

Guest Editorial

# “Physical Culture Down Through the Ages: Now the 21st Century Looms Before Us”

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Lest we in the profession blame ourselves too much for our profession’s seemingly perennial plight—i.e. the evident physical *inactivity* of too many of our citizens of all ages—we should keep in mind the words of educational historian, Thomas Woody (1949):

“Turn where one will, it is impossible to find physical culture adequately presented in books dealing with the general history of education” (p. vii).

To this I hastily add the opinion: or anywhere else for that matter. Woody, who produced what may well be the most scholarly work extant in the English language describing physical education in the ancient world—he called it physical culture—is indeed correct in his analysis of the situation. “Why is this so?” you may ask. I believe the answer is that throughout recorded history supposedly learned people understood—or have not *wanted* to understand—what the potential of either planned or playful physical activity is for improving the quality of life. How could we have expected them to do so when even we in the field did not until the last half of the 20th century begin to *fully* understand our field’s potential either? We have idealistically *wished* it to be so, but we did not have the substantive evidence.

If this is indeed the case, we can argue that the highest aim of the profession’s disciplinary wing (i.e., *kinesiology*) is the ordered assembly of the scientific and scholarly principles and generalizations that underlie desirable professional

ministrations in our realm of developmental physical activity. Happily, as we continue to work in this direction, we now have available the relatively new National Coalition for Promoting Physical Activity, a collaborative partnership formed by our own Alliance with the American Heart Association and the American College of Sport Medicine. With solid management, this could well become *the* organization that will muster the necessary enlightened marketing directed to both the public *and* the professional practitioner that will accomplish the goal of public enlightenment—and subsequent motivation to *act*—on the subject.

Any marketing effort must begin with the assumption that the values and norms of a culture have a profound influence on the way people carry out their daily functions. To understand our profession’s predicament, therefore, we need to comprehend why the naturalist, Herbert Spencer, (1861), was probably on the right track with his mid-19th century analysis. He argued that people, by steadily ignoring their “sensations” and “impulses,” gradually developed *seared physical consciences* thereby condemning themselves to lives involving a minimum of healthful, invigorating physical activity (p. 197).

Accordingly, if Spencer’s argument has any merit, we should understand better how value determinations have historically influenced physical activity in those activities that we now call exercise, sport, dance, and play. A study of history tells us clearly that physical activity (movement!) has been a basic part of the fundamental pattern of living of every creature of any type that has ever

lived on earth. Despite this historical fact, those who have written about the history of civilization, including those who have written about the history of *education*—except Woody!—have slighted physical culture consistently. Woody told us further that “lip service has been paid increasingly to the [Roman] dictum ‘a sound mind in a sound body’ [Seneca] ever since western Europe began to revive the educational concepts of the Graeco-Roman world,” but that there is still a lack of balance between physical and mental culture” (p. vii).

It is true, of course, that the steady rise of competitive sport as a social institution throughout the 20th century tends to create the impression that we are a physically active society. However, intramural sport gets little attention in our public schools typically and is usually bowled over by the juggernaut of interscholastic competition in any struggle for financial support and accompanying leadership. One example of the evidence that we are an “unfit society” typically is the publication of charts indicating that 50% of the population may be characterized as overweight and 30% as obese! (However, it is true that the criteria were altered somewhat.)

Interestingly, the answer to our plight may well rest in Woody’s words that harken back to the early wisdom of a Greek named Plato. This scholar-athlete appears to have left humanity with a mixed message on the topic of the human body. The mind-body schism that he created led indirectly to Roman dictum of Seneca (noted above). Somehow, in the Western world at least, his denial of the wholeness of the human body, coupled with St. Thomas’ addition of the human’s spiritual element (the soul), has carried the concept of a “tri-partite organism” down to the end of the 20th century.

Now, as the world moves into the 21st century, our profession must build even more strongly on the concept of a “*unified organism*” provided for us by the related discipline of psychology dating back to the time of World War I. Additionally,

Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) *Philosophy in the Flesh* makes it crystal clear that the “embodied mind” challenges traditional Western philosophy that has typically held a position largely ignoring the wholeness of the human body.

Approaching the end of a career totalling 60 years, I would like to leave behind a challenge that those of us in my generation faced, but were not able to meet. The challenge still is for you to devise—and then pursue with extraordinary diligence—the necessary ways and means of informing the American public about the proven, established principles of developmental physical activity, of *kinesiology and physical education* if you will. The facts and knowledge have now been *firmly* established upon which the field’s professional practice can—without a doubt—be based logically and vigorously.

Fine educational experiences have been related historically to the mastery of various subject-matters. Accordingly, and I believe mistakenly, we do not typically envision so-called *formal* education to fully encompass *all* of the changes that take place in individuals based on their total *life experience*. Because of this truncated outlook, the *movement* experience, the human motor performance aspect of education, of recreation, of all life, has been slighted historically down to the present day. This is what Csikszentmihaly (1993, pp. 3-4) called the *flow* experience of a *feeling* organism, if you will (see, also, Zeigler, 1996, pp. 258, 264). Huxley (1964, p. 31) called this omission a disregard for the “education of the non-verbal humanities,” a lack of concern for the “psycho-physical instrument of an evolving amphibian.”

Finally, this is the historical reality that confronts our profession worldwide as humanity enters the new millennium. I challenge you, the generation now in a position to broaden humanity’s perspective about the unity of the human organism, to bring about a state of affairs in which the evolving human organism will be *fully* educated. It will be a most difficult assignment. I wish you well.

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