

Love Your Fat Self

Rejecting fear, loathing, and sacrifice

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by Courtney E. Martin, from the book *Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: The Frightening New Normalcy of Hating Your Body*



[Image Gallery](#)

photo by Christina Alderman, FatGrrl.com

Gareth looks up from her crochet project just as the train pulls into the Brooklyn Jay Street station, where she must get off and switch across the platform for the A train to Manhattan. She stuffs the yarn into her new orange leather clutch and positions herself in front of the door, waiting for it to open.

“Yeah, that’s right, get off the train, you fat bitch!” yells a man sitting nearby. He looks to be in his 40s or 50s, dressed in jeans and a leather coat, possibly drunk but not obviously so. His words hang in the air like a noxious gas. A woman nearby gasps, clearly offended. An older man with white hair and a friendly, wrinkled face shakes his head silently. Two schoolkids in puffy jackets muffle their giggles with their hands.

It feels like it takes the doors a year to open. Gareth has heard this kind of thing so often that the effect is dulled at first. Later she will relive this moment in her head many times over, articulating the multitude of sassy responses she could have spat back, but ultimately this reflection will do nothing except give her the sharp stab of familiar pain. It is loneliness so deep that she must turn it into anger in order to survive.

Gareth is my best friend, and, yes, she is obese by clinical standards. She is also brilliant, kind, popular, magnetic, and in a loving relationship. She dresses up to go out on Saturday nights, dances her ass off, gets the occasional free drink from a hopeful guy. She is a powerhouse at the office, blazing through her daily tasks with efficiency and conscientiousness. She is an activist and an actor—mentoring a little girl with AIDS, marching in prochoice rallies, writing and performing monologues in off-Broadway productions.

There is nothing atypical about Gareth's biography. In fact, even at her present size, she is certainly not unusual: 66 percent of U.S. adults age 20 and older are overweight or obese. She grew up in Connecticut in a divorced, middle-class family, made it to New York City as soon as she could, excelled in college, moved to Brooklyn, and got an administrative job at a nonprofit. This is not a woman who has "checked out," contrary to what so many thin people assume about those who are fat. She doesn't sit at home and lament her size. She isn't passive or embarrassed. She certainly isn't lazy. She spends her time trying to make the world a better place and figuring out how the hell she fits into it.

On paper, she is a perfect girl. To the ignorant, naked eye, she is flawed.

Sizeism remains the only truly socially acceptable form of discrimination on the planet. We see living in a fat body as an insurmountable disability. Nearly a decade ago, the feminist therapist Mary Pipher wrote that "fat is the leprosy of the 1990s." Today fat is the death penalty of the 21st century. Skinny girls, counting their carrot sticks for lunch, can't imagine being lovable at that size, applying for a job at that size, even living at that size. When I asked 14-year-old Manhattanites how their lives would be different if they were fat, they were struck silent. After a few moments, one responded, "I would be dead."

Paradoxically, we as a society make it a catastrophe to be fat, but we have little awareness of the pain of a woman like Gareth's internal world. We dramatize fatness through news segments on the obesity epidemic, but our awareness of the emotional and psychological pain of fatness remains virtually nonexistent.

We are deathly afraid of fat. In some ways, we should be. According to the World Health Organization, there are 1 billion overweight and 300 million obese adults around the globe. Fatness is linked to an increased risk for heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and some forms of cancer. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), health care costs for treating diseases associated with obesity are estimated at more than \$100 billion a year and rising, just within the United States (inexplicably, the NIH spends just 2 percent of its annual budget on obesity research). The physical, psychological, and economic implications of widespread obesity are undeniably frightening.

There is evidence, though, that our approach to fatness is as unhealthy as fatness itself. In an *ELLEgirl* poll of 10,000 readers, 30 percent said they would rather be thin than healthy. Dieting is ineffective 95 percent of the time. That means, in America alone, we pump some \$40 billion a year into a crapshoot industry with only a 5 percent chance of payoff. Besides being hard on our pocketbooks, dieting is hard on our bodies and hard on our psyches. Many women are pushed to use diet pills that damage their organs; 23-year-old Janet admits, "Even after my friend had a ministroke from taking ephedra, I sometimes wonder if I can search the Internet and find some on the black market. Crazy, right?"

Political scientist J. Eric Oliver, an expert in obesity, argues in his 2005 book *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* that the health risks of

obesity have been grossly exaggerated. Being fat, he maintains, is not equivalent to being unfit. Fitness, not weight, is actually the most accurate measure of a person's health and life expectancy. Even a group of researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention acknowledge that "evidence that weight loss improves survival is limited."

Thirty-five percent of those who diet go on to yo-yo diet, dragging their bodies through a cycle of weight gains and losses; 25 percent of those who diet develop partial- or full-syndrome eating disorders. As the mindfulness expert Susan Albers writes: "The dieting mind-set is akin to taking a knife and cutting the connection that is your body's only line of communication with your head." There is little hope for long-term improvement in health when this vital line is severed.

In fact, studies show that prolonged weight loss is more often the result of psychological work. In a two-year study conducted by nutrition researchers at the University of California, Davis, behavior change and self-acceptance were far more effective in achieving long-term health improvements in obese women than America's most lucrative scam: dieting.

Conflating obesity with laziness or stupidity is an inaccurate habit of linking a physical trait, in this case fatness, with personality. This is equivalent to believing that all smokers or anorexics are incompetent. Just the fact that someone is genetically predisposed to fatness and struggles with the complex psychological implications of food and body image does not disqualify her from being brilliant, talented, and effective. As obvious as this sounds, many of the health professionals I spoke to about this issue aired an unmistakable tone of disdain for fat patients. While they were able to empathize with women who undereat, the idea of overeating sent them into a dispassionate laundry list of how to decrease input and increase output—as if people were machines.

As a society, we seek answers: black-and-white declarations, either-or cures. Fatness is not so simple. Gareth is fat because she has a genetic predisposition to fat, because she grew up with a father who sells chocolate for a living and often showed his affection through tarts and candy bars, because her mother—however well-intentioned she was—restricted Gareth's food and, as a result, made love feel conditional. She is fat because she is fascinated by food, generously cooks for others, and enjoys a good hamburger. She is fat because she refuses to live a watered-down life—cutting out carbs or sugars or meat, becoming one of those difficult dinner guests or boring picnic companions—so that she can be thin. She is fat because, like so many of the rest of us, she sometimes uses food to fill an emotional void. She is fat because she lives in an age when advertising preys on every potential craving, insecurity, and discomfort.

Most programs designed to curb obesity neglect the complicated causes of fat. Janell Lynn Mensinger, a psychology professor and expert on both eating disorders and obesity in women, has been continually frustrated by medical doctors' culturally ignorant, gender-blind, and usually unsuccessful interventions to reduce obesity. "There is such an emphasis on the body as this biological organism that must be controlled in a completely

medical way,” she explains. “Emotions get completely pushed aside because most physicians have very little psychological training.”

At a recent conference on pediatric obesity, Mensinger sat next to a tiny black exercise physiologist who was lamenting the low success rate of programs meant to teach children to maintain a healthy weight. Mensinger recalls that “she segued right into talking about how she used to be a size nine and now she is a size five, thanks to two hours a day of rigorous exercise. She acted like size nine was an atrocity! And this is [a person with whom] obese children from poor backgrounds are supposed to identify?”

There is only one rational reason to fear fatness: health risks. The other reasons, which play unconscious and insidious roles in our negative perception of fat people, are profoundly American. Obesity is rampant in the heartland of America, in the sprawling suburbs of the Midwest and the South, the farm towns of Texas. But it is rarely admitted that our struggle over the meaning of fat is at the heart of our national identity.

Our all-or-nothing nation is built on foundations of fantasy. Our imaginations are harnessed to America’s favorite adolescent fantasy: how much prettier, thinner, richer, and more successful we will be one day. This perpetual American daydream is written in the language of “somedays.” Someday whispers us to sleep at night, gets us through a boring workday, makes our little lives bearable. The hundreds of ads the average American sees every day brainwash us into believing that we need more shiny, new things and, of course, food—glorious piles of chocolate chip cookies, decadent ice cream, burgers the size of elephants. “Someday” soothes insecurities, numbs discomfort, and keeps perfect girls running obediently in the hamster wheel of preoccupation with their weight. Someday we will be thin. Translation: Someday we will be happy, loved, and powerful.

But even those precious few who get to this someday destination aren’t happy or better. If you live fat in your head, then you are fat. If you believe you are unattractive, you will experience the world as an unattractive woman. If you hound yourself about everything you put in your mouth, you won’t enjoy eating. Regardless of the number on the scale, if the number inside your head is large, insurmountable, and loaded with meaning, then you will feel weighed down by its implications.

This is the heart of the matter: A starving person can ache just as deeply inside a thin body. Our dissatisfaction is never, at its deepest, about our bodies. This is why fat women and thin women often experience the world in similar ways. If a thin woman feels inadequate and “thinks fat,” she may endure less hate coming from the outside in than a fat woman does, but just as much criticism and sadness from the inside out. Likewise, if a woman of any size is able to stop her negative self-talk and accept herself, she may experience the world with a little peace of mind.

Gareth is onstage, the shadow of her voluptuous silhouette on the wall behind her. I am watching it, instead of her, during her monologue, because it’s too hard to look her in the

eye when she is speaking such brave and brutal truths. Her words start out celebratory but quickly become accusatory:

In a way it is easy to be proud of my body. I'm proud of what it does for me and what it can do for other people. But every time I get dressed I think about how other people will see my body and I can't help but hear the words "fat bitch" in my head. I've been hearing them most of my life. It's as if people feel the need to make a judgment on my character as well as my body all at once. And it works. It makes me feel huge and obtrusive and grotesque, deformed.

It's true. I am fat. I am not attractive to most people. Most of the time, I am not attractive to myself. Where does that leave me? Angry with myself? Yes. Angry with society? No.

I think that's a cop-out, and it's not a cop-out for me. It's a cop-out for the people who judge my size. It's like, at this point, we all know that the media, old white men, corporations, the fashion industry, and all sorts of bad people or things out there shape the way we view ourselves and others. Okay, I get it. But don't you think, at some point, knowing all this, we should start taking some responsibility for our thoughts and words? I mean, isn't that the point of all this higher education, all this enlightenment?

As she reaches the end, she starts screaming her questions at the stunned audience: "So what's going on, people? Why do I still feel like crap? Huh? Who can tell me? Do you know? Can someone please explain it to me?"

I can almost hear the audience members' brains buzzing with rationalizations: But fat is unhealthy. I don't date fat women, but I have nothing against them. Why is she complaining? She's one of those beautiful fat women. When is this going to be over? It's torture.

Gareth pulls herself together, takes a deep breath, and says calmly, "I know what you are all thinking, and it's OK," then ends, cool as ice, "You want the fat bitch to shut up," and struts out of the spotlight and off the stage.

Gareth is beautiful, especially tonight. She's dressed in a knee-length black skirt, cut in uneven triangles on the bottom. Her shirt is a rainbow of reds, oranges, and yellows—as fiery as her monologue—cut low, revealing the tops of her breasts, freckled with beauty marks. Her eyes are outlined in dark pencil, making them seem even bigger than they are, even more striking. The spotlight bathes her in an ethereal light.

But most of the audience members instead focus on her anger. They are not used to being called on the carpet for their judgment of obesity. They feel attacked, misunderstood, perhaps defensive. They have fat friends. They aren't narrow-minded, just concerned about the obesity epidemic. They thought that was the right way to be. They feel unmoored, the first phase of a new consciousness.

Gareth's monologue provokes a storm of self-reflection. I would never say anything rude to a fat man or woman about his or her weight, but would I think it? I preach tolerance, but would I consider dating someone who is overweight? When I compliment Gareth on her new haircut, is there a part of me that feels relieved that she is undeniably beautiful despite being fat? Do I identify her anger more quickly than I would a thinner friend's? Do I patronize her by complimenting her eyes, her sense of humor, her determination—as if the rest of her doesn't exist?

Just as racism is not primarily about frightened white women clutching their purses but about the seemingly mundane, unconscious voices in our heads—Why do black girls have to be so loud? That Latina woman is probably a great nanny. This new Asian guy is probably really smart—sizeism is not about the drunken man who screams “fat bitch” at Gareth on the subway as much as it is about the march of hateful inner monologues: That girl would be so pretty if she would just lose some weight. I wonder what's wrong with her, must be lazy. This fat bitch is taking up more than her share of the bus seat.

When I started to pay attention to the voices in my own head, I was frankly horrified. It wasn't only fat women on whom I unconsciously commented, it was thin women, too: That skinny girl looks like such a bitch; I bet she's vacuous and vain. That woman shouldn't be eating that muffin. I feel sorry for that little girl; she's going to be lonely if she doesn't lose some weight.

Seriously humbled by my own judgmental nature, I realized that thinking this way about other people creates an inner climate of suspicion. If I think this way about her, what is she thinking about me? Like a chronic gossip suddenly aware that other people probably talk about her behind her back too, I woke up to the fact that I was sealing my own fate of mercilessly judging and being judged, even if my participation was unspoken.

That understanding is Gareth's gift to me. It is a daily struggle not to listen to the voices—the furtive whispers, the outdated instincts—that try to slip under the radar. But it makes me feel more generous. It makes me feel less scrutinized myself. Sometimes I sit on a subway car and look at every woman purposefully and lovingly—as if she were my mother or my best friend. It is breathtaking how beautiful they all are when I see like this.

Courtney E. Martin is a writer, teacher, and speaker living in Brooklyn, New York; www.courtneyemartin.com. Excerpted from her book Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: The Frightening New Normalcy of Hating Your Body. Copyright © 2007 by Courtney E. Martin. Reprinted by permission of Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.