

Fat, Fitness and Exercise-- health or healthism?

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There's a lot of talk in the fat movement today about exercise, physical fitness, and health. We are told that "FAT can be FIT" (just as in an earlier time we heard that "Fat can be Beautiful"). We are being encouraged to get ourselves involved in some kind of regular exercise program, a la Jane Fonda, et al. Not, you understand, for the sake of losing weight, but for the sake of feeling good about our bodies, getting "in shape", being healthier, reducing stress and fatigue, and a host of other benefits.

All of which goes along with the popular wisdom of the day and fits into our national obsession with "fitness". It all sounds quite reasonable, if not quite in sync with most people's conceptions about fat folks.

Which is, of course, precisely the point. That fat can be fit should be perfectly obvious from a look at our country's history. Many, if not most, of those immigrants who sweated 25 hours a day building our railroads, running our factories, keeping rich people's homes immaculate and their own families fed, clothed and housed, were by today's standards "grossly" obese. They were certainly "fit". We can also point to all the fat athletes and dancers who, through the years, have proven the truth of this slogan.

So, why are we making a big fuss over this in the movement now? Partly, I suspect, because we are trying to change our public image from the "fat slob" stereotype to something more positive. We see embracing fitness for fat people as a way of accomplishing this goal.

Seeing a fat person engaging in serious exercise on a regular basis can be an eye-opening experience for some of the thinner members of society. I found this out during my first year in college when I enrolled in a modern dance class. It was a purely pragmatic decision on my part--I had the choice of taking gym in addition to all my academic classes and getting no credit for it, or taking the dance class and receiving credit.

My dance teacher seemed shocked by the apparent grace and agility of her 300-plus pound student. Once I got over feeling self-conscious in my skin-tight leotard and tights (they were the largest size made and barely fit), and realized that the the three men in class were feeling every bit as strange as I was, I discovered that with very few exceptions I was as capable as any other student in the class, and perhaps more creative than most. I also saw that everyone else left the class as exhausted as I was and dragged themselves in the next day just as I did. By the end of the year, I earned a B grade from the teacher, who told me I would have had an A if I hadn't missed one class!

Whether or not I accrued all the health benefits a regimen like my dance class is supposed to bestow, I enjoyed the experience. These days, most of the exercise I get comes from such activities as tearing down plywood paneling, plastering ceilings and walls, laying

carpeting, tiling bathrooms, sanding every wood surface in sight, and painting, painting, painting. I am remodeling a hundred-year old two-family house from the inside out. To anyone who doubts this involves exercise, I can only say that if exhaustion and aching in muscles I didn't know I had are any proof, I'm exercising my you-know-what off!

But is it the right kind of exercise? It certainly isn't the fashionable kind. It won't help me run any marathons, or even walk any further (I have a congenital ankle weakness, inherited from my 120-pound grandmother). By the current definition of fitness, I am probably not fit. That is, I don't engage in the kind of regular training program the "experts" recommend. This is partly because I don't have the time, and partly because I don't like most sports and exercise programs. I could get a bicycle but having had my house broken into 3 times so far I know it wouldn't last long in my inner-city neighborhood.

I do love to swim, and spend as much time as I can during the summer at nearby beaches. But during the rest of the year I'm not so fortunate. All the indoor pools charge a fortune for membership. Finding and sticking with a form of exercise that is theoretically good for getting and staying in shape is both time-consuming and expensive.

For many fat people, just supporting themselves consumes all their time and energy. For others, there isn't money in the budget to spend on health club memberships, sports equipment, etc. In our society, access to "fitness" is a privilege granted to those with the available financial and leisure time resources. Since being fat is downwardly mobile, and the fatter you are the more this is true, this means that more of the thinnest members of our society have this privilege. For the rest of us, it's a question of priorities. What must we give up to become "fit"? Often it's too much to make it worth pursuing.

I think it is very important that as a movement we do NOT adopt elitist attitudes which tend to weed out the very people most in need of what we claim to support. It is one thing to have as our goal the right of every person, regardless of size, to have access to the resources to become more physically fit. It is quite another to base the acquisition of our civil rights, individually or as a community, on being or becoming "fit". To do this would be healthist. Elly Janesdaughter, who coined the term, defines "healthism" as setting an arbitrary standard for determining whether a person is healthy and persecuting anyone who does not conform to this definition.

Fat people have been collectively victimized by healthism. We must be careful to not use it against ourselves. Just as we must assert our right to eat whatever and how much we please, to take up as much space as we need, to dress in whatever fashion we like, we must assert our right to decide for ourselves whether, how, and how much we should exercise...without guilt, fear of censure or ostracism, or pressure from society or OUR OWN MOVEMENT.

We must remember that to a size bigot ALL fat people, no matter how hard we try to not conform to stereotypes, are "fat slobs", just as to a racist all African Americans are the n-word. Let's not Uncle Tom (or Aunt Jane) our movement into adopting the value judgements of our oppressors.

The idea that any of us is somehow "better" than "those other fat people" because we dress in designer jeans, or eat "health foods", or work out at a gym every day, is political poison. Insidiously so, because this subtle sense of superiority is so easily incorporated into our rising self esteem when we become politically aware. We must be very careful that our own consciousness raising around fat is not accomplished at the expense of any of our fat brothers and sisters. Remember proto-feminist Flo Kennedy's phrase "D & C"--Divide and Conquer. It would be all too easy for our movement to be coopted by tokenism--give a

few of us token privileges (not rights) to shut us up, and be damned to the great majority of "unliberated" fat people. A kind of tokenism based on "plump is okay but fat is not" is already happening. As long as one "fat slob" does not have his or her civil rights, none of us--no matter how acceptable we have tried to make ourselves by society's standards--can be truly liberated.

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