

Fitness Trainers: Touching the Mystery

Why Fitness Trainers?

I'm not a great dancer, but I've always wished that I could move my body the way that beautiful music moves my soul. When I hear Strauss, I wish I could Waltz. When I hear jazz, I wish I could swing dance. I want to do in my body what the music does to my soul. I stand in the tension between the openness of my spirit and the limitations of my body, and I realize more than ever the important work of a good dance partner.

The work of a fitness trainer is not so different. Fitness trainers are professionals who help people unite spiritual intentions to physical actions when the intentions require physical adaptation¹. A trainer helps prepare the body for how the spirit dares to move. A pilgrimage like the *Camino de Santiago* in Spain is another example of this dynamic: a spiritual intention finds expression in the physical movement of the body across hundreds of miles of land.

Physical fitness is always intentional. A person trains *for something*: fit for dance, fit for sport, fit for service, fit for reaching Santiago. When a spiritual movement of the will is united to a physical movement of the body, action happens. In this sense, fitness touches the very heart of the human person. Although we can never achieve complete harmony between our body and soul in this life, it's natural for us to seek the perfection of both. A fitness trainer is there as a partner on the journey: to educate, to inspire, and to activate the potential in the human body.

The Importance of Trainers

Trainers are more influential today than any other period in history. They came into existence only recently, out of necessity, because changing socio-economic conditions² made it necessary for millions of people to seek help in meeting even the most basic physical demands of life. Given the rapidly growing demand, fitness training is one of the fastest growing professions in the world and is playing an increasingly important role in people's lives.

Fitness is even more universal than sports because it extends beyond athletes. It includes athletes, but it also includes the mother of a large family who doesn't have the time or energy to play organized sports and the 85 year old man who wants to build bone and muscle strength in his legs so that he can walk again.

These are the *joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age...and nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts* of the followers of Christ.³ What is more human than a child who wants to be able to chop wood like his father some day, a man recovering from knee surgery wants to be able

to dance with his wife again, and a grandfather who wants to be able to play with his kids? This is the privileged and noble work of the fitness trainer.

The Importance of Play

Fitness is often thought of as a *means* and sports as an *end*. We think of fitness as “work” and sports as “play”. There’s a radical difference between the two. We have to beg children to start working; we have to beg them to *stop* playing. When something is work, we watch the clock; when something is play, we lose track of time.

It’s my strong belief that we must recover a sense of play in fitness and other spheres of life. Fitness should not always be a *mere means*; there is intrinsic value in it. There is deep joy in the human body moving as it was designed to move. Children do this better than adults; we have much to learn from them. When we play well, fitness *happens*.

The Authentically Human

People want to be fit in order to do things that touch the core of the human heart. And this is why well-formed, Christian fitness trainers are so urgently needed! It’s the Christian alone who knows the deepest desires of the human heart and the loftiest vision of man, revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. It’s him who *reveals man to himself*⁴. In the end, we can’t speak of fitness without speaking of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, who in his sacred humanity so often touched others through his own body with a gaze, an embrace, or the healing touch of his hands, is the reason why our dancing, our playing, and our training have value. He’s the reason why all of our human actions can be redemptive. In placing our hand on the back of a friend getting ready to play a sport and in speaking a word of encouragement to him, we are touching a mystery that finds its ultimate meaning in the mystery of Jesus Christ himself, true God and true man.

The Mystery

*“The body, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it.”*⁵

Trainers are bearers of a mystery in their own bodies and sharers of it in the lives of others. Every encounter between a trainer and trainee, in the light of this mystery, is a mutual exchange of gifts. A well-formed fitness trainer must give of himself, but he must also be open to receiving. Training is never a one-way street. There is a profoundly *personal* element in fitness training (and hence the English term “*personal* trainer”) that allows for deep friendships to be formed when both the

trainer and the trainee understand the human, spiritual, mental and emotional interchange that can and should unfold over the course of their relationship.

This requires trainers with a deep awareness of the mystery of the human body and what it *means*. It requires trainers who see not a biological body but a theological body – a human person in his full plenitude and depth. For this reason, new programs are urgently needed for forming trainers⁶.

Programs are needed that measure the things of the spirit at least as the things of the body. A trainer must know basic kinesiology; he must be able to diagnose injury; to see movement patterns, cue properly, and prescribe effective training. But a trainer must also be able to listen well, to play, to recognize gifts, to create community, to activate hearts, and to raise people's gaze to the values that lie above. We have done well mastering the science of fitness, but we must master the craft: all that is intangible, all that is human.

Community

There is also an opportunity to create *communio* in and through our work as fitness professionals. This happens when we to think less of “my” fitness, my health, or my body, and more about “ours”. It's not enough that I achieve fitness or my goals in sport: *I can't pass through the battlefields with a rose in my hand*⁷. If I achieve my fitness goals, what ultimate value does that have? There are many people, especially the poor, who cannot afford even the most basic physical necessities of life. If fitness training isn't united to basic corporal works of mercy and instead seeks greater levels of “fitness” for the healthy, it risks becoming disconnected from the community of which it is part and which it serves.

It has been inspiring to see so many fitness professionals do *pro bono* work, dedicating time each week to serving those who cannot yet think about “training” for anything because they are thinking about where they are going to get their next meal. Ministry keeps fitness training properly ordered and in perspective. It reminds us of the larger, mysterious “body” of human beings to which we all belong and to whom we should live in solidarity with. Our goal cannot be to be comfortable – we have to go out to the peripheries.

A strong sense of community is important also because it helps us recognize the limitations of our work and helps us serve people better by connecting them with a greater number of resources. With a greater number of people seeking “holistic” health from personal trainers, it's more important than ever to recognize the boundaries of our competency and not believe ourselves to be able to give more than we can. The “New Age” industry, recognizing this tendency, often markets itself as a one-stop physical, spiritual, mental and emotional healing⁸ shop. But a well-formed fitness trainer knows that he is a member of a greater “body” that finds its head in Christ, and he will not try to be the eye if he is the ear, or the hands when he is the feet.

It is critical that we understand the scope of fitness and its proper role in helping to guide people toward the truth that they are seeking. When trainees bring psychological, spiritual, and emotional needs to a training session, we have a responsibility – often as the first point of contact – to be able to connect them to the people who are in the best position to help them: doctors, nutritionists, psychologists, ministers, and others. Ultimately, it’s the witness of our life rather than the breadth of our expertise that offers the greatest hope.

Moving Forward

This article is meant to serve only as an entry point into a deeper exploration of the theology of fitness, which makes sense only in the light of a fully developed Christian anthropology. We must train human persons in the light of their great dignity which comes from God. Fitness training allows us draw others into that mystery in and through the mystery of the human body and it’s ultimate meaning: to participate in the mystery of our redemption in Christ and to be a sign of the hidden mystery of God from all eternity.

My hope is that coaches, athletes and trainers can work together and share their experiences with one another to deepen our understanding of what fitness training means in the light of faith. I see a particularly important role for fitness trainers in developing the “theology of the body” beyond sexual ethics to combat modern rationalism, Cartesian dualism, super-spiritualism, and all the disembodied anthropologies infecting the modern world, and to help us all become more conscious of the mystery and reality of the incarnation⁹ and all that it implies.

We have a tremendous opportunity to witness to the redemptive work of even the most ordinary of human actions in our lives and the lives of others when they are done in faith, hope and love. It’s then that we touch the mystery. Animated by one spirit, we will find as many ways to express this mystery in our bodies as there are people, but it always be the same great mystery: *God dwells in these earthen vessels*.

Luke Burgis, C.S.C.S.

Email: luke@activprayer.org

¹ This broad definition comes from the Christian sports and fitness company *activprayer*. It is notable that the English word “fitness” has no good equivalent in any of the other major languages. It is probably most associated with the Greek *askesis*, meaning exercise, training, or self-discipline. In Italian, Spanish, and French, the closest equivalents relate to being “suitable for something” or having a certain “physical form” in order to do something else. There is no direct association to what most English-speakers think of when they hear the word *fitness*: running, aerobics,

weight training, or some other mode of physical exercise. In this sense, English has given fitness a narrower, more specialized meaning.

² More sedentary work, processed foods, and many other factors

³ *Gaudium Et Spes* par. 1

⁴ *ibid.* par. 22

⁵ *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 19:4

⁶ The annual ACTIVEIGHT Experience by activprayer is one example of an initiative in this regard (<http://www.activeightfitness.com>)

⁷ cf. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicisme: Aspects sociaux du dogme*

⁸ cf. *Jesus Christ, The Bearer of the Water of Life*

⁹ West, Christopher. *Preface, Man and Woman He Created Them.*