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The Shame Game

By Joel Stein

I am incredibly judgmental. This is partly because it's fun, partly because it's a way to bond with others and mostly because one of my few faults is not appreciating how difficult it is for others to be as amazing as I am.

But I'm not a fan of public shaming. Sure, shame is a powerful tool that has helped cut down on smoking, littering and people trying to write a column like mine. But it's possible for a culture to overshadow: stoning adulterers, putting gossipers in the stockade, TMZ. Now that we can shame at a distance--via television, Twitter and blogs--we have gone shame-crazy.

In her interview with Lance Armstrong, who admitted to outdoping rivals to win the Tour de France seven times, Oprah Winfrey was never able to fully suppress an urge to do a superiority dance as she read off her questions: "Were you a bully?" "Did you feel bad about it?" "Do you feel embarrassed?" "Do you feel ashamed?" "Do you feel humbled?" "Tell me what you feel." "Do you feel disgraced?" "Is there real remorse?" All I could think about was how awful it must be for Stedman every time he forgets to pick up the dry cleaning.

I too have been publicly shamed, though not by Oprah, whose shameless producers interviewed me and then used out-of-context clips during her public shaming of James Frey. Which I feel ashamed about. But I've been publicly shamed for writing offensive columns. Not all of them, because that would take up all of society's time, but a few--none of which were ones I was worried about. Like Armstrong, I didn't think I was doing anything wrong until people got upset. I'm still unclear if what I was trying to say in those columns was horrifying, if it was misunderstood or if I just wasn't funny enough. The weird part of shaming, unlike guilt, is that society can make you feel however it wants, like it made Huck Finn believe he was going to hell for the sin of trying to free Jim. What I'm saying is that my columns are a lot like freeing slaves.

So while Oprah was shaming Armstrong, I thought about whether I would stand up and refuse to cheat when everyone else was cheating. I know I memorized the answers to my weekly 12th-grade history tests that were handed to my class from the previous grade. In the 1980s, I bought a book of video-game cheats so I could win at the arcade. A person who would cheat when the stakes are that low is capable of anything.

Cycling is an elite cheating sport. The three Tour de France winners before Armstrong's first win in 1999 have all been linked to doping, and two riders since Armstrong's last win have been stripped of the yellow jersey. Nearly every cyclist in the top 10 during those years has been caught or was on a team that got caught. When I joined my fledgling high school cycling team in 1987, kids told me that the top cyclists banked a pint of blood a few weeks before the race and then restored it to their bodies so they could carry extra oxygen. This was one reason I failed to show for my first race. The other was that I realized I picked the one sport that girls didn't care about. If I was going to make sacrifices, I at least wanted to know what it was like to have sex with extra blood in my body, if you know what I mean. Or at least to know what it was like to have sex.

When some of Armstrong's fellow cheats broke their promise not to tattle and ratted him out to the antidoping cops in exchange for a wrist slap, he went after them. That's because he's a jerk. I interviewed him at the 2000 Olympics, and my first thought was, Jerk. I've heard astonishing stories of his arrogance, aggression and crudeness. I don't know much about cancer, but I'm pretty sure he gave it to Sheryl Crow.

It's hard to feel bad for Armstrong. But it's easy to feel great about hating Armstrong. Just like it's easy to feel great about hating John Edwards, without knowing what it's like to run for President, take care of a terminally ill wife and want to relax by having sex with a complete whack job. I don't fake getting upset at every comedian's insensitive Twitter joke about tragedies, since I know how hard it is to write decent jokes about tragedies, as evidenced by that Sheryl Crow sentence.

We need to stop with the public apologies in which we demand our pound of tears. Oprah, Barbara Walters, Katie Couric, Jay Leno and Jesse Jackson have become the tailors of our scarlet A's. I do not believe that people who watched the Oprah interview felt wronged for believing that an athlete didn't dope to win a sport they've never watched. I believe that interview made us feel better about all the bad things we've done, because at least we didn't cheat at cycling. Even better, it allowed us to avoid asking if we would have. I know I would have if I weren't so afraid of needles. And exercising.

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