

The Truth About Freedom

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – January 27, 2013

Scanning my office bookshelves these days is a trip down Irony Lane -- especially when I glance through the cycling section. There's Lance Armstrong's 2001 autobiography, "It's Not About the Bike." Lance, after your long overdue confession to Oprah regarding performance-enhancing drug use and blood doping, we know it was about a lot more than the bike. There's also his 2003 follow up, "Every Second Counts," which cries out for a subtitle such as "And I'll Do Anything to Get Them."

Those early works were written to inspire fellow cancer survivors, and they did. With his continued dominance of the world's biggest bike race, the Tour de France, Armstrong's later books shared tips for replicating his success on the bike. One such title is "The Lance Armstrong Performance Program," coauthored by long-time friend and personal trainer Chris Carmichael. It's been years since I read it, but I'm pretty sure Lance and Chris left out some of the most crucial ingredients in the overall "performance program."

I also have a book by Armstrong's former sporting director at US Postal Service and Discovery Channel Pro Cycling, Johan Bruyneel. "We Might as Well Win," proclaims the title. "Since We Already Cheated," seems the best subtext for that one.

I've been a fan of pro cycling since the mid-1980s, when "Wide World of Sports" showcased for three weekends every July the unprecedented feats of Greg LeMond. Americans ate it up as a kid from California beat Europeans at their own game in an unfamiliar bike race over the far away mountains of France.

Armstrong's confession is no surprise to anyone who follows cycling. I made peace with the inevitability of his guilt long ago. I was disappointed that he lied so often about it, but as many dozens of elite professional riders were caught – and hundreds more implicated – each one fervently defended his innocence. Some gave in sooner than others, but the first response was never "you got me."

What set Armstrong apart -- and made it impossible for me to support him in later years -- was the ferocity with which he not only refuted, but lashed out at his accusers. The counter attacks, character assassination, and law suits were Armstrong's formula for staying above the mounting pile of evidence against him. It worked, too, until the US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) began to investigate and question Armstrong's inner circle of closest friends. They finally got to people he couldn't attack with that same "seek and destroy" mentality.

Armstrong's fall from grace is an American tragedy of a scale normally reserved for literature. Sadly, his behavior in the years before confessing makes him a poster child for how we argue and debate in these times. Disagreements over facts or conclusions

regarding the biggest issues of our day devolve more often than not into personal attacks, name calling, and outright dismissal the other person's (or group's) legitimacy to tender a position.

It's a fallacious argument called *ad hominem*, from the Latin for "to the person." Merriam-Webster defines it as "appealing to feelings or prejudices rather than intellect... marked by or being an attack on an opponent's character rather than by an answer to the contentions made."

Lance was the master. But, why does ad hominem work in our society?

A friend recently posed a question on Facebook, saying "While lying and cheating are not new to our world, it seems to me that they have emerged as a more 'normal' (i.e., expected, nothing new) part of our culture." After elaborating, he asked "What the Hell is going on, and why?"

It was a great conversation starter. I jumped in with many others, and we each had our thoughts. But, as I reflect further, I'm reminded of two familiar sayings and the deeper meaning created by pairing them together.

"The truth will set you free," we say, borrowing from scripture. Singer Sheryl Crow used those exact words when asked to comment on her ex-boyfriend's confession.

Add to that: "With great freedom comes great responsibility." It's unclear who first said it, but it completes an interesting equation.

Truth = Freedom = Responsibility

When we fall for attacks that play on our preconceived notions and prejudices, we know better. Real truth almost always lies in the middle, and reality is ever more complicated than the false choices put before us. But, we cling to one side or the other out of convenience – don't make me sort through facts – and comfort – don't make me challenge my beliefs.

We say we love freedom, but do we?