

What Lance Armstrong Teaches Us About Real Heroes

Written by Ginny Grimsley

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As a Cancer Survivor and U.S. Marine, I Once Looked Up to Him

By: Jay Platt

What is a hero? Webster's dictionary defines a hero as someone who's admired for his achievements and noble qualities, and one who shows great courage. Fortunately, today we have many examples of real heroes. Look no further than the U.S. military, police and firefighters -- men and women who put their lives at risk for others.

A real hero also is the person who is fighting cancer or some other chronic illness, and does so with great dignity and grace. Though they may be in pain or discomfort, they somehow make those around them feel better, do better, and be better.

Which brings me to Lance Armstrong.

I was a supporter of his since his first Tour de France win. Coming back from cancer the way he did, and racing the way he did drug-free (supposedly), inspired me to no end. When others questioned how he was able to do the things he did without any help from performance-enhancing drugs, I defended him as if he were a personal friend.

As a cancer survivor myself, and someone who continues to battle the disease daily, he inspired me. He gave me strength when I felt like I had none. He even motivated me to challenge myself by attempting demanding physical feats, like hiking the 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail beginning to end. When I got tired and wanted to quit, I'd think to myself, "If Lance can do the things he does, I can do this, too."

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So, his recent revelations to Oprah Winfrey hit me like a 50-pound sledgehammer to the chest. When he admitted to lying about taking performance enhancing drugs, I felt like he had personally lied to me. And that's when I knew that he is nothing more than a fake hero.

Fake heroes have none of the qualities of a real hero. Rather, they lie, cheat, steal, and do whatever it takes to make themselves look good and heroic. Winning, to them, is the most important thing, and who they hurt in the process really doesn't matter. All of which, sadly, describes Lance Armstrong.

I know he still will have his defenders. I've already heard from people who have basically said, "Well, what about all the good he's done for cancer research?" While that is true, and I certainly hope that Livestrong is not negatively affected by Armstrong's admission, the fact is that the whole organization was started based on a lie.

He never would have had the millions of dollars, the fame, and the incredible story if it had not been for the lie that he told for so long. And, although it is uncomfortable to say so, how do we know that he did not get cancer because of his taking performance enhancing drugs? Would that have changed his story? I'm sure, for many, it would have.

And what of his admission now? Surely, that took courage? It was heroic, right? Hardly! First of all, look at to whom he chose to tell all of the details. Oprah Winfrey. I have no doubt that was a well-thought-out strategy on his part. He, undoubtedly, was advised to go where he would most likely garner sympathy and do it before an audience that probably knows little about cycling, and that is most likely to give him a pass on his transgressions.

Even with all that though, he still could have done the heroic thing. But he did not. He could have looked into the camera and said in the sincerest way he could muster that steroids are not the way. That he, in all likelihood, gave himself cancer in his quest for fame. Think of the kids who could have benefited from hearing such a thing. Instead, however, he defiantly said that since everyone else was supposedly doing it, he felt justified in doing it, too. Very hero like, huh?

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About Jay Platt: Jay Platt was medically retired from the Marine Corps in 1998 after suffering complications from the cancer von Hippel Lindau (VHL), a genetic disease that resulted in brain and spinal tumors, kidney cancer, and the loss of his left eye. Told his future would be considerably dimmer than his past, Platt set out to rebuild himself physically, mentally and spiritually, and to challenge himself by setting demanding physical goals. He is one of fewer than 300 people to have hiked the 2,100-mile southbound Appalachian Trail; one of three to swim from Alcatraz Island to San Francisco with hands and feet tied; and the only person to swim across the Mississippi while blindfolded, handcuffed and shackled. Proceeds from his adventures and sales of his documentary benefit non-profits, including the VHL Family Alliance. For more information, visit: www.livingunstoppable.com .