

Post-Surgery = Post-Community?

Margo

I began wanting to be a boy around the age of four when I realized the limitations of being a girl - an older woman in my neighborhood was aghast that my mother let me run around with no shirt on in the summer. She gave my mother so much grief that I was never allowed to go shirtless outside again. At the time I had no understanding of why the neighbor was upset - my chest looked no different than the other kids. My mother told me that eventually I would grow breasts like hers. Even if that was true I couldn't understand why it mattered since I did not have breasts then!

I always liked boy's clothes. My mother gave me homemade short haircuts and I ran around in 501's and white t-shirts at home. At school there was a nightmare dress code and until 5th grade I had to wear a dress or skirt to school. I absolutely HATED it.

When I was out in the world with my mother people usually thought I was her son. I loved that. Once, when I was older, at the flea market with my dad, a couple of girls were acting really funny - they were looking at me and giggling (but it wasn't the laughing that I sometimes got at school.) I looked at him questioningly and he explained that they thought I was a boy and they were flirting with me. What a piece of heaven! I often thought about this episode.

Someone made fun of my size when I was in kindergarten. Looking back on the photos it is odd because I wasn't even big. Tall, but not fat. My mother was fat and I loved what she looked like. It didn't occur to me that fat wasn't acceptable until I got messages about being fat from kids at school. My mother was tormented about her size and was often on a cottage-cheese-and-grapefruit-type diet. When I started to get big she'd encourage me to diet with her.

As a child I did not hate my fat body even though I was teased about it, but when I developed breasts and got my period I felt that my body had betrayed me. There was some point where I wished fervently, numerous times a day, that I would transform into a boy. I never did that about being fat. Which isn't to say that I never had that desire - it was just that gender was a much more important priority.

In high school I became a jock. With that transformation I felt wonderful physically even though I was big. I was a really good athlete, but one of my coaches was always nagging me to lose weight and giving me diet tips. I overheard the coach from a rival team telling her how great I was and I heard her disgusted reply about how good I could be if only I lost some weight.

Being fat, being a gender airball, and being racially mixed are very intertwined for me. I walk through the world feeling very exposed as QUEER but depending where I am, even in the S.F. Bay Area where there are a lot of very gender savvy people, I am frequently read as male. It blows my mind how much better I am treated as a "fat guy" than as a "fat woman." But remember that I am not a fat feminine woman - so the contempt that people have for fat women is also shrouded in the contempt that there is for butches or women who do not gleefully embrace their gender role. My favorite way to suck up this privilege is with waitresses who think I'm a big guy who needs big portions.

When I'm out with my lovely fem wife, especially if she is all dressed up, there are times that we are taken for being straight. There was one time we were on vacation and I was wearing a big down vest that covered any evidence of my birth gender. We were holding hands and the oddest thing happened - all of these very conventional looking straight couples kept smiling at us - something that doesn't usually happen. We are familiar with stares, look-aways, guffaws, and scowls, but these people were looking at us like, "Oh what a cute fat couple."

If I were less big I think I would pass as male even more, thus raking in even more gender privilege. I also have to say here that I can rake that in because, although I am Latin, I am also very light-skinned. If I were as dark as my father and if I had his accent, people might do other things - like check their wallets. A dark-skinned friend who transitioned now has people cross the street and act scared of him.

At my present age of 45 I try to just be myself as much as possible. Years ago someone was painting me into a mural and I noticed they made me not look very fat - I told the artist not to be afraid to depict me as I really look. When I envision myself smaller it has to do with increased mobility or fitting into things that are uncomfortable like airplane seats. I feel very lucky and privileged that I can mostly find clothes that I really like and can afford to buy. I some-

Four Writers Tackle Questions of Weight, Gender & Transitions

times wonder if gender would be easier if I transitioned. I know that being totally male (or as male as I could be) wouldn't be quite right either in the way that being female isn't. It is hard for me to sometimes separate who I really am with how I am treated in the world. If there were more tolerance in general for the concept of gender to be fluid in presentation and action I think that I would spend very little time dwelling on the issue. And, frankly I'm somewhat tired of it. If I didn't have to navigate bathrooms and stares and issues of safety because of gender I think I could have a very leisurely approach to my identity. I feel like I spend more time than necessary worrying about how I will be perceived and accepted in the world at large and in the dyke, queer and FTM communities, all of which I feel a part of or at least on the border of.

I try to put myself as much as possible in places where I can just BE.

I think I gravitate to people who are like me in some way - a lot of my friends are fat, many are butch or butch/fem couples, most are queer, many are POC or mixed.

I came close to crossing a weight line ten years ago when I was having trouble with my gall bladder. I was very afraid of having surgery and I tried everything to avoid that - acupuncture, nutrition, herbs, etc. One of the other things I did was exercise a lot and I ended up losing about 70 or 80 pounds over about six months - probably one of the worst things I could have done for my gall bladder. I was feeling good from the exercise but kept having horrible, extremely painful attacks that would last 24 hours and would come with extreme nausea. I can't tell you how many people told me how great I looked. Of course I couldn't just let that be, so I would usually let them know that I was sick. I just hate the "you look great, have you lost weight" thing.

I cross the gender line constantly and reside on the border most times. I think this border is comfortable for me because I live there in race, too. I am racially queer or ambiguous - sometimes a chameleon. When with Latins I am perceived as Latin, when with Jews, a Jew.

I also feel much more comfortable at my size and being in a fat marriage around people from lower class origins. The higher the class level, the more uncomfortable about both fat and gender stuff I become, even if the folks are queer.

I like looking queer. I enjoy being public about who I am

- I know it makes some people uncomfortable but at least I know where I stand - I never have to worry about what people will think when I come out to them.



Nomy Lamm

When I was a kid I would rehearse awards speeches and give interviews in my head while predicting my future achievements. One of these was given on the occasion of imagining myself, after years of hard work and failing - finally, effortlessly, naturally - losing weight. Becoming not fat. Not too thin. Curvy. I pictured the hot outfit I would wear: cut off jean shorts with fishnets and garters. I would be hot and empowered in my sexuality. I imagined saying "Even though I'm not fat anymore, I will always feel like a fat girl." A valorous sentiment. Staying true to my roots.

At age 14 I could not imagine being empowered, sexually or otherwise, in a fat body, but I still knew that there was something about my perspective as a fat girl that was valuable. Not so different really from the valuable perspective that I got from being Jewish (in the Pacific northwest), or having a fake leg. It's the sensitivity that comes with the daily struggle of trying to feel at home in a world that wasn't built for me.

When you grow up fat, you pick up on certain vibes from people that may be invisible to others. You feel it in a specific way when you get ignored and your skinny friend gets smothered with attention. You know that you have to work like hell to get a tenth of the options afforded to even the most insecure thin girl. You know that those girls enjoy having you around because you make them feel more attractive. You know it and you resent it and you still play the game because you see when and where your presence is considered valuable, and those are the roles that are available.

After years of being a self-hating fat teenager, I was lucky enough to find a small community of fat friends who I could relate to. It makes such a huge fucking difference to

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have allies and cohorts. It meant that we existed, we could reflect ourselves to each other, and validate our right to be fat, to not want to lose weight, to make our own choices about how we treat ourselves. To eat "like pigs" when we wanted to. To take up space. To say the word "fat" in mixed company, to say it with pride. To laugh about it sometimes. To share clothes and reaffirm each other's hotness.

A friend of mine put it clearly, when talking about a thin nutrition teacher who used herself as proof that anyone can be thin. "THERE IS SUCH A THING AS A FAT PERSON!" my friend cried indignantly. Why the constant assumption that we can or should lose weight? That thin is a better way to be? That we would be happier that way? I am so grateful to have the space in the world to ask these questions. I am grateful to the people who ask them with me, and the people who listen without trying to brainwash us in response.

By creating a community that provided visibility and reflection, my fat punk queer friends and I managed to change the culture around us. Fat became a seen, recognized and desired body type within certain communities. We created a new aesthetic and a new social dynamic around it. Sure, anyone could argue that fat was ugly and unhealthy if they wanted to, but they would be challenged by our presence, not to mention our vocal response to that kind of judgmental bullshit.

It's always a shock when one of the core fat folks in my life loses weight and is no longer perceived as a fat person. It's shocking for me because at least part of our connection to each other has to do with being fat and then suddenly that's gone, and it's shocking for them because they suddenly get treated so different by the world. Everyone wants to tell them how good they look and find out how they did it. I find myself wrestling with my own emotions around it. Are they still my ally? Do I trust them? The whole power balance changes, the person who lost the weight feels on-display and isolated, and I feel the projections of their weight loss on my own fat body, which I work very hard to love and care for.

Why does this keep happening? It took me so long to accept that diets don't work and that thin isn't a goal. That I am a fat person, and fat is how I'm going to live my life, so I better make the most of it. It's been hard to watch so many of the fat people around me become thin and lose the status of visible ally. Their bodies changed for different reasons—depression, hormones, yoga, etc. In every case the weight loss seemed like a surprise or side-effect. I will never know for sure if part of their weight loss is not a manifestation of their internalized fat phobia, but I know that if I trusted my friends before when they were fat, then I should trust them now.

What is it that makes me trust a person anyway? It doesn't

mean we will always be together, we will always agree, we will stay this way forever. Trust means, I know you are a person who works to spread light in the world, and you are going to be that person no matter how you change. Of course there is the inner conflict of feeling betrayed when my fat friends "cross over" or whatever, a similar sentiment that I often hear from older lesbians who have "lost" friends and lovers to transsexuality. My response to that has always been, what are you losing? That person still exists and still needs support to be strong and stand up for themselves. And you need them too.

If ever you thought that you were just imagining that women get treated differently than men, ask a person who has been both to describe what it feels like to have your reality shift in that way. Likewise, if you ever doubted that fat people get treated different than thin people, ask someone who's made that transition. One of my best friends basically turned into a bitter bitch when she realized how different people treated her as a not-fat-person. "I don't have to do anything, people just automatically think I'm interesting now," she told me. "It's ridiculous, it makes me hate everyone. People really are as stupid and shallow as you're afraid they are."

I believe it. People often have a way of meeting expectations. Which is why I have to believe that these former fatasses are still allies. They still know the experience of being a fat person. They still see the oppression and prejudice and they still know that it's fucked. It is up to them to look at whatever privilege they now have, and figure out what to do with it. It's just like anything else—be honest about your experiences and about who you are. Stand up for the people you love. Know that we have your back if you have ours. This should be simple for strong-hearted creatures. And I have to believe that mine is a community of strong hearts.

Fat people are not going away. People's bodies change all the time. Sometimes we can make sense of it, and sometimes not. Sometimes it hurts. After ten years of being a fat activist, I realize that there is no perfect point of self-acceptance to work towards, and that kind of linear goal-oriented thinking is tied into the dieting mindset. We play into it all the time, by measuring our stories against each other, by perpetuating the idea that once we "get over" whatever is keeping us fat, we will become thin. By perpetuating the idea among ourselves that being fat is a terrible fate. The time is now to empower ourselves, regardless (and inclusive) of our identities.

Time to live,
time to act,
our bodies are perfect right now,
let's give them the lives they deserve.



Weight, Gender & Transitions

Sondra Solovay

The town where I grew up had one elevator. We only needed one since we only had one three-story building. On our eighth grade field trip to the nearest big city -- a three and a half hour drive -- many of my friends got to ride an escalator for the first time. Against this backdrop I explored gender and body image.

The look sported by kids in my church town was totally androgynous: levis, pastel polo shirts, and Nikes. I wore satin smoking jackets, men's suits with wingtips and spats, and lots of black. My gender exploration was not about fitting in and being average, it was about expressing myself and being fabulous. Sensing something queer was afoot, townsfolk called me "Boy George." I thought he was rather dull. Church pamphlets warned that my black clothing was proof I had turned to Satan, but my mother was always supportive of my clothing artistry. I remember her comment on my head-to-toe menswear: "You can get away with that -- you have a very feminine face." Her words did not sting, the way they would have for many of my tranny friends, but they stuck with me, a marker of privilege that I did not realize I needed in order to play with gender.

My expression of body size was a different matter. It was all about starving myself in the desperate attempt to fit in. I pursued it with all my heart, but I never made it. I dreamed of being the person the doctor told to eat more, but even when I was eating nothing at all, I never got that advice.

When I look at pictures of myself as a child I see a thin person. When the pictures were taken I saw a fat person. Both opinions are correct.

The lines between fat and thin, male and female, like so many other divisions, are cultural creations: Artificially erected borders with a very real impact. They can be a lot of fun, but they can also be very dangerous. A doctor, looking at the number on the scale, may condemn a child to weight loss surgery and a life time of complications (if the child is lucky enough to survive the surgery at all.) It is not unlike the measurements made by doctors holding an intersex infant, where a fraction of an inch determines which sex the child will be raised as and condemns many to a lifetime of hormones, surgeries and struggle. Cultural fictions are used to justify medical interventions.

I stopped trying to change my body. I recognize coercion

when I see it. The right to lead a happy life including equal access to civil rights should not be denied on the basis of weight, gender identity, or sex.

We have become accustomed to thinking about both weight and gender/sex as linear creatures where male and female, like fat and thin, are at opposite extremes. My friend Dylan Wade, brilliant co-creator of the Transgender Law Center, writes about a different concept: A gender galaxy. In the gender galaxy each person inhabits their own unique gender: separate stars in a galaxy, rather than points on a line. Similarly, our body does not express itself numerically, but rather through an individual, unique, and dynamic dance of size, shape, weight, proportion and composition.

Male, female, fat, thin are matters of context and perspective, not rigid definition. When you get close to the artificial borders they break down. A woman who wears a size 6 dress is fat and faces weight discrimination at work where everyone else wears a size 0 or a size 2. A 400 pound person is thin when the viewer weighs 650 pounds.

An acquaintance of mine had two surgeries and made headlines some time ago: "How a fat heterosexual man became a thin lesbian." This is the place where weight and gender differ and where "being post-op" has drastically different implications for our community.

To be out and transgender is to move away from societal norms: to do something that society says you cannot do. Some people use hormones and surgery, some do not. The effect is to disrupt artificial, static notions of gender. To play with gender. To fuck with gender. And it is no accident that that a transgender person gets legal protection in exchange for swearing allegiance to and reinforcing the artificial borders of the gender system. Imagine an FTM who has been outed suing over employment discrimination: "I had a girl's body but even when I was a child I played with trucks and guns -- I knew inside I was a boy." He will win. In comparison, the trans person who likes to come to work sometimes in boy drag, sometimes in girl drag, and claims to be neither a man nor a woman will get no protection from the courts.

Where size is concerned, being fat is the transgressive act. Letting your body express itself at its natural size, refusing to obsess over body size -- these are transgressive acts. Being a thin person who dates fat people, who fights for fat rights, that is transgressive. Expending effort, time, money, or having surgery to become thin is not transgressive -- that is moving toward, and not away from, societal norms.

Moving from a place of oppression to a place of privilege is challenging. My childhood friend went from a fat teen to a thin adult and was disgusted and embittered by the difference in how she was treated. She was desired and respected

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in her thin body, ignored and despised in her fat body.

A formerly fat friend of mine confided to me she felt bad about fat people being forced to buy two airline seats, but felt physically uncomfortable sitting next to fat people on the plane. Another friend transitioned from F to M, bolstering his "M" by putting up nudie pics of thin women at work. A different FTM friend of mine liposuctioned his ass. Gender, fat, sexism -- they run together in complex ways. I want my friends to be happy and safe - fat, thin, trans, not-trans, whatever. Even though I understand that it's not fun to fly squished, that a nudie pic means bonding and even safety at work, that lipo gives more stereotypically masculine contours, these actions and attitudes have an impact beyond the personal. They uphold those artificial borders. They say that fat people, not too-small-airline-seats, are the problem; that "real men" have sexist attitudes; and that fat men can't be masculine.

I envision a world where our attitude, more than the snapshot of our current identity, gives us membership in community. I respect the work of activists before me and am so grateful that they shaped the current community. I hear people expressing loss, pain and judgment when butch dykes transition. I hear the loss, pain, and judgment when fat activists have weight loss surgery. The feelings may be similar, but the acts are not the same and the impact on community is different.

When a person has been part of the dyke community and they transition. I want them to continue to have access to the community that they helped build. I don't want to steal their work by virtue of my privilege as a non-trans person, and that is what I do when I accept their work and then exclude them. Purely selfishly, I want to continue to benefit from having an expanded community and broader gender options.

When a person has been part of the fat community and then becomes thin I still want them as a community member if they uphold fat ideals. Fat community comes in all shapes and sizes and there is plenty of room for allies. But, like a person who "converts" to heterosexuality, if the attitude is one of "triumph" it does not matter how the weight loss happened - surgery, dieting, Yoga, vegetarianism, exercise, accident, whatever -- that attitude is fatphobic. Formerly fat people must really educate themselves and understand that pursuing weight loss as a goal reinforces the very thing that oppresses fat people -- the idea that people can and should change their weight. (This is the backbone of decisions that take fat kids away from

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their parents, that force kids to undergo weight loss surgery, that allow employers to deny jobs, and that support social ostracism.) There may be times when the pursuit of weight loss is a reasonable choice. I try not to judge such a personal decision, but to acknowledge the consequences for the community.

I want a world where we have more gender choices than just two, where we oppose sexism, fatphobia, racism, ageism, ableism, homophobia and all the other isms no matter what our sex, gender, weight, race, age, mobility, and sexual orientation. I want a world where FTM fags are free to have a fat tushy and where one airplane ticket will be sufficient to fly that fat tushy to its destination.



Marilyn Wann

Lately, whenever some narrow-minded opinion about weight invades my little personal terrain of precious lived experience, my brief time in the quick, I want to yell, "My body is non-negotiable."

Non-negotiable embodiment makes all of those weight-hating words -- cruel jibes, greedy ads, pseudo-health advice, butt-bemoaning small talk -- sound like the wheedlings they really are. "Why don't you wanna conform? Just one teensy bit...pleez?" Fuck no. There's nothing in it for me. I know better. No matter how they wheedle, a carrot is a kind of stick.

For example: When I try on clothes, the authority in that little room is not some piece of fabric, my fat ass is the authority. If the pants don't fit, the problem is in the pants, not in my fat ass. Fat Ass Authority is a useful motto for all sorts of situations, fashion-based or otherwise.

Being non-negotiable: A woman in my neighborhood, who only knows me by sight, walked past me on her way to the corner store the other day. She said, "You're dieting!" I thought she said, "You're dying!" Uh, no. "Yes you are, you're dieting," she said louder, so I would share her glee. I said, "No, I'm not. I don't do that." She kept pushing her nasty little compliment on me as we walked. I said, "I don't diet. I would never do something so stupid." She tried again, "No, You look thinner. I can tell." I said, "No, I'm not!" If my neighbor wants to hit me with her carrot, I don't go along with that abuse.

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I don't care what you weigh. I don't care if you happen to lose weight. I don't care if you gain weight. I care if *you* care about your weight. Because I think your body is non-negotiable.

I was talking with Pat Lyons, RN, the other day, about death. (Pat co-authored the excellent book "Great Shape: the First Fitness Guide for Large Women" years ago and it's still in print.) She's been working in hospice care, recently. We got to talking about how Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages of grieving also describe the way people respond to being fat. (Given the surveys that find people would rather die than get fat, it's not much of a stretch.) Sure, there's some denial and anger, but as a culture, we're stuck in the bargaining stage. Being fat is a kind of code for all the bad, painful, scary things that can happen to a person, including death. The bargaining stage relies on the spurious belief that if we just drink this protein shake or follow this diet or avoid this carb or run this mile or do these Pilates crunches or eat enough broccoli or Chicken Caesar salads or lose this weight and make the number on the bathroom scale conform, that nothing bad will ever happen to us and we'll never die. If we get all those bargaining balls juggling at once, we'll be guaranteed heaps of money and sex and happiness, in perpetuity. That's some carrot stick. It leaves an ugly bruise.

Refusing to negotiate with terrorists: I attended a panel discussion at UC-Berkeley last year. The speakers were all people who believe, more or less, that fat is a Big Problem that needs a Solution. Kelly Brownell and Marion Nestle and Joan Dye Gussow spoke, moderated by Michael Pollan. Joan was the most sane about food and about fatness, of the bunch. The others were quite happy to advance their arguments for local/seasonal/organic food production by vilifying fat people and the epidemic of our existence (Because, of course, if no one ate fast food, there'd be no fat people -- yeah, right.) As a matter of social justice, I welcome the time when such arguments will be made on their won merits (which are certainly convincing enough, without mention of fat bogeymen.) The worst of the bunch in my opinion is Kelly Brownell, because he knows better, and he does it anyway. I confronted Brownell during the Q&A about how his medicalization of weight fuels the very real discrimination that fat people experience. His response was a paragon of doublespeak that claimed he and I were on the same side. I confronted him one-on-one after the talk and said, "Fat people are the target of a witch hunt right now. As long as I'm fat and you're piling logs on the fire, we're NOT on the same side." That's when he told me he imagined fat people would be grateful to have weight defined as a disease -- fat people aren't to be blamed, just pitied, for our condition. What condition is that, Kelly? Oppression! Every time I hear an O-word -- "overweight," "obese" -- I know fat oppression is involved. Every time I hear the F-word -- "fat" -- I know there's a chance to break free, to refuse a hate-based bargain.

I am heartbroken every time I learn that a fat person is negotiating with their precious body. I do understand it. These are dark times. People do what they think it takes to survive. I understand trying to pass. I have compassion. I also want nothing to do with it. There's a whole big world out there that will applaud and approve every time a fat person tries to negotiate. (Take my stomach in exchange for love? Take my health in exchange for a job? Take my ability to conceive children in exchange for a nice, new wardrobe? Take my joy in food, in exchange for nothing.) Sure, the game isn't always rigged, the house doesn't always win...otherwise, we wouldn't keep coming back for more "cure." There's a before-and-after photo: but what about after that?

Am I just being a bitch, withholding my approval from my fat sisters and brothers who feel themselves negotiable where I don't?

The latest "cures" are deadly. 1 in 50 die from weight-loss surgery in the first month, post-op. Chronic malnutrition and complications kill many more. Those who survive are all sales pitch about it (even when they're suffering horribly). I call it what it is: surgical starvation, stomach amputation, digestive bonsai, gut lobotomy, mechanically induced anorexo-bulimia...fat oppression. The gastric band? American Stomach Binding. The new gastric "pacemaker"? An internal cattle prod. Eww.

Proof they negotiate in bad faith: When my hero at the CDC, Katherine Flegal, did methodologically unassailable research on weight and mortality this spring and found that tens of thousands fewer people are dying above BMI 25 than below BMI 25 (the alleged magic cutoff beyond which people are "overweight"/"obese"), none of the "obesity" researchers -- who claim to care about fat people's health -- were happy about the good news. They were angry and argued energetically that it couldn't be true, that fat people really are dying in droves...otherwise, they won't get funded to research the "cure."

Am I just being a bitch, withholding my approval from my fat sisters and brothers who feel themselves negotiable where I don't? Maybe. I see it as self-defense. My body is non-negotiable, but I have to defend that certitude every day against the wheedling. I'm also working every day for a world where no one need negotiate with oppression. Hanging out with people who have weight-loss goals (negotiators) would just bum me out too much for me to be able to carry on, personally or politically. Obviously, what you do with your body is your choice, over which I have no control and in which I want no part. I won't get in your way. Please don't get in mine. 