

Is Lance Armstrong Still a Hero?

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“Yes,” say at least several on-line articles. According to most of these, Lance Armstrong still is a hero as a cancer survivor and also because of the much money he raised in support of fighting cancer. But would the money really be “clean” if it is the result of cheating? Surely, we can find on-line articles saying “no” to the same question. However, I do not think that the question actually matters. What matters, in my opinion, is (slightly) increased awareness about cheating.

An obvious observation is that before and after Lance Armstrong's doping charge, many people's perception about him has changed, even though the fact, whatever it is, stays the same. Before the doping scandal, Lance Armstrong was no doubt a hero. And there must be many other “Lance Armstrongs” who are still worshiped as a hero. Then, it seems rather meaningless to label a person as a hero or a cheater, based on the limited information available to us. What matters more is how we think about our attitude about cheating.

Both before and after the doping charge, Lance Armstrong must be aware of what was going on. There must be a cheater in him. At the same time, there must be a fair player in him as well. In fact, every one of us must have a cheater and a fair player in us. Often, both of them are hidden deep inside us. Occasionally, one or both of them surface and take over.

In many cases, our cheaters show up due to social pressure. For example, we are often pressed to win. We are obsessed with competitions. Since winning is so much valued, we often try to do it at all cost. There are numerous examples (Callahan, 2004), including the relatively recent high-profile cheating case at Harvard University. We might think that there are unhealthy and healthy competitions. However, according to Alfie Kohn (1968) competitions are basically all unhealthy and problematic. Krishnamurti (1963) even points out that one of the main sources of problems, especially in the context of learning and education, is comparison. On the other hand, if we do things when we are genuinely interested in the process of doing them, we could be free from the pressure of competition and comparison. If our society as a whole reconsiders its madness about competition and values our own intrinsic motivation, our attitude may change. Then, the instances of cheating may go down dramatically.

Returning to the presence of a cheater and a fair player within us, an analogous point discussed by Tich Nhat Hanh (2001) seems helpful. That is, we all have anger and compassion deep inside us. Sure, it is natural to have both positive and negative feelings in us. However, it is important to tender the negative feeling when it is still a “seed” and cultivate it into compassion. We could do the same to the cheater and the fair player in us. We need to be clearly aware of the cheater inside us, tender it when it pops up, and then cultivate it into a fair player. To be able to do this, we surely need the strong

sense of fairness.

References

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