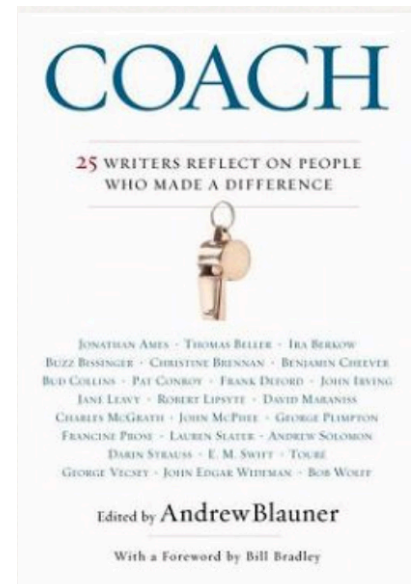


Prudent Fitness: A Panegyric

• ANDREW SOLOMON



I always hated exercise. When I asked my mother once whether she thought I had suffered any early traumas, she told me that learning to walk had been my greatest ordeal. “You spoke so early and so easily,” she said, “and it took you so long to be coordinated enough to make it across a room.” That was my legacy.

And because I never liked doing things at which I could not excel, I remained long stranded in words over motion. We live in a changed world, one in which the benefits of exercise are commonplace.

If my parents were transposed with their young children into the twenty-first century, they would insist on exercise, I am sure. Forty years on, there might as well have been a social revolution. But when I was little it wasn't one of the health matters that obsessed my mother and father. Not smoking was very important, and so were eating right and staying thin.

Exercise was a taste that some people had and others — including us — lacked.

When I was in elementary and high school, I would beg my mother for gym excuses, coming up with all kinds of reasons and pretexts: my hair hurt; or I needed to spend that period studying for a chemistry test; or I had lost my athletic shorts. I hated my gym teachers: they were the villains of my worst nightmares.

There was the snide Mr. Slaybaugh, handsome and tough, who demanded push-ups and push-ups, as though they were a ransom. There was Mr. Lombardi, thick as two planks, for whom I was subhuman in my inability to play football; he barely knew my name after eight years of painful interaction.

There was Mr. Beisinger, who I in retrospect think was rather a nice man, though that possibility never crossed my mind at the time; he made me run. Mr. Anderson was just a thug with a whistle. Their names and faces are etched forever in my memory: Mr. Quinn (wrestling — at least I had the advantage of being a featherweight in those days); Mr. Kramp (who implausibly coached the swim team); Mr. Brown (endlessly correcting my forehand).

I can see in my mind's eye the private tennis teachers too, to whom my mother optimistically sent me, assuring me that knowing the game was a great social asset. There was also the guy my parents hired when I was in second grade, Dana — I called him my gym tutor. He decided to teach me soccer because no one else in those days was trying to learn soccer and so I might conceivably have an advantage in the game. But that too came to naught.

When I graduated from high school, I swore I would never again go to the gym. I had a languid career as an undergraduate: I slept a lot, and ate a lot, and rank a lot, and read and wrote a lot, and the miracle of a lucky metabolism kept me slender on this regimen, and I hadn't yet begun to think about musculature — my own, really, or that of other people. I suppose I thought that having a beautiful body, like having a gift for mathematics, would be lovely but had nothing to do with who I was, or with my circle of friends.

I had one friendly acquaintance who visited the gym almost daily, and had the looks to prove it — indeed, pictures of him in university athletic gear were at a later date available from the Shocking Gray catalog, which sold mildly homoerotic images to middle Americans and shipped them in plain brown wrappers so that pesky mailmen and neighbors wouldn't find out what was afoot.

Paul tried to persuade me that the gym was fun, and I dallied with the idea of at least checking it out, but gym was still in my mind a euphemism for hell, and I finished four square years of study without ever even finding out where the door to the building was or how to get a locker there.

All this coincided with a sensual life in which being young was such an asset that having a wholly undeveloped body was scant hindrance. I wasn't yet seeking relationships with my peers, and to the predatory crowd I accommodated, what I had was more than enough. Physical pleasure was thrilling but quick and passing. I was for all intents and purposes disembodied.

When I finished grad school, however, and went forth into the real world, I had to accept the waning of my precocity, and it was at about this time that I graduated into mainstream sexuality. I had my first serious boyfriend, and we were both tall and lean and neither of us was muscular and we were both young and I was living in England, where the body culture had not yet accelerated.

Until that time, I had asked very little of my body, except that it contain my mind and heart. I was all feelings and intellect; I believed that I had a soul that was barely contingent on the flesh. Then suddenly, I wanted to be physically of the physical world. But I also wanted to be a Nobel laureate, and to own a yacht, and the physical world seemed to me as obscure as such achievement and position, to be a reality in which others had commerce but which would to me be forever obscure.

A few years later I moved to New York, and at about that time, when I was twenty-eight, I expressed to a dear friend my frustration with the body-conscious gay culture of New York, and she said, "If you want your body to be happy in sex and on display, you have to pay some attention to it. Try exercise. You might find that it's worth it." It was something of a revelation.

As I looked around at the powerful bodies that flaunted themselves on the Chelsea streets, I suddenly wondered whether I could look like that, and what it would feel like, and what possibilities it would open up. I had heard much of the joy of being in shape and wondered how it would feel to climb five flights of stairs without getting winded. It was like imagining a different person, a person I had never thought to be. I had always been a great believer in self-invention, however, and I decided to undertake a smooth transformation.

A college acquaintance was going out with a guy who did some personal training, and at a party she had one night, I got into a conversation with him about his practice. He said he thought I had good potential. "Look at those long, lean muscles you have. You could build them up," he said. No

one had ever even suggested that. “And you’d feel better. It’s not healthy, the sedentary life.” I remember the first time I went skydiving, and the leap into the blue was no more startling to me than the leap into that first conversation with Dièry Prudent.

It was the first step in a shift of my relationship to authority and my relationship to my own mass. I said I wasn’t sure, didn’t know, had to think. He proposed that we try a session. He said he would come to my house and that we could do an initial assessment there.

I was relieved that my inadequacies wouldn’t have to be flaunted in a room full of adept strangers, the disheartening gym of my imagination. We settled on a Tuesday, and I looked forward to it with an unsettled anxiety like that of entering a new psychiatric treatment or career.

Dièry is mesmeric. Tall and strong and self-assured, he has a quality of profound conviction, a quiet authority that is persuasive but not obnoxious. He was born in Haiti and has skin so black that it seems almost blue. He has a shaved head of noble proportions and large eyes and thick, clearly delineated lips.

He has a perfect body, the muscles all arranged as neatly as they were in the anatomy model we studied in ninth grade biology class. He maintains himself the way a museum maintains its art, or a restaurant its food. His voice comes from quite deep in him, and he forms his words with precision; he has no particular accent, but his speech is specific to him and like no one else’s.

He is one of those people who accomplishes by whispering what less impressive people accomplish by yelling. I envied his then-girlfriend, later his wife, but it was an affectionate envy rather than a lascivious one; it was not that I wanted to have Dièry, but that I took innate pleasure in the contemplation of his personal beauty and elegance, enjoyed being in his thrall. And I admired his aura of serenity, which made me think that from physical power might come inner peace.

From our first meeting, he had a quiet optimism about my body that I had never known myself. He knew intuitively what I could and couldn’t do, and he set a realistic pace, and didn’t drive me too soon to do too much. But he made me believe in possibilities, and he held fitness and musculature out to me like promises.

I was, in fact, a weakling, the sort of weedy young man who struggles to get his suitcase off the baggage claim carousel and dumps it awkwardly on the luggage cart as quickly as possible. I hated having to carry anything anywhere. I went to the beach and watched people swim from the indolent safety of a lounge chair; I usually kept my shirt on.

I felt that there was no point standing when one might sit, and no point sitting if one could lie down.

I was skinny by birth, with long arms that were about the same girth below the shoulder that they were at the wrist, and toothpick legs, and a flat chest with no particular lines or demarcations on it. I had the tautness of youth, but there was no strength in my body.

Dièry acted from the start as though I were dormant where I had thought I was dead. The strength of that confidence was remarkable — the belief seemed to matter even more than the qualities in which he believed. Dièry's father was a sometime preacher, and Dièry inherited the ability to persuade others into faith itself.

Let us be quite honest; I started this whole business out of vanity rather than out of concern for health. As I've grown older, the vanity has come to seem a bit futile, and the maintenance of good health has become increasingly necessary, but the original impulse was founded in the visual. Dièry does not judge by surfaces, but he likes both beauty and rigor, and was game to indulge my wish for a dream body.

We targeted, at first, the muscle groups that would show the most, and did biceps and chest repeatedly. The rest we snuck in as necessary to make me strong enough to look stronger. We had to work on the most basic things: the idea of good form, for example, and the right ways to breathe. I learned to recognize good and bad pain, the kind without which there was no gain and the kind that signaled we had gone too far.

I learned to like the good pain — not the pain in the moment of reaching, but the pain that lingered afterwards and made me feel that my body was alive and that I was doing things to it. I remember those first sessions, and the sense that I was entering a new realm of experience. It turned out that genes were against me, and that even a great deal of exercise would never give me the rippling physique of a Calvin Klein model. The way my body looks has changed, but it does not approach the Platonic ideals I once had in mind. Nonetheless, my feeling about my body has altered dramatically. I take my shirt off on the beach. I am ready for sex when it comes. I no longer think of my physical self as the weak link to my emotional and intellectual self.

It would be rhetorically satisfying to say that Dièry and I interacted in a pure realm of physicality, but that would be a lie. Part of Dièry's success with me — a large part — has to do with the fact that he has many of the qualities I have traditionally admired. He is someone whose intelligence would have allowed him to function very well in the realms where I spend most of my time, but who chose to devote himself to corporeal vitality instead.

I had long held the defensive belief that people who were smart enough to read and write at an advanced level would of course choose doing so over a life of the body, which seems to me to be lower on some great totem pole of superior and inferior activities.

But Dièry is as quick as anyone I know. He occasionally writes articles for newspapers, and even to my fussbudget eye, he is a lively, lucid, incisive writer. His conversation sparkles. His language is elegant. His eye for narrative is impeccable. Further, he is a person of rare insight, who can express that insight persuasively. It helped that he had these qualities and it helped that he valued them; I couldn't have gone through the abject humiliation of exposing my physical weakness to someone who wasn't able to understand and appreciate, to some extent to share, my strengths.

It took a long time for me to understand Dièry as pre-Cartesian. It wasn't that he had chosen the body over the mind, but that he didn't see such a great gap between them. The fact that he could bench-press 240 pounds and also write a poem didn't seem anomalous to him.

I know that there are many trainers who could have done as good a job as he did of helping me to build up my strength, and that would have been terrific, but with them I might not have found this model for an integrated self, and that has been perhaps his greatest gift to me. The way he has bestowed it — through example and instruction — has been uncommonly generous. In learning from him, I found a great intimacy.

When I first met Dièry, I did not think of being his friend. I thought that we were from different planets. Over time, I awakened to his kindness, to a certain stern sweetness that glimmered in our sessions together. And then bit by bit I became aware that in choosing to be a personal trainer, he had opted to be not only physical, but also, more broadly, caretaking. Dièry can't bear to leave anyone's suffering or flaws untended.

This quality can be extremely aggravating: he will come to my house and helpfully tell me what is wrong with it, and he will edit parts of my life that I was happy to leave as they were. He has summed up the shortcomings of my various romantic partners with a disagreeable acuity. He can be a busybody, and he is incredibly bossy. But he also waters the plants in my garden, because he notices that they are thirsty and can't bear to leave them to fight the heat of the sun (as I can). He pats my dog. He notices my moods, and makes way for them.

For Dièry, personal training is a ministry. He can be tough on making me do my crunches, but he also has a surprising tenderness. He cares deeply about my well-being, and when I am ailing, he is there to heal me. Sometimes when I'm not performing up to par, he will get impatient. "We're here to work," he'll say. But sometimes, very occasionally, he'll

say, “Your heart’s not in this today,” and give me a massage instead. On those occasions I sometimes want to say, “No, I can really do it, watch me” — but some part of the emotional dynamic between us involves my deferring to his sudden gentleness.

There are three cardinal intimacies assigned to people I pay: the dentist, who puts his hands in my mouth; the psychiatrist, who meddles with my mind and expects total honesty; and the trainer, who tells me what to do, and I do it. I have never supposed that the psychiatrist or the dentist were friends, though I am fond of both of them.

But with Dièry, the lines around the intimacy are blurrier. At times, the relationship seems intensely erotic — not because it has any actual sexual content or even desire, but because the subjugation and physicality are so plangent. I couldn’t do this with a person who bored me.

We found a commonality in emotion. Dièry, for all his gloss and finish, has grappled with depression from time to time, and I will always remember how, when I was suffering from catastrophic depression in the months after my mother’s death, Dièry would coax me along, painful step by step, to keep physical movement in my life. That is part of what got me through.

I will never forget the time he came over just before I was supposed to do a reading from my novel. I was in an acute depressive episode, a gibbering mess, wracked with sobs, barely able to move. I remember how Dièry ran a bath for me and put me in it and sprayed me down with cold water to bring me up to speed.

I had by then learned to trust him enough to be childlike with him. That hadn’t been an easy path. When I was growing up, someone once asked me what I’d like to be when I grew up, and I said I wanted to be intimidating. I tend to deal with uncomfortable subjects — such as physical fitness — with chill austerity. I put forth a cliff-front.

With Dièry, I allow myself to be shockingly vulnerable. All my imperfections, physical and cerebral, are on ample display. It runs contrary to my nature, and it happens through a great deal of determination on my part, but all the self-discipline in the world wouldn’t allow me to do it with most people. I can’t lift my portcullis alone. Words keep me safe; few people can get around them and to the nonverbal part of me.

It has become oddly unclear for whom I am doing all this exercise. Presumably it is for myself, but I cannot bring myself to do it when I am traveling, or when Dièry is traveling. To do so feels like talking to myself, almost a little crazy. Exercise exists for me as a form of dialogue: the

onanistic pleasures of the body seem substantially less attractive to me than the communicative ones.

I sometimes work out with Dièry, looking all the while at the clock, hoping he'll leave. This is madness: I am paying him to stay. I should have the buyer's right to ignore him. But though my imprisonment is voluntary, its rules are absolute. I seldom say no. Dièry is not only the guide for but also the occasion of my exertions.

The relationship appears to be embarrassing because it involves the sublimation of my ego, but I don't find it embarrassing as I live it. I don't like having people tell me what to do, and I ordinarily avoid situations in which I am ordered around, but I seek out this one.

Dièry definitely plays the carrot and the stick; he often exhorts me to do more, keep going, not give up, but he can also seem disappointed, as; though his every hope of happiness hung on my managing four more reps.

And sometimes he can be short with me, irritable if he feels I am not trying. He has a particular hand gesture that he uses when I'm on the exercycle, a sort of rotating of his finger rapidly to suggest rapid rotation of the wheel, that makes me feel like a trained seal or a miscreant dog. I put up with it. Dièry is for me a figure of authority, and I submit to the power I vest in him.

I am a person who fights against structure. I grew up in a household in which everything was orderly and scheduled. My mother could tell you three weeks in advance what she was doing, what time she was doing it, and what she was planning to wear to it. I, on the contrary, like to make plans, then change them, respond to the moment, leave for a weekend in Europe on four hours' notice, and so on.

Part of the purpose in becoming a writer was to have the absolute maximum of freedom. If I woke up on a Wednesday and the weather was nice, I could go off and take a walk, and if I had a deadline I could stay up all night to meet it. I could go to bed at 10 p.m. one night and at 5 a.m. the next. But having a personal trainer doesn't work like that.

Dièry and I had to settle a time between us, and I had to stick with it. For twelve years now, I have seen Dièry at 11 a.m. five or six days a week when I am in New York. Because I hate getting up to an alarm — it feels like too brutal a way to start the day — I tend to let Dièry come and wake me up. I go to bed most nights around 3 a.m. and get up when Dièry arrives. He is the first person I see, having slept through my partner's earlier departure.

In the beginning, it was all weights, and a little stretching. Bench presses, flies, squats, lunges, unilateral and bilateral curls (I wanted to do a gay weight-lifting book called *Curling Iron*), crunches, super-crunches, jackhammer crunches, twisties, rotators, overhead presses, pullovers, tricep extensions, clean-and-jerks, bent-over rows, upright rows, standing upright rows, shrugs, incline presses, close grips, wide grips, deadlifts, bent-knee deadlifts — the list seems nearly infinite, and just writing it makes my muscles twinge.

Over time, we began to incorporate aerobic exercise and now we spend half the session keeping my heartbeat high (pulse 150 if we can). I ride an exercise bicycle and Dièry cheers or prods me on. I know this seems to outsiders like a waste of his time; I should be able to do the aerobic work by myself, but I can't. It takes the interest of another person to sustain my own interest.

I am still about eighteen pounds over my ideal weight. I have tried dieting, and diet pills too. It hasn't been a big success. To have both to do something I don't like doing and to give up something I very much liked doing seems too much. I gladly exercise and eat, and could well not exercise and not eat, but having to exercise and not eat seems too high price to pay for any kind of beauty.

Dièry and I talk about my weight whenever it goes down, and leave the subject whenever it goes up, fluctuating in a ten-pound region over periods of weeks or months. I can feel his look at my belly, and from time to time he has tried to talk me through my eating habits — but there, privacy reigns. I feel I am vulnerable enough to Dièry without adding this insult to the injury. I know about diet, and when and how and to what degree I act on that knowledge, I reserve to myself.

There are three unsought consequences of working with Dièry. First is the jazz. Dièry is passionate about jazz and knows a great deal about it. My course of jazz instruction has been an accessory to my course of physical fitness training. We listen to music and he talks about it and his interest is enlivening, and I know a galaxy that I didn't know twelve years ago, especially about his particular hero, James Moody.

We talk about jazz, and then we talk about race. I have many other close friends who are black, and one of my godsons is half-black; in general, I treat and experience race as invisible. With Dièry, race is a direct topic of conversation. Because he is a visibly strong black male, he is perceived as threatening, and this has led him to a variety of racial humiliations — from the typical story of not being able to get a taxi to narratives of police brutality. In his tales, I have come to see a more divided world than I had previously recognized. I have more fully appreciated the pain that those divisions cost.

I always looked down on women who confided all their secrets to their hairdressers. I felt that intimacy was an earned privilege and that it lost its meaning if it was shared too freely, especially with a paid captive audience. I tend to have a polite formality with people who work with or for me.

But the friendship with Dièry became profound because I like and admire him so much and the mitigating factors — that I followed his orders, that he accepted my money — seemed ultimately to balance each other out. It has taken on a certain unique depth because of its dailyness.

I sometimes feel as though his life and mine are soap operas that most people catch occasionally and on the fly, but that we catch in each other day after day. I see him first thing when I get up and am not always in the mood for confidences, but he is my North Star, steady and constant.

The fact that we are so occupied with my weightlifting takes up some of the conscious energy that so often impedes confidences. And I have taken a role in his life too, his longest, steadiest client, who sees him most frequently (except when traveling). Time and our ages have caught up with us.

I no longer push up that maximum weight at which I once so ecstatically arrived. I slog through these days, and do lots of repetitions with lighter weights to strengthen particular small muscle groups, to improve that occasional ache in my back, or to help the weak shoulder on which I had surgery. We have achieved a rare understanding, predicated on what is at last a balanced power.

If you had told me, in those days of Mr. Slaybaugh and Mr. Beisinger, that one day I would be hiring my own gym teacher to come daily to my house to put me through my paces, that it would become one of my primary activities and expense, I would have laughed out loud.

I could not have conceived, then, of the gift Dièry was to give me, the gift of my own body. I had no idea what lay ahead, that just as my body was beginning to age, I would come to a happier relationship with it than I had ever had, that even as it waned, I would get so much more from it.