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Why I'm Not Climbing a Mountain

BY TOM SOWA

I survived a diagnosis of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2001 and prostate cancer three years later. Right afterward, it never occurred to me to puff out my chest and consider what I had done a personal victory or a triumph of will. People expected me to be different, but I managed to disappoint them.

In 2004 after I had my prostate removed, a relative called and began discussing my good fortune. This person was sure my success was largely the result of uncommon genes and positive mental health. This was the one moment when I might have considered putting an "S" on my chest. But the temptation lasted just a second.

In fact, I knew and still believe my good fortune was simple: I was fortunate to have been diagnosed early and to live near excellent medical care.

But then it became clear that others around me had similar expectations of uncommon survivorship, that they felt those who survived cancer each had their own inner Lance Armstrong waiting to get out.

In part it was the onslaught of people wearing those yellow bracelets. It was inspiring, sure, to see people show support for cancer. But I also wondered if those plastic bands had people focusing too much on the survivors climbing Mt. Everest, and not on those who wake up each morning saying, "Praise be" and get on with their lives.

If there is a stronger person at the tail end of treatment and recovery, I doubt if that strength is anything more than pure intensity to get through the ordeal in one piece.

When you're originally diagnosed, there's an instant when you know you're suddenly part of a strange club. You're now part of a special society where great effort is needed to stay focused and avoid excessive introspection and self-pity.

When you leave that club and join the 10 million Americans who can say they've survived cancer, you're set free. That freedom extends to how you define yourself. And because of social expectations and the intense personal exhilaration that accompanies remission, it's not unusual for us to want to raise our fists and pump the sky in victory as we hit the finish line.

But it's not my choice. Unlike those training to climb a steep mountain or run a marathon, I'm happy to stay up late, reading a book or watching a good movie. My goal, at the age of 58, is to remain normal about the whole thing. I don't need what I came through to inspire what I do next. I had cancer. It's done with. Praise be.

