

“TAKES OFF INCHES” by Ann Gerhardt, MD

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One Sunday morning I headed out for a long racewalk workout, which took me past a church. Throngs of mostly old people (old being defined as looking older than me) converged on the church and I weaved my way through them. A few blocks away, a neatly coifed, make-up masked, 70-ish woman, apparently walking to church from her fab-40's home, observed my intense wiggle-walking. She smiled sweetly and said, “Takes off inches, doesn't it?”

I almost stopped and gave her a lecture. But would she have understood, even if I had spent an hour doing so? The notion that one exercises only to lose weight or inches, ground into us by everyone from Shape Magazine to doctors, is too firmly entrenched in our collective psyche.

I wonder which inches she was talking about. I'm not a big person. In fact I'm getting shorter all the time, as my scoliosis scrunches my previously upright spine into something resembling a Chee-to. I certainly don't need to lose top-to-bottom inches. I doubt she could see under my loose T-shirt that the scoliosis has eliminated what little waist I used to have and adding an inch. Exercise won't take away my boney distortion. That leaves over-all inches - Now I'm no super-model, but I doubt that anyone would way I need to lose inches.

So what was she thinking??? My guess is, she wasn't. The concept that one could exercise because it feels good, energizes, calms my neuroses, helps me sleep and hopefully prolongs my puny life probably hadn't occurred to her. Or if it did, as an “Oh, yes, of course, dear” acquiescence, it certainly wasn't the thought that escaped her mouth.

She parroted prevailing dogma: You can never be too thin. Do whatever it takes to get there, and the only reason to get out and enjoy the brisk fall air is to lose inches or weight. We went from a physical species, farming, hunting and walking where we needed to go, to one that seemingly has no reason to be physically active, except to lose the weight that we gain by being inactive. Make sense to you?