

Heroes of Everyday Life

by Robert M. Schwartz, Ph.D.

Heroes have been hard to come by lately. Even the concept of heroism has become suspect. From Roosevelt and Rockefeller to Kennedy and Clinton, these near-greats have failed at least one of the heroic tests of resisting temptation. Perhaps we need to revise our idea of heroism and search in less obvious places.

As a psychotherapist, I draw inspiration from my clients who have found the courage to transform adversity into advantage. You won't read about them in the newspaper, but these heroes of everyday life may represent another step towards a more democratic era of the individual, one that looks beyond presidents and generals to the foot soldiers of daily existence who triumph over life's suffering.

Boomers weaned on the glory days of the post-World War II era haven't abandoned the search for conventional heroes who transcend the outer limits of human potential. The world still needs them. Along with Mario Lemieux, a local hero, Lance Armstrong assumed heroic proportions because he conquered a deadly cancer and came back to win yet another Tour de France, the world's most arduous and spectacular bicycle race.

But the source of his heroism runs deeper. Armstrong relates frankly in

his autobiography, *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life*, that he never knew his biological father, who abandoned the family when he was an infant. He views his father as nothing more than a DNA donor (pretty good stuff, at least) and has no desire to know him. His stepfather proved little better, physically abusing young Lance with his fraternity paddle, cheating on his wife, and eventually divorcing her.

Making Lemonade From Lemons

So what saved Lance? Certainly it wasn't his peer group. Back in Plano, Texas, Lance tells us, unless you were upper-middle class or played football, you were nothing. Riding a bicycle wasn't going to get you a prom date. In fact, Lance didn't even attend the prom because he never graduated from Plano High, as the principal denied him time off to compete in a world-class biking event. Lance's devoted mother, a wellspring of his character strength, taught him transformational thinking: "Make every negative into a positive. Nothing goes to waste, you put it all to use, the wounds and long-ago slights become the stuff of competitive energy."

Lance applied this heady advice early as he rode his bike on the streets of Plano: "Maybe if I ride my bike on this road long enough, it will take me out of here." Indeed it did. He was able to transform the deep emo-

tional injuries of every day into the fuel that allowed him to surge ahead of the pack. He became the world's best hill climber because he had to climb out of the pit of Plano.

None of my clients has raced in the Tour de France, but many have won the battles against abuse that have ravaged their families for generations. A male client whose self-esteem was battered by an abusive father established a major fundraising event to fight the disease that took the life of one of his children.

A female client whose childhood was so explosive and conflicted that she was torn apart by anxiety became an international expert in conflict resolution. More importantly, she established a loving family that had no more than the normal range of conflicts. And there are many clients who were bullied because they were different in some way (e.g., too short, wrong religion, red hair, diminutive stature) who transcended the rage and transformed it into compassion and kindness FOR others.

Check Your "Kayak Paddle"

If you weren't challenged early in life, you will be later. Boomers often face the "sandwich generation" task of caring simultaneously for young children and aging parents. The good news is we live much longer; the bad news is we are more vulnerable to losses. If you haven't yet honed your skills for transforming adversity, don't wait until your kayak hits white water to examine the paddle. Consider the following coping strategy that has helped many of my clients navigate difficult waters.

Life crises can bring negative reactions such as depression, anxiety or bitterness. What, then, distinguishes successful "transformers" such as Lance Armstrong or my clients? They didn't just sit there; they did something with their pain.

You need not bike 40 miles a day or win the Tour, but you can beat the blues by viewing crises as challenges and being proactive in making something positive from the losses. The main thing to understand is that pain and suffering contain energy that can be harnessed and transformed into good.

Consider pain a signal that something is wrong and must be corrected. View suffering as a process that grinds down old structures to make way for new growth. Although ancient alchemists failed in their efforts to transmute base metals into gold, we learn from religion and psychotherapy that the energy contained in traumatic life experiences can be transformed into positive action and higher awareness.

Cultivate an optimistic attitude to find positives, an active problem-solving strategy to generate creative solutions, and a social orientation to reach out to others rather than withdraw into isolation. Ask yourself, "What can I do to make things better, if not for myself, then for others?"

If the path of action appears blocked, active energy may be directed inward to create a new philosophical perspective on life or a new spiritual awareness. Those who survive near-death experiences can learn dramatically to transform "sweating the small stuff" into finding small joys in little things. We can learn from family members with Alzheimer's Disease that the essence of human beings is more than intellect or an ability to perform.

It is only suffering accompanied by loss, which can drive the ascent to this higher, transcendent dimension. Lance Armstrong put it well in the title of his book: *It's Not About the Bike*. So when things get tough, keep on "pedaling" and you will surely get to where you need to be.

Robert M. Schwartz, Ph.D. is President of Cognitive Dynamic Therapy Associates (CDTA), a multi-specialty psychological group, and Adjunct Assistant Professor

of Psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. Dr. Schwartz has published more than 20 scientific papers on mental balance, and has guided hundreds of clients to more balanced living. For a brochure, call (412) 687-8700 or e-mail to CDTA@hotmail.com. CDTA can be found online at www.CogDyn.com.



Dedicated
to the
Pittsburgh
Area's
Baby
Boomers

Boomers