

**Dreaming Big and Often: An Essay for Students and Professors**

Tommy Boone

Professor and Chair

Director, Exercise Physiology Laboratories

Department of Exercise Physiology

The College of St. Scholastica

Duluth, MN 55811

Life is full of unanswered questions and challenges. Age doesn't seem to help, except that people get caught up in what they do for so long that they forget to raise questions. After a while, work justifies living, even if the work is not inspiring. As a university teacher and as someone who enjoys teaching and learning, I'm occasionally asked about work. What makes it important? How did you decide to be an exercise physiologist? Of course, my answers don't really help others too much. They have to struggle with finding the right answers for themselves. Life is a constant effort to understand why we become what we are.

Self-actualization is that which comes from within us as we begin to realize what is most meaningful in what we do with what we have. Life isn't about money, however important. Life is about how your knowledge and skills will be used to help others. I believe that each of us has an important purpose in life. If we take time to discover what is within us, what we value as important, then we either intentionally (or, as is some times the case, unintentionally) find out who we are and what we are living for. When we come to that understanding, we realize the importance of what we are doing on a scale much beyond a salary.

Those who come to understand their purpose can be both excited and fearful about their ability to live up to the expectations. Some move forward, some move backwards. The latter is defined as "doing nothing". They are often times alone in their disappointment. Without help, they float through life attached to whatever is easy, comfortable, or popular. Those who step up to the plate are astonished to realize that fear is okay. It doesn't have to bring you to your knees. It is okay to feel less than capable, even inferior to others. It is okay to not know if you can do it. However, it is not okay not to try. Life is about trying, and we do that mostly through our minds. Like riding a bicycle for the first time, the sense of doing it was not in you but you did it anyway. You wanted to ride the bicycle and you did it.

Are you asking yourself about where you are going to be in a few years? Are you concerned with your academic major? Is it the right one for you? Are your

parents going to be happy with your decision? Is your sense of purpose encouraging you to major in exercise physiology? Everything sort of depends on the answers to these questions. For many of us, the future of what we become can be traced to our undergraduate and/or graduate decisions. How we will think, react, feel, and relate to others can be traced to our teachers, how they did their job, and how they influenced us. So, what we are talking about is your life and your future. What you are doing today in college courses will enable you to realize your dreams or not! This is why I think it is very important that you read this article. It is written for you.

A college degree doesn't carry with it a promise that the world will be a wonderful place after graduation. Some degrees are not that helpful in locating a job, unless advanced degrees are obtained. The purpose of the **American Society of Exercise Physiologists** (ASEP) is to help ensure that the undergraduate degree carries with it the opportunity to access a professional position with both credibility and financial stability. Certainly, this is not a new idea. But, it is seldom linked to more traditional degree programs like kinesiology with a concentration in exercise science. Most, if not all, of these types of programs actually have little to do with a professional job linked to a professional education. Instead, as is clear on most department web sites, such degrees appear to exist primarily to enable a student to make application for physical therapy or some other recognized healthcare profession.

With the founding of ASEP in 1997, there is a new vision and a new academic and professional opportunity for students. Everything has changed. Today, exercise physiologists have their own Code of Ethics [1]. This was not the case before 1997. Imagine the problems that would result from nurses not having a Code of Ethics over their many years of working in hospitals. It would be almost impossible for nurses to do so or, for that matter, physical therapists, occupational therapists, or athletic trainers. The path to exercise physiology professionalism has been defined for decades of relatively little organization. Fortunately, this has changed. Now, students who believe exercise physiology is "exactly" what they want to do can join a professional society of exercise physiologists. The ASEP organization is all about the important factors that associate with professionalism. It helps tremendously in giving students a chance to plan ahead and to find a job as a board certified exercise physiologist [2].

The decades of not having a professional organization to support the concerns and issues of all exercise physiologists are over. This doesn't mean that the thinking and feelings that associate with those decades without a professional organization is gone. Far from it. For a variety of reasons, many hard working academic exercise physiologists over the past 10 to 20 years have not completely embraced ASEP to make the beginning something special. However, like all things new, there is a proving period. There is a learning period. Both are important to unlocking the benefits of the paradigm shift. The 21<sup>st</sup> century view of

exercise physiology is bold and right. Members of the organization believe that the students' best days are ahead of them because their future is not tied to what was but to what is. The new reality is full of hope and opportunities. As someone who has done some thinking on this topic, now is the time for students to embrace the ASEP vision [3]. The highway to professional opportunities as an exercise physiologist is open. The path is marked, and it's achievable.

Unselfishly serving members of the ASEP organization, the three different Boards [4] have seized the hearts of many to ensure that accreditation, board certification, and licensure are available to every exercise physiology student. Listen again: "Today, two of the three boards are reality. The third, licensure, is an obvious struggle for any new organization and/or profession. But, it will become reality too." Time is on our side. Our ally is time. We should not, therefore, forget our blessings. What ASEP has accomplished in such a very short period of time is worth noting. So, stop squandering your tuition money, and find an academic institution with an academic major in "Exercise Physiology". It is not just important. It is imperative. No one can become a nurse unless he or she majors in nursing. Shall I press the point further? No one can become a physical therapist unless he or she majors in physical therapy. Why is it, therefore, okay for a student, who graduates with an academic major in physical education with a concentration in exercise science to refer to him- or herself as an exercise physiologist? Obviously, it isn't right. It is not okay. Also, it is wrong from many points of view. Others understand this all too well. Students deserve the best information about careers in exercise physiology from their university teachers, department chairs/directors, and others.

The failure of those who oversee departments and programs of study to update thinking about exercise physiology and the career reality of their programs has resulted in little reason for celebration. For example, listen to John who said: "I worked hard to my degree in kinesiology. I paid my tuition bills. I survived undergraduate school on many fronts. Now, I feel betrayed. There are only a few jobs, and there are a lot of people like myself looking for the same job. Even if I should get a job, I don't think that I can make it financially on the salary. I will need to work odd hours at a second job. Why didn't the advisors, teachers, and department head tell me the truth early on? I'm thinking really hard about going back to school and getting a degree in nursing. I don't want to, but I don't see any other way around the situation I'm in."

There you have it. Absolute disappointment. Who is to blame? Is the student to blame for believing the information that the department gave him was accurate? Are the exercise physiologists in the department to blame? How about the department chair? The answer is that everyone is to blame. The academic exercise physiologists are the primary problem. Why? Because they continue to allow, if not, encourage the past to define the future (and, they do it regardless of the negative effects it has on their students). Few, if any, have looked to the ASEP accreditation process to upgrade their academic programs from fitness

professionals to exercise physiologists. They are the problem. They understand the dubious future that lies ahead of their students, but knowing the problem doesn't automatically allow the thinking to correct it.

Adoption of new ideas is a hard thing for many people, especially those who have acquired comfortableness with their way of looking at an issue. It is a gift to be able to see beyond where you are. Few can do it quickly. Most require decades of wear and tear to adopt what is obviously important. They don't get the message early on, nor do they understand the words of those who are involved in the change process. Morning comes and the afternoon goes, nothing is changed. They still fail to get the spirit of change. Their inner qualities seem lost to the needs of the students. Their sense of worth appears to be defined by another publication or another professional meeting; all of which cultivates a definition of an exercise physiologist who is not a healthcare professional. This doesn't mean that those who enjoy doing research are not important to the field. Rather, because the "practice" of exercise physiology is important to the foundation of building a profession, extra effort should be given to the design of new career opportunities for students (not more research publications).

In other words, what matters is not the professor's resume, but his or her inner disposition to cultivate an upscale academic program. The only appropriate expression of this new thinking is the all-important ASEP accreditation to capture and hold the attention of other healthcare professionals. We think that by enrolling in an accredited program, the kind of opportunities already recognized with other accredited programs will be forthcoming to our students. This is at the heart of our students' problems. Once corrected, it will attract new students for the right reasons. No longer will students have to settle for less. This is good news. There is the promise of increased opportunity, respect, and credibility. It's that simple! So, what do ASEP exercise physiologists want you to believe? It is all about giving up the old way of thinking for the new way. Thinking that will overcome the barriers of our tradition in exchange for manning a new world of opportunity is genuinely an awakening for our students.

Too many of us have wanted this awakening for a long time. Why? Because we never intended our students to be at a disadvantage! Nothing shapes a student's life more than the commitment teachers make to help with frustration and occasional regret. Hence, it is important that teachers right the wrong in the academic settings. Students cannot make it when they are going in the wrong direction. Only when they and their professors focus in the right direction on the right target can both begin to move forward in attitudes and opportunities. This is the reality we must achieve. It is also the hardest step of all because it results from taking action. Ideas are like anchors. The truth is that some keep us from moving when we should move. Learning to do what needs to be done is clearly a game of the mind. Maybe not yet, but eventually all ASEP members will learn to do first things first. And, at the end of the day, when the fear is controlled,

each of us will end up with a fresh sense of what we are and our commitment to a new place.

In summary, when somebody says, "I'm thinking about joining ASEP," do you respond with a polite "really" or do you say, "Great, with your help, we can collectively make a difference." Together, our focus will get the job done (especially when we refuse to give up). Never give up! We will be remembered for daring to make a difference, for allowing our minds to wander outside of our history, and for dreaming big and often.

### **References**

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