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Body-Management

Robert P. Inglis

“The average human body looks either like a monkey or an overfed horse, and only clothes help some to look like colonels and others like bank presidents. Strip them and farewell to the colonels and bank presidents !”

—Lin Yutang

“What do you consider to be the three most important things in life ?” This was the topic given recently to all four years for group discussion. ‘Good Health’ was at the top of practically every list. No great surprise there, of course. However, what did come as a bit of a surprise was the lack of inspiration when the ensuing discussion posed the question of how to get and maintain a satisfactory degree of physical strength and endurance.

A few students mentioned jogging or tennis. The vast majority, though, were at a loss, hoping, no doubt, that Good Old Mother Nature would benignly take care of everything in the forthcoming years.

From this I take it that there is some general interest in the health question and have thus decided to pass on to you my own experience in the field — for what it’s worth.

I was first introduced to the system I am about to describe twenty years ago. At that time I was a struggling actor on tour. I returned to my hotel one evening after a particularly nerve-racking performance during which everything that could go wrong — did, attempting to restore my flagging spirits I threw myself under the shower. The last few seconds, with the cold water turned on at full pressure did the trick, and bright-eyed and refreshed I sprang out from under the shower. . . . to come face to face with a three-way

mirror. Horror ! The front view, I suppose, was passable for a man in his early thirties — but the left and right side-views instantly changed the bright-eyed condition mentioned before into one of shock. The fact was that I was developing a paunch. Something had to be done — and smartly. Paunchy actors of thirty find their range of parts becoming somewhat restricted. How could I combat this menace ?

The next day I mentioned the problem to a colleague — and — Eureka ! He had had the same difficulty years before and try as he might with the usual methods — no improvement took place. Eventually, on an American tour, he was advised by an actors agent on the outline of the body-management I am about to relate.

Although this took place twenty years ago, I recall with great clarity most of what he said — no doubt because everything he said was of such importance to me.

The originator of this system of body-management was an Englishman, Edwin Checkley, who went to America as a physical trainer, and was very successful. For some strange reason Checkley was very unwilling to put in print most of what he knew. Fortunately, however, another face appeared on the scene — Alan Calvert, who soon became a close friend and colleague of Checkley. The latter had no objections to passing on his findings orally and thus, when Checkley was killed in a street accident, Calvert was equipped to take over and develop the system.

Calvert was for many years a trainer of strong men. He knew personally practically all the prominent exhibitors of great physical strength in America and himself laid out at least forty thousand courses in heavy-weight exercises. He invented and manufactured various kinds of strengthening and strength-testing devises. Despite his commercial success in supplying all this material for the body-building market, he became convinced that the whole notion of

training for strength through the use of apparatus and special exercises was all wrong, and eventually he decided to sell his business, although the decision involved no little financial sacrifice.

Here are the facts which determined his action.

In the first place, he found out that the development of muscles by the methods normally employed, though sometimes successful in the immediate aim, did not build up a corresponding physical vitality. Too many successful body-builders of this kind, in spite of rolls of muscle sticking out all over them, died suddenly from heart failure and other causes. Again, it was observed that the entire muscular strength acquired seemed to be dependent on keeping up the exercises. As long as the apparatus was kept shiny and in use, the strength remained; as soon as systematic training was relaxed or neglected, the healthy condition began to deteriorate. It was as though the added strength were something put on from the outside, like paint ; if it were not renewed, it wore down and disappeared. True strength, it would seem, ought to come from within outward, and be self-renewed by normal vital processes.

The most striking fact, however, which influenced Calvert in his change of mind, was the phenomenon of the 'natural strong man'. Now and again he came across someone who was amazingly strong, in spite of never having taken any voluntary 'exercise' in his life. Not the product of a gymnasium — which perhaps he had never entered — he could outdo in sheer physical strength all the prodigies of the chest-weights and the bar-bell. Sometimes, indeed, he was actually lazy, and never exerted himself at all unless he had to. Sometimes he had possessed his strength from early youth, sometimes it had come on rather suddenly. In every case, the strength was an unconscious natural growth, a spontaneous development *from within*.

Several remarkable characteristics of this natural strength were noticed.

There was, for one thing, its permanence: it seemed to go with abundant health, bodily grace, and inward vitality, and to keep on growing right through the decades of middle life and on into hoary old age. No dropping off by heart failure; no signs of overstrain or worn-out vitality. Moreover, the persistence of the state of affairs seemed to be entirely independent of any attempt to 'keep fit' by bedroom exercises, dieting, or gymnastic practice.

Here was a mystery — and Calvert set himself to study it. He had plenty of things to help him. There was his life-long training experience. He had a remarkable knowledge of muscular anatomy. Most important of all, he had access to records and photographs, and opportunity for personal observation of a remarkable series of naturally strong men.

Close study of these revealed the fact that every one of them had certain unusual habits of posture in standing and sitting, and certain habits of walking and breathing; and that they all had the same habits. The induction began to be clear. These identical habits were closely connected with unusual physical strength. Which was cause and which was effect? Did the habits create the strength, or did the strength create the habits? Observation and experiment made the answer perfectly obvious. The habits brought the strength into being. The way these people managed their bodies, all day long, and every day, was giving them exercise, just the right kind of exercise, in adequate amount — gentle and continuous exercise, which is quite the most effective of all exercise.

Correctly done, standing and walking and sitting are moderate exercises carried on for sixteen hours a day. Wrongly done, they constitute *strain* but not exercise, for the same length of time. The mystery of the man who has grown up 'just naturally strong' is simply this: in early life he fell unconsciously into certain ways of doing these things. They served to build up his strength exactly as Nature intended it should be built up. The strength,

possessed, made it easier to go on doing the things as they should be done, and that in turn made the strength greater, until at last the latter became, in many cases, actually tremendous. But Calvert's work has shown that for anyone organically sound, it is possible to begin quite late in life and still find the body being moulded over into grace of form, muscular strength and organic vitality.

The idea is to make these ways of standing, sitting, walking and breathing, *habitual* — so that they become second nature to you. When that has taken place, your physical welfare, barring accident, is assured.

The Lower Back

Like the keystone of an arch, the 'small of the back' is the key to the muscular activities of the human body. It is the focal point of bodily movements. To be strong, one must have a strong back.

Now the ordinary person does not have a strong back, and the reason is that his spine has too pronounced a curve in the lumbar area, that is, about six or eight inches from the bottom of the spine.

None of Calvert's natural strong men were hollow-backed. On the contrary, they had that 'flat back' which has long been recognized as going with physical strength.

To test the flatness of your back, stand against a wall where there is no projecting baseboard. Let the heels, calves, buttocks, shoulders and the back of the head touch the wall. Then see if you can pass your hand between the small of your back and the wall. If you can do so, or come anywhere near doing so — then you have a curvature of the spine which should be eliminated.

Most people will discover when standing thus, that in order to make the small of the back touch the wall it is necessary to change the position of the

hips. The whole pelvis ceases to have a forward-and-downward tilt, and takes on what is practically a horizontal position. It is the same adjustment that most people make when they try to get sideways through a narrow opening in a fence. This will serve as our introduction to a most important principle, namely, that the forward curve in the small of the back can be straightened out by altering the position of the hips.

Imagine the pelvis to be a bowl of water. When the spine is curved inwards at the small of the back, the bowl is tilted forward so that the water spills over its front edge. But when the back is held flat, the bowl is level, or balanced, so that no water spills out at all. This should be the normal position in standing, walking, and sitting. When it is so, the back will be flat.

Another way of describing the movement is to say that the hollow-backed person (and that means most of us) needs to learn to carry himself with the hips thrust forward and up. Roll your buttocks under you. At the same time, roll down the diaphragm. That is to say, unlock the bunch of muscles that has probably gathered in the solar plexus area just under the breastbone; as the diaphragm goes down toward the abdominal region, you will feel a little pressure and there will be a slight distension of the lower abdomen. If at the same time the chest is held high and wide, the internal organs get a fair chance to do their work more efficiently. The chest is set free; you will notice instantly that you are taking more breath into your lungs. The same thing is even more true, though less observably so, in the case of the vital organs located in the abdominal cavity. They get more room to function smoothly because they are released from the contracting pressure to which they ought never to have been subjected. Possibly more important is the easing off of the pressure which, in the hollow-backed position, is brought upon certain nerves and ganglia. Controlling, as they do, the blood supply of the abdominal region and the sex glands, their restoration to freedom means a

more healthy and vigorous functioning of a very large portion of the whole bodily organism.

It is said that in the French army, soldiers were trained into getting this 'balanced-hip' position by being made to walk around with a coin clamped between their buttocks.

Here then, in brief, is Calvert's advice on the proper way to stand and sit;

Standing

1. Hips balanced.
2. Weight of the body falling on the broadest part of the foot, and not the heel.
3. Knees firmly locked and turned slightly outward on each side.
4. Chest up — not out.
5. Back of the neck set firmly against the inside of the collar, so that with the head up, you look out at the world with even eyes.

Most people automatically and unconsciously set themselves in good standing position as soon as they step under any height-measuring device. They try to make themselves as tall as possible, and in doing so, they unconsciously throw their weight on the balls of their feet, tighten their knees, bring their hips forward and up, straighten out the lower spine, lift up the chest, throw the head back and the chin down — and there they are in the perfect standing posture !

Sitting

We sit at breakfast, we sit on the train on the way to work, we sit at work, we sit at lunch, we sit all afternoon. . . a hodgepodge of sagging livers, sinking gall bladders, drooping stomachs, compressed intestines, and squashed pelvic organs.

Dr. John Button — Newsweek

1. A human back's best friend is a straight-backed, hard chair.
2. Sit far enough back in your chair for the front of the chair to touch the under side of your knees.
3. Gather your posterior under you, with your hands if necessary, executing a motion similar to that which women sometimes use to keep their skirts from bunching up under them and getting wrinkled.
4. Let the centre of gravity fall on your hips and thighs — not on the lowest four or five vertebrae of the spine. Press down on the seat of your chair.
5. Put your legs naturally and easily out in front of you — not crooked under the chair or with one knee on top of the other. For a more relaxed position, cross your ankles, not your knees.
6. Keep your back flat and your chest up.
7. Hold up your own weight by your own muscles. If you must have support for your back, let the lowest part of the spine rest vertically against the back of the chair.
8. If you have to turn, try to do so with the upper half of your trunk, keeping the lower part steady. If you have to lean forward, do so mainly from the hips.

So there we have the basic principles of Calvert's beliefs. There is nothing startlingly new in them — he was active in the 1920/30's.

For me personally his advice has been most valuable. Believe me, I have my fair share of aches and pains. I have no expectation of striding briskly through the octogenarian years 'fit as a fiddle' as the saying goes. I am sure I possess no greater strength than any of my contemporaries — yet I am convinced that the application of Calvert's philosophy — especially the advice that all exercise should be gentle and continuous — has helped me enormously and I hope that, perhaps, you too may derive some useful, applicable tips from this condensed account.