

THE AGELESS BODY™

ANTI-AGING, FITNESS AND CONTINUUM

By Sharon Weil Aaron

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**Most people believe that aging is a downward slide towards decrepitude, and there is no coming back.**

As a culture, we are captured in a collective trance that sees aging as a process of inevitable decline in vigor, mobility, interaction and worth. We accept a model for aging that does not include the idea of renewal, and we suffer for it in many ways. We are wounded by the cruel irony that once we have the hard earned wisdom of our years, we no longer have as strong and vital body to carry that wisdom. But this is not how it has to be!

The teachings of Continuum tell us that vitality, fluidity, flexibility, and radiance all come from a full and complete engagement with life and all our biological processes, which need not diminish. Continuum and The Ageless Body program are ideal in mitigating any aging process, and provide the answer to the question, “how can I be fully alive in every moment, at any age?”

In the Industrial world, the average life expectancy at the beginning of the 1900's was only 45. Now it's 80 plus! At this point in history, men and women are living well beyond their mere reproductive purpose with no guidance from the past as to what's next. We are making it up as we go along – with more or less success. The baby boomers are not their grandparent's generation, or even their

parent's generation. We are a generation that refuses to grow old, insisting on remaining active in every way, even as we begin to feel the physical limitations that appear with age.

As people begin to age, we find certain common symptoms of physical limitations: stiff joints, bone loss, loss of muscle mass and tone, sagging and dry skin, loss of mental clarity, depression, waning sexuality and sensuality, and fatigue. These physical limitations can become "life limitations", narrowing our sense of adventure, imagination, confidence, risk, thoughts and feelings. Stress, repetitive movement, excessive habit or patterning, malnutrition, loss of hydration, and injury are all causes and expressions of a system that is closing down, rather than opening up to what is possible.

When this happens, our very lives start closing down, our circle of friends circle of geography, circle of interest and engagement all become smaller. We fade to gray, get stale, and get stuck in our ways when we are not in circulation with our *inner source*. We feel lonely and isolated when we are unable to commune with a *greater source*. We begin to diminish when we cannot access what is new, exciting and fresh. But when we do, our bodies have the innate ability to refresh and renew at every level in a *biology of innovation*.

When I first developed The Ageless Body, a program for anti-aging through movement, I merely thought it was a good idea, and the answer to

someone else's necessity. I was a very fit 48, having had my first child at 43, and I was still coasting on the fragrant fumes of youth.

Then the beginning signs of perimenopause began to appear, I endured the stress and sorrow of the long illness and death of my sister, and a period of debilitating illness of my husband, all of which changed my body from strong and fluid to taut and collapsed. I soon saw that, indeed, I was part of this very group I was teaching; not only was I teaching what I knew, but what I needed to know.

I have been teaching Continuum for 12 years and have been studying and practicing for 18 years. The focus of my teaching and contribution at the Santa Monica studio was helping others build *fluid strength* through the strength and tone program of Continuum called The Jungle Gym. As the population of the studio was growing older I saw certain issues arise again and again in class – concerns about bones, joints, waning vitality, waning sensuality, and a greater need to address recovery from injury and illness. I realized this was a separate and distinct conversation that was long overdue. What was needed was a new and gentler approach to the very same goals of building and maintaining *fluid strength* without causing injury. The motto became, “Keep doing what you’re doing, and you’ll keep getting what you get. Or do it differently and see what else can happen.”

## WE START OUT FLUID

Continuum and The Ageless Body program can bring renewal to the effects of any aging process because the movement and breaths of Continuum are designed to activate the fluid system of the body and activate the fluids within the body. Continuum recognizes that the fluid of the body, just like the water on the planet, has the inherent ability to renew and refresh itself, and thereby, in the proper circumstance, reverse any stagnation that has accumulated.

One of the central issues in aging is dehydration – we are literally drying up. As we age, the fluids in our tissue diminish. It is a natural part of any aging process. We see it all around us in Nature. The vibrant, juicy yellow-green leaves of Spring ripen into the fullness of Summer, and by Fall, become brittle and eventually crumble and fall.

This loss of fluidity shows up in the connective tissue of the body; fascia, bones and joints. Add to this the compression of repetitive movement from exercise, patterned movement, stress, or merely years in gravity, and you have a situation where circulation is impeded, stagnation occurs and the tissue becomes starved for nourishment and dries up. We could say that in an unchecked aging process, we are starving for food and water at the deepest level.

When fluids in the body are not vibrant and flowing, the electrical charge in the whole systems diminishes and this results in people experiencing low energy, flat sexual desire, muted sensation, and recovery from injury takes much longer.

There is no spark or vitality in the system. Again, this all comes from a loss of activated fluid in the tissues.

As humans, we begin life in a fluid origin. The fluids of the emerging embryo are shaped into form and function. That embryo is floating in a fluid world inside the amniotic sack. When we are born, and for the first 3 weeks of life, we humans are 99% water. Jellyfish are 99% water -- all membrane and fluid. We are equally fluid when we begin. As we develop to function within the terrestrial environment of gravity, needing to support our weight in crawling and walking, we become more stabilized and structured, exchanging fluidity for denser form.

Children are resilient in so many ways. They take a fall in stride, their cuts and constant bruises heal quickly, and they are fluid in their emotions, one moment crying, the next laughing. They are still very much in play with their internal fluid environment.

By the time we grow to adulthood, we are 80% water. By the time we reach the age 50, we are more like 75% water, and depending upon the state of health, movement and engagement with life, it can be even less.

Just as we can see the causes of the limiting symptoms of aging arise from a loss of fluidity in the system, we understand that fluidity can be restored. Whenever you activate fluids, increase the electrical charge within the fluids, restore vital circulation and heighten the fluid nature of the tissue throughout the

body, you bring life back to tired tissue, and enter a wellspring that refreshes the whole of life. You feel juicy, creative and alive.

## FITNESS

One of Continuum's greatest contributions to the field of fitness is to recognize the importance of working within the connective tissue of the body (fascia), rather than placing the focus on muscle. Because the fluids of the body are carried in the connective tissue and because the connective tissue is an instantaneous network of communication reaching into every corner and crevice, working to expand the plasticity and elasticity of connective tissue changes the entire vocabulary and intent of fitness. Strength becomes defined as "the ability to respond", and health is viewed as "the refined ability to adapt to circumstance". So being fit means being adaptive, flexible, integrated and fully engaged. Instead of separate and sculpted hard body parts, we become one flowing, fluid, relational body.

Because injury, especially to joints, is of such key concern as people get older, it is important to understand that by working with opening and strengthening the connective tissue, *through working with the fluids*, people simply do not get the soreness, strain or stress found with more conventional exercise. In fact they feel loose, open, and feel more possibility for movement than they have in years. When moving from the connective tissue, the muscles are asked to move differently, and while being engaged and strengthened, the

muscles do not respond in the same way as they have. There is no soreness because there is no lactic acid build up that arises from the breakdown of muscle as it fires in it's normal function of contract and release. Likewise, in hydrating the connective tissue, joints are less tight and bound, and less likely to be strained. Working this way promotes ease in movement that makes strengthening and toning through Continuum appropriate for all ages and conditions.

## MOVING WITH THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

By the time we reach the age of 45 and beyond, we are an accumulation of good and bad habits, experiences, stresses, and constraints. We've probably had a child or two, a spouse or two, and at least that many jobs. We have incurred losses, both great and small, not the least of which is what we consider to be our youth and the body that went along with it.

Many people enter the work of The Ageless Body with injuries, mostly muscular-skeletal: joints, hips, shoulders, back, and knees. Many people, primarily women, have abandoned their core and no longer feel a harnessed fire in their belly. This abandonment gives way to extra weight gain or inertia. And of course, for women, there are the profound changes that come with menopause, and for men the changes that come from lowered hormone levels. All of this puts people into grief about what is no longer, and fear about what further decline is yet to come.

When we begin the anti-aging work of Continuum we have to move with what is. Not some idealized sense of an athletic Adonis which we either can or cannot achieve, but a true acknowledgement of where we are right now, fit or flabby, in mourning or in joy, physically active or a certified couch potato. The first step is to recognize what is and move with it. Only when we can truly be where we are can we begin to gently and incrementally bump that up into increased strength, vitality or whatever your goals might be.

## UNWINDING CONSTRAINTS

We all have constraints – injuries, limitations, tight muscles, tight feelings, tight thoughts. Because we are primarily fluid beings, we are highly mutable. Like an octopus, we literally change shape according to context. However, most of us feel fixed and tightly bound. And this is where we must begin. Before we can enter into the fluid play of our being, before we can build strength or increase vitality, we need to unwind the constraints that confine us. Otherwise, we are imposing a new structure on top of something that is already being held too tightly and we merely create a constraint upon a constraint, making us vulnerable to injury.

The connective tissue, the fascia, is a thin sheath that wraps every muscle and every organ in the body. Bones, cartilage, ligaments and even blood are also connective tissue because they transport the fluids of the body. When the connective tissue becomes dehydrated, it contracts and becomes tight, even

rigid, and locks out nourishment to the tissue itself, where change can occur. When the connective tissue is tight, it binds the muscles and they cannot move freely. The whole body contracts and gets pulled in. We can see this in older people, the tendency for the body to be pulled in, and consequently the life itself gets pulled in.

What we must do first is soften and unwind the holding in the connective tissue so the entire body we can begin to open and invite in new possibilities of movement. We use spiraling movements to create this unwinding, because so many structures and tissues of the body are built upon the motif of the spiral; bone, muscle fiber bundles, the wrapping of fascia. We find that by moving in the same motif as these tissues, we cue them to open along the lines they are built. This seems to be most welcomed by the body, feels like wonderful release, and allows the body to begin to open according to its needs.

We accompany these spiraling movements with breath and sound that invite the connective tissue to soften and the fluids in the tissue to become more aqueous. By releasing the constraints, this new fluid awakening has more places to move and flow. This feels very free, flowing and juicy. Once you begin to unwind constraint, *a play of structure* can come in, long standing patterns can dissolve and be replaced with increased health.

## VITALITY

What is vitality but the active fluid exchange, elevated electrical charge, and heightened internal communication within the system? Sounds clinical, but really it translates to energy, spark, flow and glow. Vitality is created by increased levels of aliveness, and enhanced through novelty, innovation and neural nourishment.

The body is a conservative organism, putting necessary attention and resources only to what is needed most. Digestion takes priority after a meal, infection protection after a cut. But the functions of breathing and pumping the heart are constant and central, taking priority only if there is an increased exertion.

Continuum founder, Emilie Conrad says, “The brain is a pattern addict – where ever it can recognize a pattern it will. Do something once, twice, three times and the brain recognizes the pattern and then goes on automatic.” The brain wants to form patterns as a way of conserving energy.

However, neurologically speaking, repeated patterns are not interesting. They are energy conservative, but not interesting to the system. They don't create excitation, they create stasis. What is interesting is novelty. The nervous system thrives on novelty. New neurons fire, new connections are made. We can think of all input as information. Whenever new information comes in, it is like nourishing food for the nervous system. This feeding is the foundation of creativity, innovation, vitality and feeling fully alive.

Creativity and innovation occur when we are what physicists call “far from equilibrium”, off balance, out of sorts, out of the comfort zone, in new territory, disoriented. That is why people get inspired by foreign travel, and artists are driven by heartbreak and adversity – because it throws you out of the comfort zone into new perceptions, feeling and actions.

When a system does not circulate new information it becomes a closed system that keeps looping the same information and habits within itself, and eventually that system becomes smaller and smaller, is fed less and less, and will eventually wither and die. The unchecked aging process can be seen as a system that closes, becomes starved and eventually dies.

In Continuum, we introduce novelty to the nervous system by using varying rhythms and textures. Moving in unexpected ways, using intentional counterpoint, such as the play between staccato and sustained movement, we excite the nervous system.

Another way to stimulate variety is to become accustomed to orienting ourselves to different circumstances. In Continuum we do this through creating different relationships to gravity (sitting, standing, draping off to the side) as a way of not only creating decompression in the bones, joints and connective tissue, but also as a way to build a 360 degree orientation from which you can enter and function. Want to change your perspective? Try hanging upside down. Because the brain must learn to orient and right itself in every circumstance, intentional changes in the relationship to gravity can stimulate the brain and

strengthen our ability to be highly functional in numerous circumstances, accommodating rapid change.

Sometimes this kind of rapid change in internal and external circumstance can be disorienting and overwhelm the system. Depending upon one's need for control – these kinds of changes can feel too complex, confusing, overexerting. We discover, quite quickly, that beneath the surface of low vitality are underlying issues of fear, anxiety, depression, grief, false beliefs, and a whole array of emotions that are being suppressed. Once we start to increase excitation these issues become stimulated and can send people running out the door, or locking them from inside.

Therefore, in building vitality, we have to slowly increase the *capacity* for excitation and joy until the point where the increase feeds and does not overwhelm the system as it currently is. This gradual increase in capacity makes room for the play that is the primary component of vitality, versatility, and creativity.

I know from my life and work as a writer, director and teacher that creativity is a whole body adventure that requires physical stamina and agility to sustain its wild, curious and intimate explorations. In order to cultivate creativity we must both court the unknown and develop a dexterity of form that gives shape to what cannot yet be seen. This process necessitates elevating vigor and at the same time developing a harnessed strength to stay the course of focus, whether

physical, mental or emotional. All of life has more ease when we feel vital and strong. Anything seems possible.

## THE STRENGTH TO RIDE WITH CHANGE

In *Continuum* and *The Ageless Body* we are not only interested in the type of strength that can lift heavy weight and run a distance, but we are interested in a global strength that encompasses every aspect of life. Because in *Continuum* we use the primary and direct experience of sensation to lead us into new territory and effect change, we recognize that creating a strong body in the way we specifically do, will build a strength and stamina in all aspects of life.

Strength to hold a focus towards a goal, the stamina to endure uncertainty and the flexible strength required to ride our own emotions all come from building a *fluid strength* in the body.

All body strength must originate from the core. By the core I mean anything from the neck down and the genitals up. Returning to our embryological origins, our emerging form first developed as a central cord – brain, spine, emerging organs – and then sprouted arms and legs off of that cord. Our limbs still emerge out of what is now our core, and are supported by the core. A strong core holds up our structure, a weak one encourages collapse and compensating strain and injury.

In the process of aging many people abandon their core, or become frozen and locked in their core. With good reason. Having lived through the

slings and arrows of life, there are places within the core that have been vulnerable and we have responded with protection. Or because of set patterns, we have overstabilized in the core for support. When we abandon the core or are locked in or out of the core, there comes an over-reliance on the limbs to get us around. Without the support of the core, the limbs carry too much pressure and the joints, especially the shoulder, hips and knees, become vulnerable to injury.

We must enter the core to build strength. Ah, but there's the rub. Whenever we enter the core we touch breathing issues, back issues, digestion, sexuality, child birth, sexual abuse, heartbreak – there's so much vulnerability in the soft tissues of the organs of the core, as well as their corresponding emotions – no wonder people jump ship and never return.

So coming back to the idea of unwinding constraints, it is important to first unwind, open, and spread the tissue in the core before attempting to build core strength. If your pelvis is locked, you have back issues or hip issues, you become locked out of your abdomen and it becomes weak, which then contributes to the back problems. A harnessed, inhabited core that does not collapse is the key to sustaining vitality and strength.

Once the tissues have become softened and more open, then you can begin to incrementally engage in ways that both strengthen and lengthen the connective tissue and muscles in the core. It seems a paradox to soften in order to strengthen, but again in order to change tissue we have to penetrate

deeply, and we cannot penetrate deeply if we are locked out by stiff and tight tissue that is impermeable.

The harnessing or gathering that needs to come in to any strengthening exercise can come from the intention of initiating movement from the core rather than the limbs. For some people this harnessing of intention is as difficult as fifty sit-ups, but it is this very harnessing that creates the global strength that extends into all aspects of life.

When we take paradox and turn it into a fascinating interplay, when we play with the qualities of *fluid* and *strong* and find how one can be contained in the other – then we enter the art of whole body renewal, and we realize we can be it all, strong, supple, supported, at ease. The hard work comes in developing the ability to expand beyond the limiting ideas of what a body is, and what aging is through the willingness to have different experiences, with our bodies as our guide.

I want to conclude by saying that we all have earned the wisdom of our years. And now that we have spent half our lives finding out who we are and what we might be here to do, we feel compelled to carry that vision or continue the exploration. We all have work to do in this world, important work, and we need strong, vital bodies and lives in order to make our so dearly needed contributions. We are indeed making it up as we go along. Why not make up a

world of infinite possibility? Why not play in the juicy aliveness of an ageless body?