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Become the Big Rat or Find Your Own Niche

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“For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you....”

-- 2 Timothy 1:6

LAST WEEK, I was asked, “Why are you continuing to write articles for **PEPonline**?” I said, “Because it is important.” For a moment he just looked at me and, then, he said, “As a person with an undergraduate degree in exercise science and now a physical therapist with a great job, my experience is that exercise physiologists are not interested in professionalism and ethical issues.” I said, “I understand. The academic exercise physiologist’s priority is publishing research. They do not have a vision for exercise physiology beyond doing research. Hence, nothing matters but publishing their papers.

Professionalism, professionalization, ethical issues, standards of practice, and accreditation are rather meaningless topics to most college professors.

Do you have a vision for yourself and your life?

My reality of exercise physiology is driven by the ASEP vision. I believe in professionalism and exercise physiologists as a healthcare profession.” Interestingly, the same person said, “But, haven’t you experienced resistance and difficulties while working for ASEP and writing **PEPonline** articles?” I said, “Yes, that is true. It is also true that a person accomplishes only what he or she values and is willing to fight for. Hard work and diligence are important, but so is the willingness to give up those things you love doing to fulfill the dream of something better for all exercise physiologists.”

The way I see it is this: I am blessed to have the desire to do something that will help exercise physiologists for decades to come even though they are not as aware of the need to change how they should be. It is this desire that has enabled me to see the value in having a vision. I am still learning from this internal purpose of my life and less so from my six college degrees. Yes, I understand that an education is important, and at one time I thought the Master of Public Health, the Master of Organizational Management, and the Master of Business Administration degrees above my PhD degree would be the key to understanding and driving the change process forwards. However, the truth is to write three articles for the month of August is driven by my vision of what exercise physiology should be to benefit the profession and the students of exercise physiology. For this reason I understand that I must find the time and words to write, refine, and post in the **Professionalization of Exercise Physiologyonline**, the **Journal of Professional Exercise Physiology**, and the **Journal of Exercise Medicine** in addition to the **Exercise Physiologists Blog** <https://exercisephysiologists.wordpress.com/>).

Frankly, since starting **PEPonline** in July of 1998 (1 year after the founding of ASEP), I have put my life into the ASEP vision. Yes, the vision has required me to think differently from many of my academic colleagues and, frankly, some of my very close colleagues have acted poorly for many different reasons. I have forgiven them for the hurt and pain that their behavior caused me and my family. The bottom line is that they are simply small rats trying to “Become the Big Rat”. Perhaps, it is best to make my point using the words of Dr. Myles Munroe (1).

He said that, “Although we are all born as originals, most of us become imitators. I used to think about becoming like everyone else and joining the rat race. Yet I soon realized that if all the rats are in a race, and you win, you simply become the Big Rat. I recommend that you get out of the rat race, stop competing with the community, stop being in a contest with society, stop trying to keep up with the Joneses, stop trying to please everybody, and decide, ‘I’m not going to be a rat. I’m going to find my own niche. I’m going to make room for myself in the world by using my gift.’”

What do you see in your mind’s eye for yourself?

I think Dr. Munroe’s thinking is right on, which is especially the case for academic exercise physiologists. Moving up in rank from the assistant professor position to the associate professor position to that of becoming a full professor and getting tenure is driven by the need to imitate those who have been successful. Seldom do you run into a college teacher who isn’t trying to become like every other teacher. The academy is a rat race of college teachers who are interested in doing research because that is what their colleagues are doing.

College “teachers” are not interested in being the best teacher because teaching is not required to keep up with the academic Joneses. Hence, it is rare to meet face

to face the college professor who is driven to be the best teacher possible. Hardly any college professor will admit that he or she is driven to find his or her own niche. Instead, college teachers do whatever is necessary to become the Big Chairperson, the Big Dean or the Big Researcher to mention the common Big Rat mentality.

While it is true that the rules for advancing in academia require a strict and demanding way of thinking, the rules should not distract from one's vision to be a great teacher and acting on it. For example, I believe there are men and women who did (and are still doing) what was/is necessary to become a tenured college teacher and, then, succeeded at helping his or her students by being the very best teacher possible. The leaders of academic programs of this type understand what is essential to their success and purpose in life. They do what is necessary to move up in academic rank while also doing what is vital and necessary to achieve their vision and fulfilling their life's purpose.

I'm a college teacher. But, the truth is that I do what I can to avoid having to teach.

After all, I believe that we have the right to fulfill the vision God put in our hearts. "Finding Your Own Niche" is a 1000 times more enjoyable and personally rewarding than "Becoming the Big Rat". But, what many academics fail to get is that their students need help in dreaming and living the vision of finding their own niche, which is consistent with James Allen's (2) point of view, "Dream lofty dreams, and as you dream, so you shall become. Your vision is the promise of what you shall one day be; your ideal is the prophecy of what you shall at last unveil."

Something is terribly wrong in academia when exercise physiologists cannot grasp the significance of this brief article. For me personally, the fact that ~100% of the academic exercise physiologists have not written an article on professionalism or ethics or the need to support ASEP as their own professional organization is oddly hollow and sick. Moreover, it is strangely uncomfortable that not more than a handful of all exercise physiologists since 1998 have published an article in **PEPonline** describing the need for our Academic Accreditation and Standards of Professional Practice. Their failure to act on the necessity of becoming a profession of exercise physiology is symbolic of everything opposite of being educated. The idea that it is today's reality destroys the hopes and dreams of many students who want something better.

In fact, by comparison, it is unsettling that exercise physiology students' hopes and dreams exist today for physical therapists and other healthcare professionals who work on behalf of their profession. Look around you. It is true, especially when 100s of exercise science departments are simply not willing to upgrade to an exercise physiology title and academic degree that is accredited by the American Society of Exercise Physiologists. Yet, it is clear that position, power, and influence are tied to strength in numbers, which begs the question: "Why would exercise physiologists

allow themselves to be divided by dozens of look-alike degrees?” Leading-edge healthcare professions, like nursing, physical therapy, physician assistants, and occupational therapy, are working in the future by cashing in on healthcare today. Let’s face it ... the problem is that exercise physiology exist for the academic types to publish research papers. No, I am not exaggerating. The administration and the faculty have already sold-out by not changing how they think and by advising their students to apply to PT and other graduate programs.

Strange talk or bold talk – what do you think? Actually, it is not so strange and, yes, I have earned the right to speak the truth because I have lived it. I had the best job ever taken from me. As I said earlier, I know what it means to work 12 hours a day for 16 years and lose everything. The aftermath is a life full of hurt and feelings of unbelievable helplessness. But, the corrupt behavior of my colleagues opened up my mind to new possibilities (i.e., looking for the good in the bad). I have forgiven them, and I have moved on with my life. Also, I am not going to stop working on behalf of ASEP since it has become a way of life and a better way to think and live as an exercise physiologist and healthcare professional.

The cornerstone of a healthcare profession has always been the acceptance of a professional infrastructure. Being a member of a credible healthcare profession helps to put clothes on our backs and those we care about. The truth is that academic exercise physiologists must accept the responsibility for professional development (3) or simply accept the fact that their students will continually be stressed out. The truth is that evolving professionals either accept the responsibility for change and growth or they contribute to their continued failure. This is a huge problem because students need financial security and happiness that a well-organized academic degree offers. Think about it for a moment. How much happiness can college graduates

Are you riding a dead horse?

expect to have if they cannot find a financially good paying job to pay for their apartment or house or replace an old car to look for work?

The short answer is not much. But, it is possible to work our way around the failure of the academic system to deliver the American Dream. Listen carefully, the Big Rat mentality can be dealt with. It can be changed. What has to be done is this: Stop the academic department heads, deans, and faculty from stealing the students’ hopes and dreams. How? By bringing the issue up and talking about it. By writing about the “big steal” and publishing it in **PEPonline** and any other journal that will do the same. Correcting the existing academic programs with new thinking will help promote student opportunities to achieve positive change and a hopeful future after college. Begin today with the belief that change is possible, that it will take place, and a new future is 100% possible.

Once again, “How” – by speaking up when everybody else is scare to. How? By rocking the academic boat? By not doing what 95% of the exercise physiologists

do. They are losers because they are too scared to stop supporting status quo. The Big Rat mentality is a game of very few winners and lots of losers! The alarming truth is that there are many academic degrees that are useless when it comes to the respective college graduates being financially successful after college. That's right. On average, students are expected to pay ~\$30,000, \$40,000, or \$60,000 a year for 4 or more years to get an undergraduate degree. These days, it is highly unlikely the graduates will find a job with a salary to pay back the loan and pay bills at the same time. Meantime, the academic administrative infrastructure is increasing in number and salaries while 75% of the faculty is made up of adjunct faculty members doing whatever to become full time with rank and tenure benefits.

Does all this make sense to you? Not surprisingly, it doesn't appear to bother the American educational system. Talk about fleecing the students! It is scandalous that colleges and universities bring in huge profits at the expense of graduates who move back home because they cannot find a job in their field. This is crazy, and yet it is a fundamental 21st century fact of life in our world today. Something has to change, regardless of how much exercise physiologists are resisting it. The same old 20th century paradigm of doing things is just that – outdated. Perhaps, the late Sam Walton said it best: “When everyone else is floating downstream, swim upstream.” Yes, naysayers are everywhere. Just swim upstream anyway. It is critical that we move outside our comfort zone, especially since it is a change in exercise physiology whose time is past due. Why not take the time to share with your friends and colleagues the importance of ASEP as the professional organization of exercise physiologists? Do it by word-of-mouth or however you can to share with others that it is time to care for the success of students and much more.

The future is now. Change can be in your future, but you must take the first step. If you will do that, then, one way or another you will be part of the change. It's your choice. Ask yourself, “Would I rather be the Big Rat or the person with the niche?” Remember, you'll never be the healthcare professional you want to be while trading your educational investment for something else. As Burke Hedges (4) said, “For things to change, you have to change. For things to get better, you have to get better.”

According to USA Today, parents in their 20s “...will need to save nearly \$5,000 a year for 18 years to put one child through college.”

Be honest with yourself, do you want to be a personal trainer or a Board Certified Exercise Physiologist? Perhaps now is the time to take a closer look at the ASEP Exercise Physiologist Certified (EPC) exam. All I know is, if an exercise science instructor tells you it is not about the title, rest assured that it is all about the title. What's more – if you want to be an exercise physiologist, then you must either graduate with an academic degree in exercise physiology or sit for the EPC exam

and pass it. Remember, your future is at stake here... your family's home, your income – your paycheck!

President John Kennedy said, "Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or the present are certain to miss the future."

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