

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Be Alive. Be Very Alive.

Mark Rippetoe

Speaking of talk radio (which I was last month), Mike McConnell, the best talk show host currently on the air anywhere in the country, has suggested that the single most important contributing factor in the “obesity epidemic” is the relatively recent introduction of air conditioning and heating. This makes a huge amount of sense, given the fact that most of the time we’re inside we are sitting on our asses and that air conditioning encourages us to stay inside. Heating used to be accomplished in a more manual fashion, predicated on hauling something inside to burn. People in more northerly climates enjoy a more friendly outdoor experience in the summer, and those of us cursed with a Texas address in the summer get compensated with comparatively mild winters. But the net effect of air conditioning technology is an increased average amount of time spent indoors sitting on our asses.

This leads to problems, because we have not spent the last 65 million or so years finely honing our physiology to watch Oprah. Like it or not, we are the product of a very long process of adaptation to a harsh physical existence, and the past couple centuries of comparative ease and plenty are not enough time to change our genome. We humans are at our best when our existence mirrors, or at least simulates, the one we are still genetically adapted to live. And that is the purpose of exercise. But the problems that are created by ignoring this are not just physical. Diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis, heart disease, hypertension, sarcopenia, and bad breath are only a part of what’s wrong with the way the twenty-first century treats its precious children.

To a great extent, the health problems experienced by the members of the ridiculous culture in which we live

are self-inflicted. They are result of the reluctance of the bulk of the population to do anything that is either physically hard or something that they don’t want to do. People seem to have acquired the idea that they have the inalienable right to stroll through life without having sweated, picked up anything heavy, worked hard, or eaten less than they wanted at every meal. This approach is, of course, wrong. And it has resulted in a lot of expensive, unattractive, and entirely preventable problems amongst people who seem puzzled about why things aren’t going well.

We have become lazy. I know you’ve heard this before, and I know it doesn’t necessarily apply to you or me in the same way it does to the general public. But I dare you to read Steven Pressfield’s *Gates of Fire*, his marvelous retelling of the Spartans’ battle with the Persians at Thermopylae, and tell me that you’re not a pussy.

It hasn’t been that long—just a couple of generations—since life was more physical than it is now. My dad was born in 1920, and his father quite literally walked from Tennessee to Texas when he was ten years old. And probably didn’t whine about it at all. You and I, highly evolved specimens that we are, would never be faced with a comparable task because it has been made unnecessary under the normal circumstances of modern existence. We might decide to do something silly like ride our high-tech, lightweight bikes that far for fun, but a mandatory task of that magnitude would never occur in the modern First World.

And in one sense this is good, because lots of people died on that trip and the others like it that were made necessary by the transportation technology of the day.

1 of 3

Be Alive. Be Very Alive. (continued...)

Unnecessary death is never good. But it is also bad in that the ability to rise to such an occasion has been essentially lost.

McConnell hates the term “wellness” as much as I do. Wellness is what we say when we mean Ineffective Exercise and USDA Dietary Guidelines, both of which are designed to be easy to do and to pay lip service to a concept that most people know is good and right but don’t have the nads to actually follow. “Wellness” means having a salad and a baked potato after your aerobics class. It means enjoying increased longevity—getting to watch more episodes of Oprah! It means making an attempt at doing something slightly harder than sitting at your desk, and that the attempt itself is good enough. Mainly it means that just being “well” is good enough. Well, “well” is not good enough, and we need to quit acting like it is.

Granted, modern Western society could benefit immeasurably from a large-scale movement in the direction of even this watered-down version of optimal human existence. But, the general public being what it is, the tide that floats all the boats is going to have to be a pretty big tide, and “wellness” just hasn’t got that much water. Those of us who actually train should understand why it’s good: that physically—and mentally—difficult tasks are normal and natural to our existence, that they have been since the inception, and that this is the reason they make us healthier. Overcoming the challenges presented by these tasks makes us generally better as humans, and if the task does not rise to the level of a challenge it fails to provide this benefit. It may make you “well,” but it won’t make you anything more. Maintaining our own high training standards will have the long-term effect of raising those of the general public as well, for which favor they will all owe us a beer.

Hard training does all these fabulous things because physical difficulties are always accompanied by mental and emotional effects that those difficulties create. Finishing a very heavy set of twenty squats, or pushing through “Three Bars of Death” as prescribed, or suffering through “Murph” wearing a weight vest, is as much a mental task as it is a physical. The seventeenth rep is done under conditions of accumulating lactic acid, the inability to satisfy an increasingly severe oxygen debt, blurred vision, aching feet, and a sensation that must be vaguely akin to drowning. And then you have to decide whether to do the eighteenth, which isn’t going to feel any better. The nineteenth and twentieth are going to be

worse, and most people who have not experienced this before will quit. The ones who don’t will learn something about their own limits, and about the temporary nature of such adversity. Amazingly enough, the weight is not that heavy—the first rep and the last rep are both “light” compared to the way a heavy single feels—and the challenge is not really the generation of enough force to get back up out of the bottom. The challenge is doing it when you feel like you are about to die, when things other than making the bar go up would logically seem more important. If you have never done a set of twenty with a weight that you previously thought was a 10-rep max, you should try it sometime.

Max sets of twenty are nasty, sinister bastards, very hard to do for more than a few weeks at a time because of the mental aspects of the task. Quite literally, you have about five minutes to enjoy the fact that the set is over before the realization dawns that you have to do it again next week. I have often spent days with an awful sense of dread for weeks at a time while I was doing them until, finally, progress on them slowed to a stop and I could honorably change squat workouts to something else. After this, pretty much everything else seemed easy, at least in the weight room. I learned later that there is significant carryover to things outside the weight room.

The two things that most influence our physical appearance, exercise and diet, have in common the fact that doing them correctly means choosing to do things that involve discomfort. It is unfortunately impossible to sit down to the table and eat all you want every time you eat. Jobs that make this possible—like being a galley slave or a field hand—are not terribly common since the invention of modern labor-saving devices like engines and tractors. Leaving the table before you’re full involves making a decision not to do something you’d rather do. Whether this rises to the level of actual discomfort depends on your personal relationship with your cheeseburger, but hunger is a powerful sensation for most people who don’t suffer from an eating disorder. Try walking into a restaurant sometime and just watching other people eat when you’re hungry yourself. Even younger guys trying to gain weight find that the requirements—eating more than you want to every time you eat—involve some degree of temporary discomfort.

Eating to obtain a positive result as opposed to mindlessly feeding yourself to satiety requires discipline, although not as much as the last three reps of the set of twenty. And if you can’t make yourself stay away from the fourth

Be Alive. Be Very Alive. (continued...)

piece of chicken, you're never going to do the set of twenty anyway. Supper might be a good place to practice setting easy little goals for yourself that require some discipline to accomplish, so you can get in the habit of being in better control of your behavior.

The problem with this is that when we stop expecting things from ourselves, our expectations of other people go down as well. Here's an example of what happens when our expectations get significantly diminished. This unfortunate event recently transpired in England:

Seven schoolgirls have sparked a major search and rescue mission—after being frightened by a herd of cows. The terrified pupils, aged 14 and 15, were on a geography field trip in Swanage, Dorset, when they sent out an SOS. They were dropped off three miles from their outdoor centre and told to find their way back using a map. But the teenagers, from St Albans in Hertfordshire, got stuck on a hill when they came across a herd of cows in a field blocking their way.

A coastguard rescue team, police and an ambulance were scrambled to rescue them after one of the girls called for help on her mobile phone.

I say let the cows eat them. They are already useless, because they've been taught—at home and at their ridiculous school—that they can't do anything for themselves. I say had they been doing PR sets of twenty squats, a herd of English cows would not present so intimidating an obstacle. And at this late date squats may be their only chance at a life free from shame and embarrassment.

Now, I realize that there are hundreds of millions of individual examples of people throughout the U.S. and Europe who have grown to a ripe old age without having engaged in either hard physical work or hard physical exercise. So why does it matter so much that people are out of shape, especially if it has no apparent effect on longevity? Well, I don't know about you, but I'm not interested in being 85 if I have to hire somebody to help me get up off the toilet. Very often in discussions of the public health benefits of exercise, the only consideration is longevity; an 80-year-old man with Alzheimer's might argue that longevity in itself is not always a benefit, if he could.

So let me say something a little meatier: you owe it to yourself and the millions of lives that generated yours to live as though you appreciated it. Over and above the

fact that you're healthier—and as a result cost everybody less money and aggravation while you're here—there is just something wrong with getting up every day and moving through your existence with the least possible effort. Doing it this way makes you more than merely less than optimum. It makes you afraid of cows, and unable to understand that you should not be.

If your expectations are always those of someone content to live without physical challenge, then when it comes time for mental, moral, or emotional challenge, you fail to meet it because you are out of practice. Meeting and overcoming obstacles are skills that can be honed, as opposed to talents with which we are born. The best way to prepare for the inevitable shit that life occasionally hands us all is to live in a way that prepares you for it. If you can treat personal tragedy like a heavy set of twenty squats, you'll do better than someone who has never met any challenge. Intentionally placing yourself in the position of having to complete a task when you don't know if you can is the single best way of preparing to be in that position unintentionally. And that, my friends, is the way your training should be approached, so that you get more out of it than just “wellness.”



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