Forty years ago, as he ran across the towpath along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, repeating to himself "I am light, I am barely touching the ground, I am floating swiftly forward," John Casey spied a man, facedown, with his hands pressed beneath his belly.

As Casey knelt beside him, feeling for a pulse, the man opened his eyes and asked his "friend" for "a free sample of the coin of the realm." When Casey demurred, the man replied, "That's perfectly all right. You are a connoisseur of the protocols; I am a connoisseur of the vicissitudes....Keep running. Keep running - that's what keeps the world spinning."

Now a septuagenarian professor of English Literature at the University of Virginia and the author of "Spartina," which won the National Book Award in 1989, Casey is still running - and rowing and skiing. In the delightful essays in "Room For Improvement," he explains why he remains addicted to outdoor sports. Although they are important factors, neither health concerns nor vanity, he writes, are enough to keep him going.

Outdoor sports satisfy - and feed - his sense of adventure, competitiveness and connection to the physical world. And they provide a distinctive dimension to friendship, "a mostly worldless confidence and comradeship."

There's nothing new about Casey's "defense" of sports and exercise. But you're likely to find the exquisitely written accounts of his adventures informative and compelling, even if you are, as I am, a couch potato. Consider, for example, Casey's description of the rhythm, a state of grace called "swing," that he and his partner established during a 12.5-mile race sponsored by the Rivanna Rowing Club. At the catch, he remembers, "all four blades drop into the water in a single note - a short liquid chink - then the rising note off the stern as the wake gurgled faster during the drive.....Sometimes it can be like that."

"Room For Improvement" is also awash with practical suggestions. Borrowing from Kenneth Cooper's "The Aerobics Program For Total Well-Being," Casey specifies the amount of walking, running, swimming or bicycling you should shoot for each week.

And he shares his discovery that a four-mile jog or a brisk three-mile walk is the best cure for jet lag - and for the melancholy that accompanies it, which can sneak up on you when you are traveling alone and unpack your suitcase in a small room, your legs feeling "like 55-gallon oil drums."

On his 70th birthday, Casey biked to the gym, realized he forgot his pass and made another round trip. He clocked around 75 birthday kilometers that day, not counting a walk with his dog, because he stopped several times to allow her to sniff, stand and deliver.

Casey no longer celebrates his birthdays, he tells us, to make it more likely that he'll stay "somewhere between the predeterminations of the calendar and the folly of denying age altogether." He'll succeed, we can guess, as long as he keeps his oar in the water - and makes room for improvement.

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Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

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