A Lesson on Exercise From an 88-Year Old Champion

For several years I worked in a nursing home. Daily there were six or seven elderly residents lining the halls in wheelchairs. They were either sleeping, staring into space, or speaking incoherently to themselves. The odor in the hallway smelled of stale carpet and fake sweetener. The mood felt like sadness and desolation. Day after day it was the same scene and the more I worked there, the more I was determined that I would never grow old.

The Glory Days

One day I noticed an elderly man siting in a wheelchair in the Physical Therapy gym, struggling with his exercises. He was given the task of lifting a pair of tiny pink 4-pound dumbbells 10 times over his head. It was visibly hard work for him. As he rested between sets, he pulled out a picture from his back pocket. It was old, frayed and discolored. In the picture was a young man holding an impressively massive barbell loaded with weights over his head. Across the top of the picture was the word "**Champion**" in big bold letters.

With pride he passed the picture around to the other residents and explained that he was the young man in the picture. He spent the next several minutes describing his glory days. He told us of his many accomplishments as a competitive weight lifter, the number of years he competed and the glorious feeling of wearing the champion medal year after year. Those around him were drawn in by his stories and listened in amazement. When he no longer had stories to tell, his therapist indicated that his PT session was over and that it was time for him to return to his room for his medication. I watched as his feeble body was wheeled away with his oxygen tank in tow.

When Youth Meets Old Age

Later that day I went to the local CrossFit gym and stood in a room with young men and women, all working hard to beat the odds. Picking up weights and throwing them down, running laps, climbing ropes, swinging kettle bells, wiping sweat, pushing hard, and digging deep. They talked about their meal preps, how much they missed bread, the last dessert they enjoyed, and the latest vegan recipe. Everyone had the same objective. Get stronger. Get healthier. Stay young, defy gravity and stop aging!

Then my mind's eye pictured that elderly man in the nursing home earlier that day. He once found himself in a gym just like this one, with people just like us, and with objectives just like ours. And yet none of that prevented his gradual decline to frailty and weakness. His once strong body was still forced to succumb to the wheelchair. No matter how much work he put in, he still had to trade in his strong legs for atrophied pegs; his chiseled physique for a frail frame.

Aging is Inevitable! Why bother?

The obvious questions overwhelmed my thoughts: Why bother? Why bother with

any of this, if even the strongest of us are forced to submit to degeneration and atrophy? Why am I waking up at 4 am to get to the gym? Why am I depriving myself of the foods I love? Why am I punishing my body with strenuous workouts if none of this will keep time from ravishing all my hard work?

The next day in the gym I lacked passion and purpose. Suddenly, like the thoughts of Solomon, everything seemed vain and pointless. “Nothing I do in this gym will change the inevitable,” I thought. Physical aging and death comes for all of us. The strongest, the fittest, the fastest…we all end feeble and weak.

At the nursing home the next day I asked that 88 year old gentleman to tell me another story of his physical feats. His eyes lit up and he boasted and beamed about the first time he held a champions trophy in his hands. He ended the story by saying, “Not anymore, I can’t do those things anymore. I was prepared though. I knew this day would come.”

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I asked him, if he ever felt like the years he spent working towards physical strength were a waste. With a smile of conviction and glassy eyes he said, “Not one bit! Growing old is a privilege that some never get to experience. I knew that one day my body would not be able to lift those weights. But I eventually learned that the real reward was not the change in my body, but the change in my Spirit.” He saw the confused look on my face and precede to explain.

“Achieving goals I never thought possible taught me JOY.
Avoiding foods that cause me harm taught me SELF CONTROL.
Showing up to the gym day in and day out whether I felt like it or not taught me FAITHFULNESS.

Waiting for the slowest person on my team taught me GOODNESS.
Putting to rest the negative voices in my head taught me PEACE.
Encouraging a friend to never give up taught me KINDNESS.
Enduring the pain of depression taught me LONG-SUFFERING and GENTLENESS.
Treating my body like a treasure taught me how to LOVE.
Understanding that nothing changes overnight, taught me PATIENCE."

"God brought the fruit of the spirit to life through the process of building my body, His temple. And because our bodies are in fact the temple of God, health and fitness is an act of worship!"

"If you are not actively improving your physical body, you may be neglecting your spiritual health."

The next morning I woke up with more vigor than I had all week. I was filled with a sober conviction that taking care of my body was of Kingdom importance. Knowing that one day my body would return to dust ignited a fire within me to build My Body; His Temple. I now have this burning desire to worship Him through exercise. Will you join me?