The last girl’s indoor soccer game of the season. We lost 6-0. We lost to a team of thugs who pushed and shoved their way to the goal and then danced in victory at having put the ball in the net after turning the indoor turf into a hockey rink. They danced in celebration and applauded their success. Afterwards I told their coach that he should be ashamed of himself, of his team. “Learn to play the game,” he grunted back. And what I really wanted to say, in hindsight, since the season was over, was that if he thought that was “playing the game” he was a jackass. Braying and hawing, pure and simple. He was, but that didn’t stop me from pondering the game. We played beautifully, and at the end of the game we were rewarded for our efforts with a check mark in the loss column which, ultimately, is all anyone seems to take away from these moments in time these days. Or is it? And that’s the question that bothered me.

I have not always played fair. I wish I could hold that claim to fame but I can’t. There were multiple times in heads up 7-up when I peaked. There was the time I read my sister’s diary, even though she thought she’d locked it. And so it goes. But all along I knew it was wrong. And I knew what was right. And, in the end, I decided that I would pay for my sins, and that those who had struck to the straight and narrow would reap their reward. And yet, as I looked at the scoreboard at the end of the indoor game, I had to wonder. Is there any justice in the world? Is there any reward to being “right”? Or was this just another mark in the win column for the old aphorism, “might makes right.”

Long ago, in a galaxy, far far away, I worked at the United Nations. True, I was just a lowly intern, but sometimes the smallest cog gets a glimpse at the whole machine. I got a glimpse at a swish cocktail party with ambassadors and heads of state. The deputy ambassador was drunk (no other way to say it). He was talking to God knows who and said, “I don’t know why we even bother. The whole thing is a sham. We pretend like we care about the smaller nations of the world, and what’s more, we pretend like they actually have a say in all this.” He was right. The smaller nations don’t have a pot to piss in. The UN is really a quaint song and dance where we pretend we’re all equals. But really it’s more a case of Tom with Myrtle. He doesn’t really respect her and is just humoring her flighty notion of “being somebody” just so he can use and abuse her. If there need be any more proof of that it’s the fact that the US bought it’s way into the invasion of Iraq and then used the little nations of the world that had been bought off as evidence of the righteousness of the action. Please. These nations had two choices. Either stick with their principles and get checked into the boards, or drop the vestiges of truth, pony up support for the U.S., and get a big fat pay check to
boot. GOOOAAAALLL!!! Which leads me back to the soccer game in question. I asked my players to do the right thing, to stick to the rules, and what happened? They got clobbered, both physically and emotionally. So one would imagine that if a lesson were to be taken away from the experience, it would be “don’t get clobbered.” And yet, what is the alternative?

To get at this, I must sub-reference/digress to the film The Emperor’s Club in which a young student decides to cheat his way to the top. Despite his teacher’s admonition that he is headed for the dark side, the kids responds by saying, “Yeah, I cheated because I knew could.” And the teacher does nothing. He simply admonished the student that he would get his just reward. But instead, that student goes on to become a U.S. Senator, while those who played by the rules were relegated to the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder imaginable...a High School teacher. It’s Hollywood, and so of course the teacher is right and the kid/Senator gets his comeuppance in the end. But what about the real world? Ignoring the controversy over Iraq, the U.S. has historically used and abused much of Latin America (both politically and economically) for its own devices. And yet, has the US gotten its just reward. No. We’re happy as clams. Has Putin got his just reward for revoking democracy piecemeal in Russia? No, he’s achieved clam status as well. Stalin died quietly in his bed. So did Pol Pot. For every Nelson Mandela who beat the system there are thousands who died bitter deaths in prison at the hands of the ruthless. The only people who have really suffered are indeed those who have played by the rules and hoped for justice. And yet, as I witnessed in the soccer game...justice never comes....never came...lurked in the background....was on a coffee break...out to lunch. So what is the point of taking the high road, of being the “good guy” if all you have to show for it at the end of the day is a bruised body and ego. I know that somewhere out in this country there is an AP Language teacher who is going to open the exam early, make Xerox copies, and walk his students through the exam step by step so they can ace the test, get college credit, and run past all my students without a glance over the shoulder. So why shouldn’t I do the same? (Even as I speak I can see some of them salivating in the back row).

In short, is there anything inherently wrong with raising a society of cheaters and short cuts. I asked this of the Philosophy Club and they said that there were no “right” or “wrong” actions, it was simply a matter of your personal belief system. But when I followed up with whether that made Hitler an “alright” guy, they balked. So where is the line between cheating on the soccer field and the mass murder of 6 million people. I don’t know
the answer. Perhaps that is why my hair is going gray. Because I'm now a parent, who is going to have to send his daughter out on that same metaphorical soccer field, filled with cheaters, and tell her that there is honor in a morale victory, even though history tells me I'm dead wrong and that instead she should just "learn to play the game."