The Jungle Gym: An Inquiry into Fitness

By Kevin Smith

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Editors note: This article follows Emilie Conrad Da'oud's essay entitled Movement *in the May 1998 issue of* Rolf Lines®.

This article is an introduction to an on-going inquiry into what we know and can say about fitness. The inquiry is the Jungle Gym, developed by Emilie Conrad Da'oud. The Jungle Gym is a contribution to the evolution of a biologically based, self-reflexive model of exercise and fitness. The Gym has evolved out of the recognition of the need for a different type of workout, the cultivation of a different kind of fitness. The concepts, values and methods used in the Jungle Gym stand in sharp counterpoint to the industrial models of fitness and exercise that predominate in our culture. The following narrative is meant to convey something of what it feels like to 'work out' in this way.

THE WEB

I'm suspended upside down in space, hanging, undulating like some sort of mammalian sea kelp floating to and fro on the tides of breath, feeling and sensation. Above me my legs are entwined in the Web—a rectangular grid work of foam tubing suspended within a 10 X 8 framework of steel tubing, the whole of which is oriented at a 45 degree angle to the ground. Each square opening in the grid is about 18' X 18' allowing me to slide my trunk and limbs through in an infinite variety of ways. This invites elaborate explorations in 360 degree space. As I hang, one arm floats up, prehensile fingers slithering around a foam intersection. My weight lazily begins to shift. I begin to explore this new relationship to gravity. One of my legs, freed from the requirements of stabilization, begins to rise, a tentacle, extending above the plane of the web. My trunk begins to torque, ribs knitting together, abdominal wall contracting in a powerful wave through my pelvic floor, rippling through the tissues of the leg above and out through the sole of my foot. The heel leads, arches spreading, the toes curling, tasting, exploring the surrounding space. The trunk movements expand, creating a variety of torques and arcs that propagate out through the limbs. My breath deepens, and I feel a galvanizing of my system, all the layers of my abdominal myofascia initiating, responding, supporting the constantly changing vectors and curves of the pelvis and leg—the ultimate abdominal workout.

My weight continues to shift and the other arm slowly settles to the floor.

Fingers extend, touching down, a lunar lander sending up little puffs of moon dust. Another shift and I am slowly pouring weight into the arm and hand. The limb begins to change form as my shoulder girdle, a moment ago free to play in a huge sphere of motion, now coalesces to provide the needed stabilization. I feel my clavicle and scapula extending out in space toward my elbow, my hand and beyond. The web-like stabilizers of the shoulder joint engage, creating connection between arm and trunk, span between arm and shoulder, shoulder and spine. There is a stimulation of bone and muscle and connective tissue but as well a stimulation of understanding. It is the understanding of structural and functional support, connections and relationships in three dimensional space.

My trunk is now suspended nearly horizontally, my weight balanced between a same side arm and leg that are entwined in the web and the arm that has just touched down. As I play in this configuration I feel a delicious tractioning effect in the lateral fascia of my trunk. It spreads slowly downward through the iliacus inside the pelvis and laterally into the tensor fascia lata and related hip fascia. It feels... incredible, a Rolfer's dream. I hover, feeling the reverberations of each beat of my heart, allowing the moment to grow until all I am aware of is this emerging inner topology of movement, breath, elongation and meaning.

At this point I am aware of nothing so much as an exquisite distribution of support. I feel extraordinarily light—as if the work of stabilizing my body in gravity is being distributed throughout every fiber, every cell of the skeletal and myofascial system. Thus de-centralized, I am the expression of constantly shifting reference points. The concepts and abstractions I use to understand, define, and bind that which I call "body" and separate "it" from the 'outside' environment begin to blur and lose meaning in this space.

As this new awareness emerges out of the unknown I feel a rush of excitation and the hair on my arms and legs stand on end, a rippling forest of cilia. The membrane of my skin becomes even more sensitive and permeable to the surrounding air. A new wave motion begins to emanate from the viscera, winding its way up through the lateral fascia of the rib basket and the shoulder. My jaw softens as my head and neck begin to drop sideways to the floor, elongating. I bring more breath into the upper lobes of my lungs and rib basket. I feel the fascial web opening in response. First rib, scalenes, on up into the temporal. Behind my right eye an opening. My head feels weightless, buoyed up from underneath, as if underwater. I laugh mischievously. Which way is up?

WHAT IS FITNESS?

I would like to establish a contextual framework for the reader by repeating several provocative statements Emilie made in her essay on Movement. They express some of the underlying values and guiding principles of the Jungle Gym inquiry. I invite the reader, after reading them, to contemplate their potential implications on health and fitness. Consider the question: What would a workout or a system of exercise look like that gives primacy to these kinds of ideas and values?

"Our relationship with our planet is maintained by the resonance of our fluid systems with all fluid systems, human and otherwise."

"Life is movement. Movement is something we are rather than something we do."

"All form is temporal. Its demise or its need to reconfigure is inherent."

"Stabilization is vital for efficiency but it becomes rigid when uninformed by new probabilities... With increased stabilization there is a compromise of adaptability."

Speaking of her revolutionary work with spinal cord paralysis she says, "Movement can innovate new function. . .Perhaps paralysis is in the model and not in the spine."

"Western culture. . .has brought about the industrialization of the body, with devastating and alienating effect."

"Creative flux is essential for the enhancement of our functioning. . .It provides us with an ability to function as biological systems rather than cultural entities."

THE WORKOUT

The Jungle Gym is a lively, sensuous workout that cultivates a rich responsiveness, a deep flexibility and resilience in all the physiologic processes (bone, fascia, muscle, nervous, fluid systems, etc.). As in Continuum there is a primacy put on fluid movement. This is reflective of the fluid dynamics influencing virtually all levels of the development of form in living organisms. It is in contrast to the linear right angled movements associated with conventional exercise systems based on cardinal planes and mechanical models of movement.

In the Gym we use a rich tapestry of constantly evolving breath, sound and movement explorations in three hundred and sixty degree space and multiple relationships with gravity. Breaths and sounds are used to cue an awareness or resonance with certain physiologic processes. These may range from a breath that stimulates the cardiovascular and and fluid systems, a sound that stimulates a vibrational resonance within the bony

matrix, to another breath that seem to stimulate a dissolution of the boundary between inside and outside.

CONTAINERS AND HARNESSING

We utilize the notion of a container in the Gym to assist in harnessing awareness and intention. Explorations are laid out as flexible themes. A specific position or movement element may explore, for instance, the lateral 'line' of the body from head to foot, the participant is free to explore a wide range of movements and connections within that context. The field or container of the exploration is well defined in order to allow the effects of the movements to amplify. Yet it is also permeable enough to encourage the person moving to follow the sensations and impulses that emerge. This fosters the capacity to innovate new function out of the creative flux of the movements.

ESTABLISHING A BASELINE

In a typical Jungle Gym workout we begin by exploring and registering some specific position and type of movement in order to establish a Baseline. We borrow this term from the field of experimental science in order to engender a playful, yet mindful atmosphere of experimentation and inquiry. A baseline movement might be as simple as positioning ourselves on all fours and exploring the degree and quality of movement available and the relative level of our participation in that movement. At periodic intervals throughout the workout we then return to the baseline in order to deepen our awareness of the changes that ensue.

THE ALCHEMY OF LAYERING

After establishing a baseline, as few as three or as many as six distinct elements (breaths, sounds, movements) are combined together in a process we call Layering. The intention of layering is to extend the protean capacity of the organism to galvanize its energies and form to meet an energetic challenge and then relinquish that form in response to a new set of circumstances. Thus, successive layered elements in the workout are often quite dissimilar. For instance, one such layering might juxtapose a rapid, dynamic movement of the trunk in the standing position with a slow, tractioning exploration parallel to the floor on the Explore Board. This might be followed by explorations using breath to stimulate subtle movements of the cerebro-spinal system while sitting or lying supine.

Presenting the organism with successive, diverse challenges to respond to appears to have a complexifying effect on life processes. Participants are often amazed by the profound shifts in their level of participation in the movements. Large changes in fluidity, articulation and energetic flow of movement are common. This does not appear to be the result of a simple additive effect. The layering of the two elements seems to gives rise to the appearance of a third effect, not predicted by either of the others. It is analogous to the interference pattern of ripples created by dropping two stones in a pond.

ROUNDS

After a participant completes one round of explorations layering all the elements they return to the baseline movement to explore what has transpired as a result. They then proceed through two more rounds of layering the elements together to further broaden and deepen the complexifying effects of the workout. They can deepen the process by investigating a position or movement on different pieces of equipment in successive rounds i.e. lying on one's side on the floor in round one, in a side lying position on a chair in round two, using the lateral entry position on the Explore Board in round three. Throughout the workout we encourage people to pause in open attention at frequent intervals to deepen their awareness of what is transpiring.

ACROBATICS OF THE GODS

The atmosphere in the Gym during a workout is hard to describe because of the emphasis on multi-planar and non-patterned movement. There are times when looking around the room it appears to be some kind of extraordinary underwater ballet with limbs and trunks moving in all relationships with gravity: extending, contracting, undulating in various rhythms. The usual reference points for "bodies" and how they move and configure themselves in space are often absent. This creates an aesthetic that might appear quite strange from a culture bound perspective but very familiar from a biological one. Emilie often jokes about giving out an Ant Motel Award to a particularly vivid expression of a biomorphically inspired shape or movement.

There are powerful resonant fields generated within the entire group in the Gym. They are the result of a deep, mutual informing taking place on many levels. It is a unifying effect not, I suspect, unfamiliar to Rolf practitioners from their class experiences but with a uniqueness all its own.

EQUIPMENT

All these explorations are made possible or enhanced by the use of any of a number of pieces of equip

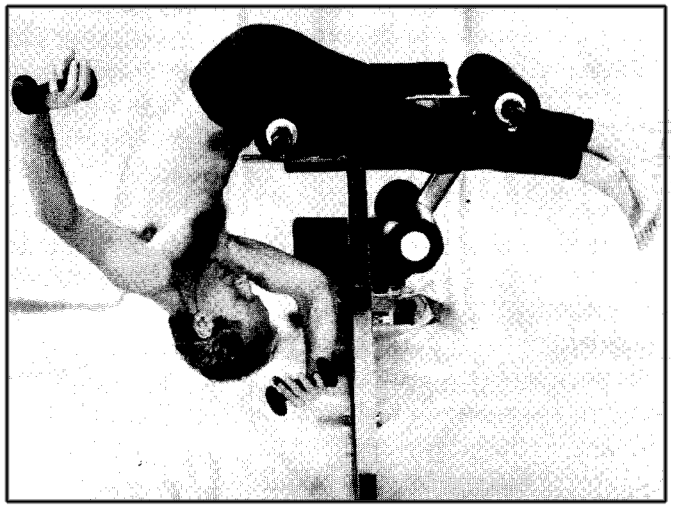
ment or props. The Explore Board and Extension, The Web, Strong Suits and Dynamite Vests, simple chairs, Physio-balls, and resistance bands are some of the props that constitute the physical milieu of the Gym. The Explore Board, Strong Suit and Dynamite Vest were invented by Emilie for the express purpose of expanding the potency of the Gym's effect on fitness.

The Explore Board and Extension is a custom built slant board with specially welded joints, great lateral stability and a variety of attachments to support movement in any gravitational plane. The Strong Suit is a two piece spandex leotard with weights strategically placed in the outseam of the arms and legs. These are oriented along the long axis of the bones, with an extra weight cuff on ankles and wrists. The suit allows someone working out to do resistance work while moving freely in any direction through complete ranges of motion. The Dynamite Vest is a weighted vest of the same material used to create a deeper challenge in core movements of the trunk. The Web, already described, is currently under development. There are four or five prototypes in use around the country.

PROGRESSIVE LOADING

We can create a deeper energetic challenge to the organism through a process we call Progressive Loading. In this type of workout, the elements, layering, and rounds are the same. The difference is that in each round the participant is working with a different level of resistance and weight.

In the first round the participant might start with a Load: either a Strong Suit, a vest or one or more weight belts around the trunk. The amount of weight used is dependent on the health and experience level of the participant. We add proportionately more weight to the core rather than extremities in order to challenge and stimulate the fundamental movement capacities of the organismic center. Also, some of the complex, multi-planar movements possible in the Gym require well organized core/extremity organization and support to avoid undue stress on the axial/appendicular structures and junctions when additional weight is added to wrists and ankles.



In the second round the participant Up Loads, adding a vest to a Strong Suit, or more weight belts to the trunk. Experienced movers might add ankle and wrist weights as well. Paradoxically the effect of the Up Load is not simply increasing resistance to movement. The added weight creates a deeper tractioning and elongating effect on the tissues. Participants can explore slow suspensions and tractions in favorable relationships with gravity that create outstanding expansions in myofascial and skeletal processes. The arcing, spiraling movements facilitate a reorganizing of all the neuro-fascial planes, wrappings and envelopes and their contents (including, viscera and glands), as well as through joint capsules, and the bony matrix.

In the final Unload round, all weights are removed. All the elements are then explored anew in the absence of the added weight and its profound effects on the proprioceptive and kinesthetic systems. People often report after the third round that they feel like they are flying effortlessly even in movements and suspensions of body parts that require a great deal of connection and support and that had initially been quite challenging even without weights.

Progressive Loading usually begins with some nervous giggles as everyone starts loading and looking around at the spectacle of what looks like an indoor scuba class. But it is quite amazing to watch and feel the level of engagement in the room as participants rise to the energetic challenge that the Load and Load Up rounds present. It is particularly satisfying for women who wouldn't be caught dead doing conventional resistance training to harness all their movement capacities in the service of promoting greater flexibility and resilience.

THE EFFECTS OF INNOVATIVE MOVEMENT

We speculate that some of the enhancement of organismic energy that the Jungle Gym facilitates occurs due to the combined effects of traction and wave motion or fluid movement. These effects appear to induce an increased electrical conductivity in the tissues of the body. This increased conductivity may be, in part, a function of piezo-electric fields created by the mechanical forces that rhythmic contraction and elongation exert on the crystalline-like structures

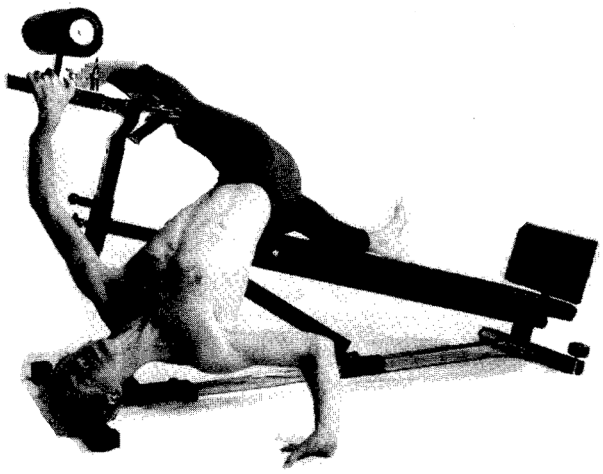
of the connective tissues of the body.

These documented effects have been discussed by Jim Oschman in relation to potential effects of manual pressure on the fascial matrix. Don Van Vleet, in the Future of The Body classes he co-teaches with Emilie, elaborates beautifully the unique effect that Continuum and Jungle Gym movements have on the health of all organismic processes via the fascial matrix. Whatever the mechanisms involved, we believe the implications of harnessing and cultivating movement in this way are vast. Focused awareness, breaths and movements and their effects on gross and subtle structures and processes can be sustained in a workout for extended periods of time. They generate resonant fields of information and energy that literally bathe the organism in ways that are deeply nourishing and regenerative.

The capacity to strike a balance between the conservation of useful habits and the capacity to innovate new function is a defining characteristic of living organisms, health, and fitness. "Creative processes are not symmetrical," Emilie is fond of saying. Non-patterned, asymmetrical movement encourages the nervous system to discover novel responses. The challenge is to let go or "put on a shelf" our habitual, learned movements, rhythms and styles, (however valuable in other contexts) and then allow something new to emerge out of the creative flux that is our nature. This is the aspect of Continuum and the Jungle Gym that I have found most fulfilling. I believe it is an almost totally neglected yet absolutely essential element of any comprehensive model of health and fitness.

FITNESS AS SYMBOLIC ACTIVITY

One of the totem animals or symbols of the Jungle Gym is the Octopus.



Capable of astounding feats of strength, a decent sized octopus also has the ability to shape-shift, squeezing herself through a coke bottle sized tube to get to a potential meal at the other end. That's flexibility! Although there are huge differences between homo sapiens and octopods, there are also biological kinships that can transform our movement capacities if we simply attune to them.

There is a strong emphasis in the Jungle Gym on attuning to sensation and lower order events in the nervous system. We do this, in part, by using primitive, embryogenic and biomorphic images and metaphors in our workouts. The value of doing this can be illustrated by means of a simple experiment.

I invite the reader to first visualize deeply for several moments, then move one arm and hand through its entire range of motion in ways that are in keeping with the the lever and pulley model of bio-mechanics. Notice which muscles are activating, the quality of their engagement as well as the way the joints move. Notice the level and quality of fascial activity in the arm as you do this. Finally take note of how interesting the movement is to you. Now visualize deeply for several moments, then move your other arm and hand in ways that are akin to those of an octopus. Again note the kind and quality of *muscular activity,* joint movement and fascial activity. Note as well your level of interest in the movement.

To complete the experiment, sit in open attention, feeling your arms for a few moments before answering the following questions. In which arm did you feel more fluid articulation and muscle engagement? Which type of movement involved a more global involvement of the fascial web? Which movement felt more sensous? Did one movement feel more significant or meaningful than the other? Finally, which one felt more alive?

This example vividly illustrates the incredible impact unexamined models and assumptions about movement and bodies have on our experience. We are symbol users. It behooves us to choose carefully and wisely what we want to embody through our use of symbols. When we think about fitness, we should exercise our species' greatest strength, our self-reflexive nature. Otherwise it will be our greatest source of weakness. ❑

Kevin co-leads Jungle Gym Intensives with Emilie Conrad Da'oud as part of an on-going collaboration into the nature of health and fitness. The next Jungle Gym Intensive is scheduled for March 19-23, 1999 in Santa Monica, California. Those interested in attending may call the Continuum office at (310) 453-4402 or contact Kevin directly at (914) 679-2335. His email address is: kdsmith@netstep.net