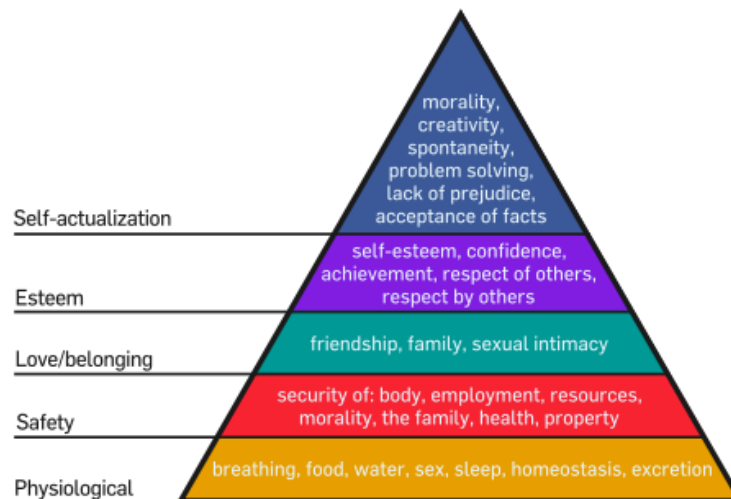


Cycling: My Barometer of Life

If you've read Lance Armstrong's book, *It's Not About The Bike*, you discovered that the title refers to the Tour de France. He writes that the Tour de France is a metaphor of life. The full range of highs and lows of sensations and emotions can occur during that race, just as in life itself. In my many years of riding and racing I've noticed that cycling provides me with some of my strongest emotions, both the thrill of achievement as well as the lows of discouragement following a bad race or overtraining. In Davis Phinney's book, *Training For Cycling*, he writes in the Epilogue that a wonderful thing about cycling is that it allows us to live fully in the present. When riding, we are living in the here and now, feeling the sensation of the wind on our faces, feeling the sensation of our legs working, and feeling empowered to propel ourselves across the landscape under our own power. We are experiencing life at its fullest. Some of my strongest emotions have occurred as a result of cycling. In other words, some of my best experiences of living life at its fullest have occurred as a result of cycling, either directly or indirectly.

I have also noticed that my riding ability and the enjoyment of riding is directly related to how well everything else in my life outside of cycling is going, you know, things like work, health, family, finances, etc. When everything is cruising along well and I don't have any cares in life, my riding usually goes well. Part of this is because I have the time to ride because I'm not putting out fires in my life. On the other hand, when there is something going on in my life that requires my attention, such as a nagging problem at work, my attention focuses away from cycling and sometimes riding becomes an additional chore rather than a reward. Training and racing is stressful in itself but when everything is going well, it's a positive stress, not a negative one. But when other things are going on in life, it can quickly become a negative stress and add to the physical, mental and emotional burden of living.

If you have taken psychology classes or ever been to a human resources management seminar at work, you probably are familiar with Abraham Maslow and his Hierarchy of Needs. In this hierarchy, Maslow identifies five key needs humans. A pyramid diagram is often used to display these needs. The image below summarizes the hierarchy (source: Wikipedia). The more basic needs must be satisfied before the higher level ones can be addressed. The most basic need is Physiological: water, food, shelter, temperature needs to be addressed before we can be expected to do anything else. The next need is Safety: we cannot expect to work on anything else when our safety is at risk from weather, fire, emergencies, etc. The next need is Love and Belonging: we need to belong to groups in society and cannot function when feeling isolated and lonely. The fourth need level is Esteem: we need self-respect and respect from others to operate at our fullest potential. Finally, the fifth need level is Self-Actualization: the need to express oneself doing what we want to do and feel we need to do. Musicians make music, painters paint, cyclists ride their bikes.



When you have satisfied physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem needs in your life, you can focus on self-actualization - being who you are and who you really want to be. When you have addressed the other needs, you are freed to pursue your interests. I often replace the term 'self-actualization' in this diagram with 'cycling' as for me that is my means of expressing myself, doing what I enjoy doing when nothing else is in the way. Part of the time, or even much of the time, you may find yourself at lower levels of this hierarchy. Until you take care of those levels, you cannot rise up to the pinnacle, to self-actualization.

When you find your cycling is suffering and may not even be enjoyable due to other demands in your life, much of this is actually mental fatigue and not physical. It takes a huge amount of mental energy to train hard and race. You have to be willing to push yourself into discomfort to train hard enough to get better. This isn't easy, and if you are battling other fights in your life, be it relationships, work, finances, etc, then you will find it difficult to go beat yourself up on a bike voluntarily. You may find yourself skipping the ride altogether or just going out and riding at an easy pace.

When I am finding it difficult to stay on task with my training plan and concentrate on cycling, it is usually because there is something more important, more overwhelming, which is taking my attention and energy. It may be something as simple as finishing a project around the house. But until I resolve this unfinished business, my cycling is not going to take top priority. This is why I refer to cycling as my "Barometer of Life". When everything is humming along just fine with my life, my interest in cycling is high and I can push myself very hard when training. But when something else needs attention, my desire and interest in training subsides, sometimes quite dramatically, depending on the issue. If I can go out and ride and concentrate on the ride itself, I am self-actualized. But if I find myself thinking about something else when riding, I am not.

I am sure this happens to you too. There are times when you are able to focus on your cycling and then there are other times you don't even want to look at your bike. My point here is to make you aware that your ability to ride and train rises and falls with your level of stress and pre-occupation with other matters in your life. You must take care of these other matters. In most cases they are more important than cycling. You have to clear your plate, so to speak, so you can rise up again to the top of the hierarchy. Those times when you have taken care of everything else and can truly live in the moment when you are cycling, these are times when you are fully alive. This is when you are truly self-actualized and your barometer is pointing straight up!

All the best in training, and living!
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