

THE RHETORIC OF AEROBICS: PHYSICAL FITNESS AS RELIGION

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INTRODUCTION

For students of collective behavior and social movements, the recent increase in the number of running and jogging Americans offers an avalanche of interpretive possibilities. One possibility is the religious metaphor. Like all social movements, those trying to encourage fitness in an unfit, sedentary society, find themselves in the position of having to explain and justify their creed before a skeptical audience (Brissett & Edgley 1975). They must also recruit new members to their ranks and ward off the invalidating responses of detractors. In accomplishing all of this, physical fitness appears increasingly to be taking on many of the traditional techniques of persuasion long practiced by religious movements.

The data for this paper consists of participant observation of presentations by Millie Cooper, wife of Dr. Kenneth Cooper, author of several books on aerobics and one of the founders of the current jogging craze, discussions with the director and staff of the Physical Fitness Center at a major Southwestern University, conversations with the executive director of the Oklahoma Industrial Fitness and Recreation Council, a major advocate of running, jogging, and aerobic activities in Oklahoma, a content analysis of *Runner's World*, a major publication read by large numbers of runners, and informal discussions with friends, colleagues, and relatives who jog.

The Symbolic Nature of Religion and Conversion

Rhetoric or the "art of persuasion", is used to build and maintain social reality. Rhetoric promotes social cohesion, at least to the extent that it is successful in inducing cooperation. You persuade another insofar as you talk his language by speech, gesture, appearance, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, and construct; in short, by identifying your ways with his.

Religion and religious conversions, are symbolically grounded word games played for very high stakes. To be "religious" is to be persuaded by words, to persuade others with the

similar words, and to be "moved" by consensually valid symbols. Religious conversions are, *mutatis mutandis*, symbolic transformations in which a person is persuaded to change his orientation from one set of symbols to another.

Moreover, conversion implies a special relationship between symbols and the self. Rather than simply being altered (as when one moves from being a father on the birth of a child), in religious conversions a person is truly *converted*, a term which implies a change in basic identity. For the converted, all of life takes on a different hue. The person not only sees himself differently, but also his entire relationship to other people, physical objects, indeed, the rest of the world.

We wish to use the term religion in its broadest sense as any system of beliefs, practices, and ethical values which hold sacred meaning to people in interaction. It is in this sense that work is said to become a religion to some people. Some might argue that the term "zealous" is more accurate for these applications, and in a semantic sense, of course, we usually hold the term "religious" to be something more than a synonym for "zealous". For example, the term "zealous" is more accurate when used in the sentence "He reads the *Wall Street Journal* 'religiously'." In this paper, however, we do not suggest the second and more trivial meaning of religious as synonymous with zealous; physical fitness, to its practitioners, seems to us to be "religious" in the fullest sense and not simply a faddish new form of zealotry.

Our over-riding question is "What motivates the fitness movement?", and we mean the word "motivate" in the dramaturgical sense of justifying, accounting for, and rationalizing one's behavior. Every social change requires a convincing rationale, and it seems to us that a documentation of the vocabulary of motives used by those in the fitness movement will help us to understand the movement more comprehensively.

THE RHETORIC OF AEROBICS

If fitness has a Messiah, it is probably Dr.

Kenneth Cooper, whose book *Aerobics*, documented the many benefits accruing to those who run. Cooper was an Air Flight Surgeon in the 1950's who was given the responsibility of developing a conditioning program that would bring recruits up to a peak level of physical fitness in as short a time as possible. He began by putting subjects on a treadmill and by hooking them to an electrocardiograph, was able to monitor their heart rates under stress. He also measured their oxygen consumption levels, finally arriving at the level of 42 milliliters per kilogram of weight per minute as a rate of oxygen consumption compatible with good cardio-vascular fitness. By developing a measure of energy cost and assigning a numerical value for walking, running, swimming, and handball. Cooper developed a point system for measuring the degree of cardio-vascular fitness that could be used by anyone. *Aerobics* became a best-seller, and along with other books *The New Aerobics* and *Aerobics for Women* served as a rationale for the early wave of joggers, runners, and fitness advocates that began to swell in the late 1960's.

RELIGIOUS RHETORIC AND FITNESS CONVERSIONS

If conversion involves a change in basic identity, and identity changes are linked to one's conversion to a new vocabulary of motives, we ought to see such changes in those who convert to running and jogging. Predictably, we discover that the fitness movement is rampant with testimonials from those who have changed their lives through running. New runners often experience dramatic changes in their life-style. These changes range from the obvious ones such as getting up and going to bed at different times of the day, making new friends and becoming involved in new activities, to more profound ones such as shedding sedentary friends, divorcing their spouses, rejecting smokers, and finding a whole new set of others with whom to interact. "I have abandoned the non-running world," is the way one runner characterizes his conversion (Higdon, 1978,76).

DEPTHS OF DEGRADATION

Like tent evangelists, many of the testimonials of the running movement begin by showing "how low I had sunk before seeing the

light." Two letters to Dr. Cooper will illustrate the point:

"I spent every waking hour just trying to breathe. I had emphysema so badly I wouldn't walk across the room without stopping once or twice just to breathe. I got up an hour early every morning before going to work just to get my breathing process going. After only six months on your program I could walk a mile and a half in thirty minutes!"

"I was in such bad shape I weighed 247 pounds and my heart would beat like a drum when I got up from my chair to go to the refrigerator."

How low one has sunk is, of course, related to where one was originally. A number of runners are not first-time converts to fitness, but reclaimed backsliders who were athletically active in their youth, but have lapsed into sinful ways: over-eating, drinking, keeping later hours, and, through a variety of sins of the flesh, have allowed their bodies to deteriorate to the point where they are threatened by destruction. The majority of runners, however, seem to be first-time converts who have taken up running for the first time after years of licentious living. Atrocity stories are encountered regularly in discussions with joggers. Many runners are well-educated and have read much of the contemporary literature on the increasing incidence of heart attacks, strokes, lung disease, and other cardio-vascular problems being encountered by Americans. Several indicated that they had been shocked into awareness, as well as action by the health problems of friends and relatives.

FITNESS, APPEARANCE, AND THE SELF

In a now classic article, Gregory Stone significantly extended the parameters of traditional symbolic interactionism by showing the relationship between appearance and the self. (Stone, 1962, 86-118) Stone argued that 1) every social transaction must be broken down into at least two analytical parts: appearance and discourse; 2) appearance is at least as important for the establishment and maintenance of the self as discourse; 3) appearance provides a powerful lever for the formulation of the conception of self; and 4) appearance is of major importance at every stage of the development of the self. These ideas, said Stone, were developed out of his own long-term study of the

relationship between clothing and dress as apparent symbols.

While clothing is of undeniable importance in the establishment of the self, what the fitness movement has managed to do is to establish other types of appearances as a reference point for personal identity. Fitness has capitalized on the anxiety produced in a society dedicated to physical beauty and attractiveness. Not surprisingly, then, we discover that the rhetoric of aerobics uses improved appearance as a primary motive for running:

Millie Cooper: "There is a radiance about people who are physically active that can be seen by all and which inactive people do not have."

"After I got in shape my heart beat went down to 57 beats a minute, and that really excited my husband, but let me tell you the thing that excited me, ladies and gentlemen, because I am female through and through, was that I had dropped two dress sizes. I'd always been an eight at the top, but a twelve at the bottom. For the first time in my life I could wear the same size all the way down."

Mrs. Cooper (the wife of Dr. Cooper), also shamelessly admits that sex appeal and the fear of losing her husband had a great deal to do with her decision to become physically active:

"When we first got married my husband told me one day: "Look Millie, I'm giving my whole life to the cause of fitness and I can't afford to drag a fat wife around the country, so start losing or start looking."

Other testimonials from those who have joined the movement speak of the revulsion they experienced at being fat, or as Harry Stack Sullivan might have it, the reflected appraisals of others would be just too devastating to bear. These are powerful levers in the Western world where the self as object has taken on a dramaturgical significance out of proportion to other possibilities.

Besides the motivational impact of the presentation-of-self argument for fitness, there quickly emerges a hierarchy among those who become part of the movement- and these often have to do with appearances that are apparent only to those who understand the rhetoric of aerobics itself. Various tests have been devised to distinguish levels of fitness, and there quickly emerges a hierarchy among those who

become part of the movement. Runners distinguish themselves from joggers. Competitions are set up over short mini-marathon tracks (about 4.5 miles) and even full-scale marathons which cover a distance of 26 miles, 385 yards are staged, not only in Boston, but even in Peoria. Runners compare heart rates and the one with the lowest seems to be held in most reverence. One company now advertising in *Runner's World* even offers a wrist-worn, digital counter which gives the runner an instant read-out of heart rate at the touch of a button. These "internal appearances" are known only through mastery of the rhetoric of aerobics.

DISCIPLINE AS IDEOLOGY:

Daviel Bell (1960) has argued that since World War II, political ideas have lost their impact on American society, using the book title for this phenomenon "The End of Ideology." If by the term "ideology" we mean simply political ideas, his thesis seems essentially correct, for political doctrines of whatever stripe seem not to have much of an effect on the everyday life of most people. The same argument could be made for the influence of various formal religious ideologies. If, on the other hand, we define ideology as "the conversion of ideas into social levers," we can hardly conclude that ideology is dead. Indeed, there are a number of ideologies that have great currency in our society.

The essence of the Protestant Ethic is that hard-work, discipline, and self-denial are intrinsically virtuous. Dr. Cooper's pert, ebullient wife Millie is one of the traveling evangelists of the fitness movement. She gives speeches all over the United States in a lively staccato that typically has the effect of making the audience want to go down to the front and give their hearts to fitness. After her talks she goes to a nearby station and sells autographed copies of her husband's books to the faithful. Her speeches carry a Calvinist tone:

ON PRUDENCE AND SELF-RELIANCE

"The medicine of the future is going to be what the individual is willing to do for himself. And for the first time we are seeing heart disease decreasing and the surgeon general says he believes it's due to more *prudent living habits*."

ON DISCIPLINE AND SELF-DENIAL

"---this is what I preach to these high school kids. It takes discipline, ladies and gentlemen. You'll never be successful in your exercise program or any aspect of life, emotional, whatever, unless you have self-discipline. That's what the price is to be physically fit. And, you know, speaking of these high school kids, I tell them I have seen a bumper sticker that just infuriates me. It says, "If it feels good, do it." Doesn't that just burn you up!? I have the greatest desire to back up and go WHAM, and say, "Gosh that felt good to me," and I wonder if that man wouldn't change his thinking a little bit right then and there. You see, this is encouraging a complete lack of discipline and responsibility in this country, and when that kind of doctrine is being preached to our kids, then no wonder they're dropping dead of heart attacks in their early years."

ON CLEAN-LIVING

"I want to mention another risk factor besides high saturated fats, stress, smoking and drinking that came from a study conducted at Harvard University regarding the role stress plays in heart disease. The study shows that men who are unfaithful to their wives have a higher death rate from heart attacks than men who are faithful. I say, frankly, it serves them right. They were under so much stress and strain worrying that they were going to get caught, that in many instances it was enough to precipitate a heart attack."

ON HARD WORK:

"It's kind of like the woman who wrote to my husband, and said "Dr. Cooper, I'm an avid horsewoman. And I ride two hours everyday. How many aerobic points do I get for this?" He wrote back and said, "Well, ma'am, you don't get any, but the horse gets a bunch."

You know, we all want something for nothing, but you're just not going to get it. An old expression: Horses sweat, men perspire and ladies glow. "Well, you are going to glow ladies, but you're going to have to sweat a bit first."

The message here is clear: hard work, clean-living, self-discipline, and a prudent life style have their pay-off in this world. The essentials of the Protestant Ethic are suddenly revealed in bodily form. Death, like salvation,

is seen theoretically as preordained. Joggers do not usually argue that running will lengthen their lives. Nevertheless the benefits in this world that joggers, like Puritans, try to pile up, are surely evidence that God is smiling on them. The spirit of capitalism is replaced by the spirit of fitness with runners going to the bank every day to deposit aerobic points as evidence that they are among the elect.

DEALING WITH SKEPTICS

Not surprisingly, runners have created something of a backlash by their continual preaching about the joys of jogging. A recent article in *Sports Illustrated*, for example, expressed the following viewpoint: (Deford 1978)

"It is 1978 now, and I would like to announce that Running, as a literary property, is as tiresome as Ruined Young Girls, and that I don't want to hear it mentioned again. I am sick of joggers and I am sick of runners. I don't care if all the people in the U.S. are running or are planning to run or wish they could run. All I ask is, don't write articles about running and ask me to read them."

Like all social movements, fitness advocates often find themselves in the presence of skeptics. How do they ward off the invalidating responses of others? In the dramaturgical sense, motives arise in response to interruptions to on-going lines of action and a motive is successful when the audience accepts it, the challenge to behavior is overcome and the act goes on. If America is as sedentary a society as is claimed, there will obviously be strong inclinations on the part of many to reject the claims of fitness advocates. Among these include the fear that fit persons will change the categories of appearance in such a way so that what before passed as a standard of health will pass no longer. The fact that Americans spend so much time comparing themselves to each other makes changes in apparent symbols a genuine threat. Moreover, one of the consequences of claims to fitness is a covert installation of anxiety in the non-fit who may well wonder if insurance companies, influenced by the rhetoric of aerobics, might not change the health standards by which they set premiums for insurance policies. (Cooper, claims that even resting electrocardiograms (EKG's) mean virtually nothing in terms of cardiovascular fitness, and that only such measures

while the person is under aerobic stress really count. Other concerns include the competition between runners and automobiles on the highways, changes in daily schedules to accommodate runners, and the medical problems associated with running.

Detractors have dramatized their concerns in some interesting ways. The usual line is that running not only fails to benefit its practitioners in any significant ways, but is positively hazardous to your health. Non-runners use the same set of medical atrocity stories that served as the initial impetus to runners, but give them a different twist by pointing out that joggers often suffer from the very fate that they set out to run in order to avoid. The following story is illustrative of the kind of atrocity often pointed to by nonrunners as a rationale for not running:

"Robert E. Carson, aged 61, and Dr. John C. L. Brown, 48, were in the habit of jogging together, usually around the high school grounds in their home-town of Waynesboro, Pennsylvania. On one recent morning in May as they jogged together, Dr. Brown collapsed. Mr. Carson ran for help to the school, where he too collapsed. Both men were taken to Waynesboro Hospital, where they died within five minutes of each other (American Funeral Director, 1978)".

Undaunted, fitness advocates respond by saying that these are mere examples of how the uninitiated work themselves up too quickly, try to get into shape without proper precautions, or that these persons probably would have suffered heart attacks even if they did not run. Fitness advocates are generally skillful at manipulating two types of alleged benefits to great advantage. First, they speak of the tangible benefits of jogging: improved appearance, better over-all health, and increased circulation. Second, are what might be called the non-tangible benefits of fitness: at one with nature, at peace with oneself, and greater awareness of the spiritual aspects of human existence. Like other religions, the argument is circular and apparently disconfirming evidence in nicely worked to confirm the original premise.

Actually, the medical evidence in favor of jogging does not seem all that compelling at the moment either. It may well be that we will discover it is not so much *that* people jog, but how they do it that decides cardiovascular fit-

ness. If body and mind are not to be separated, then presumably one could jog in an obsessive-compulsive fashion that would contribute as much to heart disease as serving to reduce it (Friedman & Roseman 1974).

CONCLUSION: THE USES OF FITNESS

As with most dramas enacted in American society, physical fitness has social uses. It provides jobs and incomes for numerous people, pumps large amounts of money into the economy, establishes an organizational framework for countless social settings. What we have argued in this paper however is that its symbolic and dramaturgical uses are even more significant when weighed against some important over-all trends in American culture. Fitness is a symbolic crusade whose expressive functions far outweigh its instrumental functions. By offering up gestures of cohesion, the fitness movement provides a way of helping people define what they are around the body as a common rallying point. Through gestures of differentiation they define what they are not. This is, of course, as decades of symbolic interactionists have claimed, the stuff out of which identity is made. Moreover, in a society where the body and the self seem increasingly to have little to do with each other, fitness offers an attractive package for reuniting them.

More importantly, fitness holds out a secular religion that can pick up many of the purposes and meanings conventionally offered by more theologically oriented versions in a society that is rapidly becoming less traditionally sacred. The vocabulary of motives that makes such a substitution possible is the appeal to quite traditional Protestant Ethic virtues.

It might be well to point to some of the more obvious defects in our analysis. Besides the unsystematic and impressionistic methodology we have employed, it may well be, in retrospect, that the metaphor of religion is itself too confining for an analysis of the fitness movement. What we are talking about seems to take place more under the general rubric of "ritual," than it does under the more specific and increasingly ambiguous ideas of religion. It may well be that the over-riding meaning of fitness may have as much to do with the denial

in our routine, or for one of us to help them with a particular exercise. The fact that we were faculty members and had previously had some of these students in class had virtually no impact on our position in the weight room status hierarchy. Rather, the same variables associated with all the others' status equally applied to us.

Another factor seemingly related to one's status in the weight room was strength and body build. There was an obvious correlation in most cases between the variables of regularity of workouts, strength, and body build. However, even newcomers to the weight room who were well-built and obviously regular lifters were apparently more welcome and much more likely to be involved in conversation and interaction than those who obviously did not lift on a regular basis. Similarly, even newcomers or non-regulars who performed exceptional feats or lifted inordinate amounts of weight soon gained respect in the weight room.

MOTIVATION

What motivated these people to put themselves through grueling rituals of the weight lifting routine anywhere from three to six days per week? Only one of the regulars worked out less than three times per week. The answer to this question was obtained through the use of an open-ended question on the questionnaire as well as through informal conversation with some of the lifters during the workout process. The most frequent response tended to focus on the desire for better physical fitness and a better self-concept. Obviously, most of the participants derived a sense of accomplishment in having achieved the ability to lift a particular weight, or perform a specific exercise a certain number of times. Perhaps this particular aspect of motivation can best be summed up in the words of one respondent who wrote, "Lifting weights seems to be a challenge. The iron against me."

Along similar lines of motivation were the responses of wanting to gain weight, achieve better physical appearance and simply the desire to gain strength. Others indicated self-discipline, self-motivation, and getting in shape for particular sports as their primary motivation.

Only one respondent indicated he lifted weights for relaxation; the other eighteen indi-

cated they lifted for reasons other than fun. The overall atmosphere of the weight room was both relaxed and enjoyable, but, the seriousness of the lifters and their motivation for physical fitness and accomplishment were reflected in almost all their activities.

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of death as it does with the overt meaning of "good health". Despite these problems the symbolic uses of fitness, the dramaturgical skills of its practitioners, and the rhetoric of aerobics offers a way of revealing some of the more sociologically important features of an important and growing social movement.

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