrong," or "Next to Armstrong, I am just a party smoker." Armstrong set the bar high. He won seven times; therefore, he must also have used more drugs than Hamilton, Zülle, Ulrich, and other cyclists, as if the success of the Rolling Stones compared with Dire Straits was ever a matter of the amount of drugs used.

Armstrong developed a talent for suffering and pain due to his cancer that actually put him on his bike every day. Yet, I am not thinking of Armstrong within the sports world only. If the Italian journalist Roberto Saviano (2015) is right in his book *Zero Zero Zero*, then most of us are on drugs. Cocaine is what makes the world spin. It can be difficult to survive in today's achievement culture where we constantly need to do, do, and do. If the World Health Organization (WHO) is right, stress is one of the most serious sicknesses both today and for the future due to a never-ending fight for power, prestige and status. But, luckily, no one does it like Armstrong. He set the bar.

Of course, I know he was a bully. He lied, just like the former American President George W. Bush when, in 2003, he said "Mission accomplished," referring to his war on terror. He lied, like when one of President Bush's ministers mentioned weapons of mass destruction, or when Bush himself famously promoted his doctrine, saying that "either you are with us or against us." Still, Armstrong is worse: he ruled the peloton. Similar, the financial crisis in 2008 showed levels of greed, arrogance, and disrespect for ordinary people's money and lives. But none of this can match how Armstrong received money from a postal service that no one outside of the United States had ever heard of until he won. By mentioning this, I am not saying that Armstrong was a nice guy. Just because many other people are doing wrong, doesn't make his actions better. The point is, rather, that the culture or system that we all seem to be a part of is sick. This system tolerates bullying. For this reason, I also suggest that Armstrong was a man of the future because he embodied what he was teaching or doing, and only taught what he embodied. He showed what it takes to be a winner in an achievement culture, the kind of culture that we all live in.

So, now we all need to ask ourselves: Is this the world we want to maintain?

I hope not.

Conclusion

So, what can Armstrong teach us? First of all, that many of us find pleasure in praising or blaming. I suggest that we move beyond moral and personal expectations that, after all, only illustrate our own needs and hopes. Many wanted Armstrong to be a messiah, because they apparently needed one to begin with.

Why do you need a hero? And what kind of hero's do you have?

Furthermore—and very important—I assume that Armstrong was using his drugs consciously, but how many of us are conscious of the cigarettes we smoke, the beer we drink, and the sugar we eat? Are you consciously aware of what you are doing while you do it? Armstrong was conscious, intentional and, therefore, complete. Not complete in a wise sense, but in a conscious and attentive sense. He measured all he was eating, drinking, and shooting into his veins. He measured his hours of sleep and hours on the bike. Here we can all learn something. Being conscious matters as if life actually mattered.

So here is the challenge. If Armstrong can bring this expertise into all aspects of life, then he would gradually acknowledge that everything is connected. He would experience that his self is a changing process that he doesn't have too cling on to. Rather he is being affected and formed by others, just as he can affect them. For this reason, he would start treating people with kindness and compassion, not anger and threats. He didn't experience that in time, therefore, his actions hit him like a boomerang in the neck.

Should we then feel pity for Armstrong? Not at all. Call it karma or nemesis; all of our actions carry with them consequences that we have to live with. He, like the rest of us, must take responsibility for his actions. Still, what is interesting about this story is that it tells us much more about us than him. Hypocrisy, and the pleasure of blaming others without any reflection on how we are doing, is very present in today's world. Instead, I suggest that we see him as a mirror, if not of ourselves, then of the society we live in. Do you like what you see? If not, then what is the responsible thing to do?

Today, almost everything is about winning—even bringing up kids or love relationships. What we have lost is the sense of ordinary human responsibility—that *Every Second Counts*, as Armstrong ironically titled one of his books. Armstrong was the expert on the bike, the winner per se, but he never really mastered life. He lacked an ethic. Similar, many of us don't master life because we, too, are obsessed with achieving goals such a getting rich, famous and idealized instead of enjoying every moment. If we all really mastered life, then less people would suffer from stress, depression, drinking, drugging, anxiety, and the like.

In a world where people take no responsibility for their lives, Armstrong is the villain. In a world where we do take responsibility for our ordinary lives, we can learn a lot from Armstrong. That is his resurrection. In the most unlikely way, he has become one of contemporary society's best teachers. If only we dare to use him to look deep inside ourselves.

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