

Cycling's answer to suffering

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

"By now you've figured out that I'm into pain. Why? Because it's self-revelatory... pain is my chosen way of exploring the human heart."

— Lance Armstrong, in his first book, *It's not about the Bike*

Lance Armstrong knows pain. He's endured it on the Tour's most infamous mountain climb — L'Alpe d'Huez — and he's suffered through it while in an oncology ward undergoing chemotherapy eight years ago.

And, somewhat surprisingly, he sees pain as a gift. Unlike most of us (who try to avoid suffering at all cost) Armstrong seems to embrace it, viewing it as an integral part of the road to self-understanding.

Even cancer, which he has often touted as being the best thing that's ever happened in his life, even better than winning the Tour de France, is seen in this light:

"Cancer did not have to be a death sentence. It could be a route to a second life, an inner life, a better life."

Those who've run that race are probably best positioned to understand what Armstrong is getting at here. There is something about a mountain or a severe head-

wind that deeply engages and enlarges us. Pain can foster perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope.

Deep inner strength is often discovered, exercised and built up via the resistance training of suffering. Perspective can also be gained when we humbly encounter our mere mortal frailties and our need for others.

While these positive self-revelations will never fully justify or explain the mystery of the presence of pain, they do, to some degree, help us make a bit more sense out of suffering.

Which makes me wonder if Armstrong's theory on the revelatory power of pain might not have a broader application.

For centuries, philosophers and theologians have grappled with the problem of suffering in our world. How can a good Creator be reconciled with a creation gone so terribly wrong: so filled with pain?

The question has led many down the road of agnosticism or atheism; Armstrong, apparently, being one of them.

Reading his books, you get the sense that religion is something he's thought about and struggled with a lot.

How could God exist in this kind of world?

In recalling his experience of 9/11's Ground Zero, Armstrong writes, "All you had to do was go to a wall or a fence, and look at those pictures of the missing, or go down to Ground Zero and smell that place. I was hard pressed to believe that God was in the air. Death was in the air..."

Armstrong's cynicism says it all.

But is that kind of rationale fair?

Is Armstrong not being a bit incongruent here?

How can pain, at a personal level, be a profound revelatory gift, while at another level, be seen as having no compensatory value or benefit whatsoever, even to the point of denying the existence of God?

Seems Armstrong is trying both to climb and coast on this point.

What if the mysterious and revelatory

power of pain worked both ways? Not just illuminating self, but also lighting a path outside of oneself — a path to God.

Armstrong would be the first to admit that his struggle with cancer taught him a great deal about depending upon and putting faith in others.

Looking back on that struggle, he wrote, "I believed in belief, for its own shining sake.

To believe in the face of utter hopelessness, every article of evidence to the contrary, to ignore apparent catastrophe — what other choice was there?

"We do it every day, I realized. We are so much stronger than we imagine, and belief is one of the most valiant and long lived human characteristics. . . . Without belief we would be left with nothing..."

I agree. And in the face of so much needless suffering and hopeless misery in our world, perhaps we can be brave enough to believe in something beyond our basic mortal selves.

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