

# Choose Beauty

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As someone who haphazardly participates in local sprint triathlons with "finishing" as my goal, I am awed and inspired by athletic feats accomplished through magnificent displays of endurance, heart, and grace. This year's Tour de France, won for the third time in a row by the American Lance Armstrong, had moments so powerful and so moving that I recall the images over and over--convinced they carry a message about human endeavors far beyond the esoteric world of elite road cycling.

There were amazing scenes of sportsmanship, of joy, and of tragedy. A spent Jan Ullrich, the Olympic champion and former Tour winner, reaching out his hand for the hand of Armstrong as they crossed a stage finish line, a heartrending gracious acknowledgement of Armstrong's greatness. Team leader Armstrong choosing to lose precious seconds in the all-important team time trial to wait for a fallen teammate. The face of a young rider triumphantly claiming his first stage victory. A veteran favorite, worn down by bad luck and illness, standing with his bike by the side of the road waiting for the team car to carry him away.

One image I see over and over is the moment in the race when Armstrong decided the time had come for him to put his definitive mark on the grueling 21-day event, ending all speculation about the eventual outcome. A French rider, Laurent Roux, out in front, all alone, was leading the day's stage for more than 60 miles when, during a mountain climb, Armstrong blew by him. Literally. There is no other way to describe it. In a post race interview Roux was quoted as saying, "When he passed me, I had the impression that it was a motorcycle at my side. It was beautiful to see."

*It was beautiful to see?* Can you imagine that you have been riding as hard as you can, drawing on every fiber of your mind's and body's strength, will, and determination to power yourself up a long climb? Can you imagine that you are a Frenchman within sight of claiming victory of one of the most demanding stages of your country's most famous athletic events when some kid from Texas passes you like you're standing still? It was beautiful to see. That's how Laurent Roux described it. That's one of the images I cannot get out of my mind. These athletes ride for glory, and for fame, and because cycling is how they support very comfortable lifestyles--but they could not achieve the sheer monumentalism of what they do unless there was something more. They ride for the sheer beauty of the sport. And then I remembered. That's why many of us chose science. Because we were struck by its beauty.

Each of us has our story of what hooked us. For me, it was the elegant, spare functionality of the Krebs's Cycle. I had no choice--unfashionable as it was, I had to study metabolic pathways. Even though I am now far removed from such work, I find I can still lose myself when I come across one of those metabolic pathway charts, once ubiquitous wall decorations in undergraduate laboratories. And when the world hyped and whooped the "mapping" of the human genome, I was silently joyous for a different reason. After the genome, and after the proteome, we'll finally get down to the real heart of it all: what I fear might trendily be dubbed the *metabolome*--understanding the metabolic consequences of genetic alterations.

As the new academic year continues to unfold, try this: Remember your story and, at the risk of appearing shamefully aging and sentimental, share it with your students and fellows. Tell them about the moment you recognized beauty in the work of another scientist and fell in love. In a scientific world sullied by careerism, patent protections, grantsmanship, venture capitalist interests, and an unseemly willingness to say almost anything to land one's name in the paper, your story could inspire young scientists to choose something more. It may give one the courage to study something she truly wants to understand for one simple reason: It could be beautiful to see.

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