

FAT AIR

In early 1995, for reasons that no one remembers, three friends, all fat activists in Massachusetts, sat down to tape an interview. The interviewer was writer Susan Stinson. The interviewed activists were me - Judith Stein -and Meridith Lawrence. We were a lesbian couple who had been together for 12 years at that time. The final interview was called "Fat Air." Now, twenty-six years later, the interview is being offered as a moment in the history of the East Coast Fat Liberation movement.

In the fifteen years or so before the time of the interview, there was an active fat lesbian community in Boston. We organized social activities, clothing swaps, fat swims, going to dances together -- all ways to challenge the existing mentality of the time – that fat women were deeply flawed and should really hate ourselves and certainly should be dieting. We definitely should not go out into the world. And most especially, we should not go out into the world together.

Fat Liberation in Boston sponsored a number of activities to spread our message. We believed that being fat was fine; that the medical community misrepresented their own research about the supposed dangers of being fat; that it was possible and desirable to have a wonderful life in the body you had. We held workshops at women's music festivals; we organized a benefit fashion show that included fat models. We went out to eat together, ordered everything we wanted to eat and ate it with relish. We shared ideas about how to choose to ignore or respond to the hostility and stares we incurred. We wrote articles for local gay and feminist newspapers, commenting on fat oppression where we saw it. We distributed the groundbreaking materials from the Fat Underground.¹ We did everything we could to spread the word and support fat women learning to love themselves.

¹ Sara Golda Bracha Fishman, "The Fat Underground was active in Los Angeles throughout the decade of the 1970s. Feminist in perspective, it asserted that American culture fears fat because it fears powerful women, particularly their sensuality and their sexuality. The Fat Underground employed slashing rhetoric: Doctors are the enemy. Weight loss is genocide. Friends in the mainstream-sympathetic academics and others in the early fat rights movement-urged them to tone it down, but ultimately came to adopt much of the Fat Underground's underlying logic as their own." *Life In The Fat Underground*, Radiance Online, Winter 1998.

Most of us in the movement as I knew it at that time were white lesbians. We were very aware of how fat-hatred, misogyny and homophobia merged into one large weapon used to oppress us. (We knew there were fat men who experienced fat oppression. But in those years, that was not something we wanted to take on.) Unfortunately, we were not as aware of the intersections of fat hatred with other oppressions -- white supremacy or classism—or at least I wasn't. Although our lens was flawed it was definitely political. Every kind of organizing we did was political, even if it was something as simple as going out for ice cream together.

By the late 1980s, I had stepped away from most Fat Liberation organizing. Meridith stepped up to run fat women's discussion groups and other activities promoting Fat Liberation.

Reading this interview again in 2021 makes me feel wistful and tender. I miss believing that we were changing the world in fundamental ways. I am comforted now by the newer modes of fat liberation organizing and the care the movement is taking to attend to the connections between fat oppression and white supremacy. I still believe that radical change is needed and I am encouraged by the presence of so many younger activists.

J: When I first heard about the Fat Dyke anthology², I thought it was a great idea. I started thinking about what I could write, and I drew a total blank. That floored me --I felt like I had nothing I needed to say about being fat. What a change from when I started doing fat liberation work. Then I began to wonder how is it that being fat gets to be not an issue? I mean, fat oppression is still raw and happens to me really often and still hurts me. But a lot of the time, it's like "Who cares?"

S: I want to ask if part of how you got that feeling is that you are together, two fat lesbians. Were you consciously looking for fat lovers?

² Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression (Aunt Lute, 1983). My piece, "On Getting Strong: Notes from a Fat Woman, in two Parts", was accepted in the anthology.

M: I was. Right before Judith and I got together, I said to a friend, “my next girlfriend is going to be fat and Jewish.” I had already met Judith in 1979 and this was in early 1982. Judith and I got together in September ‘82. I had been thinking about her and when I moved back to Boston in ‘81. I thought “Oh I gotta get in touch with the fat community here.” At the time, I knew Judith Stein and one other fat dyke.

S: How did you know them?

M: I had met them at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 1979. And I had also seen Judith at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 81....

S: (interrupting) And what was she wearing? I want details... (laughs)

M: She was wearing dyed balloon pants from Making It Big and that's it!

S: Oooooohhh...

M: There were all these women behind her. And I thought. “oh, Here comes the queen with her entourage.” she said hi I said hi. And that was it. I felt like just one of the girls following her, although I don't didn't really follow her around.

But I knew I wanted someone fat because I had started thinking about fat liberation in ‘77 or ‘78. I was living in Michigan in a collective household and a dyke I lived with brought back the Fat Underground information with her from Los Angeles. I read this stuff and it was like, Oh! Major Click. Immediately it was “OK, I am going to stop dieting.” I was 23 at the time.

When I went to Michigan in ‘79, it was like. “Oh wow, fat liberation is here.” so my way of thinking changed.

S: How about you Judith, were you looking for a fat lover??

J: My last lover was a fat woman and that was deliberate. I wasn't looking to get into a relationship when Meredith and I got together because I had just broken up with my last lover three weeks before and I was kind of a ragged mess. But I did want to have sex with Meredith and it just worked out to be bigger than... (laughs).

I started organizing Fat Lesbians in early 1978 in Boston, that was the first group. I did that because I needed it. I had gotten the Fat Underground literature, maybe I sent to California, I don't even know where I got it. It came in the mail, and I was ready to kick ass. So, we had this group in Cambridge and we did some organizing in the lesbian and feminist communities.

I went to Michigan in 1979 and a couple of the other Boston fat dykes went also. When I saw the program from Michigan and there was no fat liberation stuff, I thought, "Oh, I'm gonna organize some fat lesbian stuff, support groups, something." So, I did, and we met, you know, I just put up signs. R. was there and she had a tipi, so we started meeting at her tipi because it was a real easy landmark to find. That was in 1979. She and I got involved and she moved to Boston, I think somewhere earlyish in 1980.

I wanted a lover who understood my life and my body. The fact that she was fat and was into being fat was mandatory for me. So, I knew when R. and I broke up that I wasn't going to have a thin lover again, it was just too foreign, it wasn't affirming to me. It was affirming to have a fat lover.

M: You know, on our first date Judith and I slept together, and I remember thinking at some point in that night that any other time I had sex for the first time, I was scared to take off my clothes. I had some trepidation. Because they were going to see my body for the first time and would they run screaming from the room, or would they not? I just knew that when Judith and I got undressed that there wasn't going to be any of that and it was just a whole different mindset, right from the get-go for me.

S: How long ago was that?

M: Twelve years.

S: That's a long time!

J: (Laughing) It's shocking that it's been such a long time.

S: So now I want to talk to you about where you live, what your home is like.

M: We moved in together after we had been together for seven years.

Anything we've bought since we moved in together, a priority has always been "Is this going to be comfortable?" There's nowhere in the house where we really have to squeeze by anything to get anywhere. We set it up so that you can walk freely throughout, and you don't bump into furniture. And then a lot of the decorations are fat images. There are pictures, tiles, artwork, little Venus of Willendorf statues...

J: Everywhere you look.

M: There are a lot of Venus of Willendorfs!

J: The last time I lived with a lover before Meridith was the first woman I was lovers with. In our apartment we had furniture that I couldn't sit on. She had furniture, antiques from her family, that I was not allowed to sit on in case I broke them. I tolerated a lot in that relationship that I would never tolerate again. Certainly, I was never again going to live with furniture that I couldn't sit on.

S: I've been to your house. When I walk in there I get this blast of, you know, it's such a beautiful house and there are so many fat, positive, beautiful things anywhere you look, in the bathroom, in the living room. Do you still notice it or is it just normal to you now to be surrounded by gorgeous fat images?

M: It's new and it's old all at once for me. The other day I was sitting in the living room and I was looking at this clay sculpture we have of a fat woman and I thought "That is so beautiful."

J: There are a few images I have that I am always aware of. I have this little wall sculpture in my bedroom of a fat woman whose legs surround a mirror. I bought it about ten or eleven years ago when I was shopping with my parents. My mother couldn't understand why I would buy it. She said, "See, you buy that sculpture. That's why you can't buy a car!"

Well, that was a typical kind of twisted logic for her -- that a \$12 purchase made the difference between owning a car or not. I think the sculpture probably made her very uncomfortable, because it was a naked woman,

and a naked fat woman to boot! But buying that sculpture was the first time I flew in the face of very overt disapproval and censure. I knew this sculpture was special, these images don't exist everywhere. I knew that if I didn't buy this fat image, I was never going to see it again. It's this fat woman playing a flute with fish around her. It's really wonderful. So sometimes I notice things, because buying them was a deliberate act of affirmation. Other times all these fat images are just like the air we breathe. The air in the house is fat air, nice, you know, you walk in and it's like there is nothing in there that is not fat or fat positive.

S: Do you have rules? Like do you talk about fat oppression in your house? Or do you constantly keep it positive?

M: I don't think we talk about fat oppression per se, in our house, but we do talk about what it means to be a fat woman in the world. I'm not without my own self-doubts and so I don't feel like I'm Wonder Woman every day that I wake up. Then, of course, once you step out of our wonderful house there is the rest of the world. I have diabetes, so there have been discussions in the past about diet products coming into the house because sometimes I want something that has NutraSweet in it. There have been discussions like that. I don't know, did we ever set up, ever have a conscious conversation like "Oh, let's put up fat images?" I mean we see fat images, we buy them. They look like us, we love them.!

J: I think we need all these real images. The one thing about having the Venus of Willendorf all around our house is that she's not exactly a true-to-life image. We do have some pictures that are real women with whole bodies. I mean we're real women and we have lumps and bumps and varicose veins and scars and hanging breasts. I just think that the more you can see real fat women, the better.

There are some other things about living with a fat woman that are nice. We'll be watching a sitcom and it gets fat oppressive. I mean, I know that hardly ever happens. (giggle), but you don't even have to ask, you just flip off of it. Diet commercials, you flip off. You don't even have to ask.

M: We've had conversations about language, but not so much about our surroundings.

S: What about language?

M: Well, once Judith said to me, "Oh, my ankles aren't so shapely." I might either make a joke like. "Well, they are shaped like the Venus of Willendorf now." or I might just say "You're full of shit!" (hearty laugh). "Where is that coming from?"

I remember when we first got together we were cooking dinner and someone started eating a snack. This happened once from me and once from her. We both kind of said to the other one "You'll ruin your dinner." We were kind of shocked that we even said something like that, so we talked and agreed that we don't say that stuff anymore. From time to time we say things and realize that they come from the old tapes that we want to get out of our heads. So, I think these conversations just foster this atmosphere of loving ourselves even more than we already do.

J: I was thinking about food because we are really committed to abundance. Because we are both working at good jobs we buy a lot of groceries, we have good food in the house, and we have a lot of food in the house. That's another thing we do. We make sure there is plenty so you never have to worry about there not being enough, or you can eat as much as you want to eat. You can eat seventeen bagels until all the bagels are gone. There is enough of everything and there is more where that came from. There is never any scarcity around food in our house.

M: The other thing is when I was in school and I got diagnosed with diabetes, we had a lot of conversations about living together. Neither of us had lived with lovers in a long time and the last time we both did, it didn't turn out so well. We had many conversations about where we were going to live, what it was going to look like and even down to what was going to be in the refrigerator. I remember saying to Judith, "OK, when we move in together and I'm making good salary, I want at least three kinds of cheese in the cheese drawer at all times." Partly from having been deprived of food as a kid, and partly from having diabetes, I want a lot of good stuff to eat that doesn't involve sugar.

S: I have another question. I don't know if you want to do this for the record. If you would talk about sex at all and sex with fat women, specifically each other...

M: I love sex with fat women.

S: Would you like to have more sex with fat women?

M: Well, in general, although time gets to be a problem. And monogamy kind of gets in the way.

S: You are monogamous?

M: Yeah, yeah well yeah. (laughing) in my mind I'm not.

S: Well, you do openly admire other fat women.

M: We have a clause -- you can look., you can talk, you can flirt, you can have crushes, but you cannot touch.

J: I mean I lust after other women a lot, but I am not going to do anything about it, it's not that serious. I don't want to deal with what it would mean.

M: And we don't get enough time alone. I mean we get time alone, but part of aging for me is that I need more time to rest and relax. But the desire is definitely there. That's the other thing, the last relationship I was in was a three- and one-half-year relationship and we stopped having sex after six months. I think part of that was because I was fat. So, after all this time we are still having sex, probably not as much as when we first got together, but there is still lust, there is still desire, there is still grabbing at each other. Every day we tell each other how cute we are, and if someone doesn't say "Oh, you're cute" then one of us will say "Aren't I just adorable!" (hearty laughter). Or it might be, "I'm just irresistible, I don't know how you resist me." That's my big line, and she goes "Yeah, who's resisting? (giggles)

J: One thing I like with fat women, a fat lover, is that you don't have to worry if you're going to smash her if you roll over on her. There are not too many sharp edges. There are some things that I think are a little harder physically to do, like that concept of rubbing cunts together. That has been gone since I was about 11 when I got a stomach; I've never quite figured that one out.

But there are more things that make up for it, I mean, a fat stomach and a big fat tushie are the most glorious things on the planet. So, sex is really swell.

The fat women that I became lovers with were loving themselves or working to love themselves. So that is a whole different thing. I don't know what it would be like to be lovers with a fat woman who is dieting or is really just hating herself, because I don't know how any woman in that state could have really jolly sex anyway. For me, one of the things that is nice about being long-term is that we've gotten to know a lot about what each other likes. And you just don't have to worry about the things that are embarrassing when you have sex with someone for the first time.

M: There really isn't anything that has not happened in twelve years, so nothing is embarrassing. Sometimes Judith will get embarrassed and I will say, "It's me, me! There is no one, no one else here. OK, the cat's here, but he's covering his eyes."

J: One of the things about being together so long is that I am twelve years older so on a Sunday night the thought of staying up all night to have sex as opposed to sleeping before I go to work is a little less appealing. Other things get in the way of sex more. I don't think that's because we're fat. When Meri got diabetes, that was a big issue; my job changed a lot and I was under a lot of stress -- these things come up in front of sexual desire more than they did when we were newly in love and younger.

M: When we were newly in love, our sexual desire was in front of us all the time. I wasn't particularly happy at my job. But then there you were, so I could put the job aside and just have sex. "Let's call in sick and just have sex all day." There was a point where it became really clear to me that the whole relationship moved into this really, really safe place. I don't think that's a function of us being fat, I think it's a function of long term, that we just sort of moved into this place where everything became really nice and comfortable. I don't mean that in a negative way, I mean very stable, very secure, very just... I know I'm loved. A lot of times I describe the way I feel loved is that I am in this warm bath of Judith's love and everywhere I turn. I know it's around me, it's a sphere around my body.

S: How do you know?

M: I feel it because it's affirmed every day. It's affirmed through sex, because we are still having sex after twelve years, and she just tells me all the time. In the car on the way here she told me "I'm just crazy about you."

J: I also said I wish that you could do something that we can't do while we're driving down the highway. (laughter)

S: Older and wiser, that's good...

M: We used to do that when we were young. We would, yeah. (laughter)

J: I don't know how you could be a lesbian of any size and not be damaged by the society we live in. I think we bring our damages into our relationships and part of why I wanted to have a fat lover and a Jewish lover was I was hoping that I could avoid some of the surprise hurts that happen when people who don't share an identity do something hurtful and they don't know they've done it. That is part of the safety, and for me I don't think I could feel that way with a thin lover no matter how long we had been together or how wonderful she was. No matter how much you are understood, there are certain things that thin woman just wouldn't know. I love that there are certain things that Meri and I know about each other because we come from similar backgrounds and have had some similar experiences moving through the world as fat women. I don't ever have to worry about being surprised by a remark that hurts me about my size or a remark that hurts me about being Jewish. That's lovely!

I know women in mixed-size relationships, and it works for them. For me it is a pleasure not to have to work with all those particular issues. We've had to work through all the standard stuff, you know, trust, monogamy, separate personalities, friends, money, all that sort of regular relationship stuff. So, I love not having to work through fat issues as well.

M: Although when we got together, you didn't know that I was self-loving. You didn't know if I was Ms. Self-Loving or Ms. Self-Hating. Actually, I was sort of Ms. Just-had-started-loving-herself.

J: But I knew you were committed to being self-loving...

S: When did you know that?

J: Well, for one thing, Meri and I met through fat liberation activities, so that told me something. But even before Meri and I got involved she did something that showed me that she did love herself. A fat dyke from the Midwest came to visit, so we had a potluck for her to meet other fat dykes. And we also had a clothing swap at the potluck. The visitor, my lover and I walked up the stairs to the apartment where we were going to have this potluck dinner. Some of the other dykes were there, looking through the clothes at the clothing swap. At the very moment we walked into the apartment, Meri turned around, bare-breasted, and gave us a big hello. It was clear the timing was deliberate -- to show off her chest! That's how I knew you were already into self-loving. Some place you already thought you were hot stuff.

S: (laughing) I can picture it!

J: In those days, fat dykes socialized together, went to dances and out to eat. Sometimes it was more than other lesbians could deal with because we were rowdy and sitting on each other's laps and running around and not behaving properly. It was a complete reaction to the kind of constraint we usually felt, and it was great.

S: Do you still have that kind of fat network? Do you see fat women regularly in your lives?

J: Well, that may have been the golden era in some ways, you know, before the first couple broke up and got involved with somebody else in the same circle. Now, that could blow things out of the water!

S: I've heard of that, yeah. (laughter)

J: So, we don't have the same community, not in the same way. And I need more from the women in my life now. It isn't enough for me anymore to connect with someone just because she's fat. That was a period in my life where I would overlook all the other difficulties or differences in order to have that fat connection with someone. I have less ability to tolerate the things that are difficult -- class differences, other political difference -- just to make a fat connection.

- S: I wanted to ask about differences in size because you're not exactly the same size. Has there been any work or anything that you've done around your size differences in your relationship?
- M: Well, right now I weigh about 315, and I am five-foot six and a half. I am shaped as a classic pear, I guess, I'm bigger in the hips....
- J: I weigh about 250 and I'm about five foot five and I'm a pickle.
- S: I've never heard of that!
- J: Pickle means I go straight up and down, you know, I don't have any waist.
- M: We wear very different size pants, but if we are shopping for a shirt or a jacket, a lot of times we will wear the same size. If we both see something that we like Judith will usually say, "Well, if you want it, you get first dibs."
- J: We talked about that actually, way back in the beginning. If there was something that fit us both and you wanted it, you got it. There are two reasons: it's easier for me to find clothes, and I've also been working longer so I had a bigger wardrobe. Especially once Meri got out of school and started working, when we went shopping she usually needed clothes more than me.
- Actually, you say I've ruined you, Meri. When I met her, she wore overalls and flannel shirts. I'm kind of a clothes horse and I like to go shopping and I like to buy clothes. So, I guess from hanging around me so long, Meri got into shopping and now she's into clothes.
- M: And now I have a wardrobe for work, which looks vastly different than my wardrobe not at work.
- J: With furniture or new restaurants, it's been a new process for me that when I sit someplace, I try to figure out whether Meri can fit or not. I can sit in almost any chair because of the way I'm shaped, but there are lots of places Meri can't sit in, so we just cross them off our list.
- M: Like movie theaters or restaurants where the seating isn't comfortable and they can't bring an armless chair. We don't patronize places that aren't comfortable. I used to go to one movie theater that was sort of an art

house and got movies that weren't anywhere else. For years I went and I sat on my side, and finally I said to Judith "It isn't worth it for me to go for two or three hours and be so uncomfortable." I just stopped doing it. At the time it was distressing, but I can't not be comfortable anymore. It's not OK. I just won't do that to myself.

J: One of the ideas that I learned in the early days of fat liberation was the understanding that I'm not too big - the world is too small. You don't really deal with that everyday vocabulary. So, when we don't go to this movie theater, it's because the seats are too small and the theater is inaccessible. It's important to take the blame off of us and put it where it belongs.

S: So now it seems like we are kind of out and in the world. Welcome to the world. Fat lesbians together. And I know you get reactions walking down the street. What is it like?

M: When we first got together and I was starting to learn to love myself, I was very aware of people around me and comments they were making. We would go somewhere, and I would say, "My God, what was he just muttering?" or "Did you see that asshole doing that??" and Judith would be like "Huh, what?" I wondered why I noticed so much more. For a while I thought it was because I'm bigger and I get more shit on the street. But I realized a couple of weeks ago that since we've been living together, or maybe the last three or four years, that I just don't notice the harassment so much. If the comments are really overt, if someone is standing there and saying something, usually we will say something back. But mostly I just don't notice the muttering and the looks anymore. I don't think the world changed, so it must be me.

J: I don't think there's a time that we go out of the house that we don't get stared at. I just don't notice it very often. I can't sort out if we're being stared at because we're big fat women or we have short hair and we look dykey, or we are wearing jeans and T shirts and we don't look like proper girls. We don't ask people why if they're staring at us or making remarks, but sometimes if people are really staring, we just walk up and say, "Do you have a problem?"

S: You do?

J&M: Oh yeah.

J: Because it disempowers me not to say something. But this other thing happens, and I know it also happens with other fat lesbian couples. People on the street are always telling us that we must be sisters or even twins. I think people sometimes say sisters because they see the energy, the connection between us, but mostly I think these comments are really about fat oppression. Meri's face is totally different structure than mine, her coloring, eye color and hair color are different, her build is different. We don't look alike, any more than any two other white girls with brown hair look alike.

But we get told that we're sisters a lot. And people are really insistent, as if we wouldn't know. Some years ago we made a decision that unless we were in some physical jeopardy, if someone asked, "Are you sisters?" we would say "No, we're lovers." Sometimes I don't have the nerve to say that, so I say "No, we're not sisters but we are kin." And that shuts people up and also doesn't deny the relationship. But it's obnoxious.

The other thing that has happened to us is that we have been mistaken for another fat lesbian couple that we know. Neither of us look anything like either of them except we all have short brown or black hair. Two different times we went into two different stores, and the clerk said, "Weren't you just here yesterday?" and they were quite insistent that we had been there, which we had not. Because we know the other couple and knew that they had been to that store, we knew what was happening. It was totally obnoxious!

M: Since we made the decision to out ourselves, it's a lot easier. We get the sisters or twins routine and when we say "No, we're lesbians." there's a lot of stammering, and I have to say it three or four times before it gets into their brains. It just takes the bullshit totally off of us. Let them go deal with their homophobia or whatever.

S: Is it different if one of you goes out by yourself then what you notice if you are together?

M: Oh yeah.

S: What's the difference?

J: A lot more hostility...

S: When you're together?

M: Oh yeah. When I go out by myself I am a lot more timid. I'm your typical fat girl, I mean, as much as I love myself, if I want to go to a restaurant or a sub shop by myself I always scan it to see if I'm going to get any shit. A lot of times that's the basis how I decide where I'm going to go in the world when I'm by myself. Can I go in there and feel relatively safe? A lot of times I don't give a shit, but I have days where I really don't want to deal with anything.

S: Is there something else that you want to talk about? I want to be sure we get to the stuff that you think is important.

J: I want to try to understand how I moved from fat being just the most tender and most militant place to something that just is ordinary about me.

S: You were talking about your own transition with fat.

J: How does that happen, that being fat becomes so normal? It's not supposed to be ordinary, it's never supposed to be OK to be fat.

M: I would say it's something about loving yourself so much and for so long that it just becomes commonplace. When I'm at home it is totally normal. Once I'm at work, since I'm a pharmacist I'm confronted with health stuff all the time. I'm also aware that I'm the biggest person at my job. But then there are times, like yesterday when we had taken the cat to the vet. I was leaning against the wall and I thought, "Wow, I feel so small to myself, I'm just in this body."

I think it's about loving yourself, I also think it's about having clothes that fit you well, and that you don't feel squeezed into. It's having a comfort with food and making peace with whatever issues you've had around eating and having foods in your house that are delicious. Having a partner who is all those things, that to me is one of the biggest parts of it, having this constant ally in my life.

For a long time I didn't understand what support I gave Judith, because she had been this big organizer for years, but she needs the support as much as any other fat woman. I know that the support that she has given me has helped me to be able to go into the world and do what I have done in my life.

J: I feel that the world hates us so much. I don't think we can say I love you enough, you're beautiful, you are cute, I want to suck your nipples. There is never too much of that, so we say it a lot and we smooch goodbye on the phone and all these things that are kind of nauseating, But there is a way in which they are not just nauseating, they are counteracting all this hatred in the universe. We are both so many things that we're not supposed to be, you know, we are unladylike Jewish fat lesbians, and so we're basically not supposed to exist. And if we must exist, we really shouldn't leave the house.

Part of that support is not intellectual at all, it's just that I like to have the lovey-dovey stuff really out there because it does create an energy barrier between us and the world that hates us. I just want to create this little cocoon of knowing that I am extraordinarily loved and that whatever else happens that is going to be true. I want that with me all the time and I want it with Meri all the time.

S: And I know that you do that, I can see the cocoon and you both talked about it and that is incredibly powerful thing. But I also know you both organized in the larger sense, not just within, but you are political about this. You met because Judith was an organizer and she was organizing Fat Liberation. So that is how you could find each other.

Are there other things that you would say about how your political work has affected your lives as fat lesbians?

M: We're both feminists, we're both still identified as feminist, we both do little things.

J: There was a period for me where I was doing a lot more active organizing in fat liberation. I was writing about fat liberation and I'm not doing that now. But in some ways I think I'm just more of who I am in the world. I think

about this at work. I'm out at work and I've gotten more involved in university life, committees and such, so here I am this very fat out lesbian doing my life. I talk about my partner, others talk about their hobbies or wives or whatever.

But that is not political organizing. I just feel that I'm less cut off from different parts of myself than I used to be. I am in the world as a confident, attractive, sexually active, married, fat woman with a fat lover. There is a way that I hope this just creates a little space for passage.

And when people say dieting stuff, about food, like "This is bad," or "Oh, I'm bad," I have a stock response that I can use most of the time, even when I don't want confrontation. I say "I don't know about you, but I've only got one life and I am not going to waste it worrying about what I eat. I'm going to enjoy myself." That's not heavy-duty fat organizing, but it is a way to disrupt the constant ideology about being bad, food is bad. The ability to interrupt that kind of fat-oppressive conversation comes from the relationship.

M: When we first got together, Judith was doing a lot of organizing and a lot of speaking engagements. And I would go with her. That was very liberating for me, because even as someone who's been fat all my life and as someone who was getting into fat liberation, it was very powerful to hear that information, over and over and over again.

But now what I want is a gathering of fat women who have been Fat Liberationists for a long time. I want to do everything with fat women, I want to do physical activity with fat women. I want to go on trips with fat women. And if I could, I would only have fat women who love themselves as my friends. I know all the fat liberation ideology and now I just want to go beyond that, it's yet to be seen how that can be done.

S: I want to list the things that you've done just so it's on the tape. When you are editing it, because you've definitely had been a political force in my life, both of you.

The first thing that pops into my head is that fashion show that Judith organized. It was a benefit for lesbian sex magazines and it wasn't all fat

women, but you were very deliberate about including fat models. You did the music for it, Meri. It was all different kinds of women, including gorgeous fat women. It changed my life: Hey, I could be a model for a room full of screaming lesbians! (laughter)... The fat group that you cofacilitated, Meri, was my first exposure to fat liberation. It was organized so there were meetings and also social times. I could see that there was fat culture, and that there were other fat lesbians.

Sometimes I think that your power and the changes that follow in your wake are not visible to you, but they really do happen. You just have a habit, you have created this habit for each other of being visible, vocal, affirming, fat, political lesbians. And that has affected other women around you, it really has.

BIOS

Meridith Lawrence – (1995) Despite having grown up learning to hate myself, I am having one hell of a great life! I love going to the beach, eating out, traveling, swimming, and driving around with the radio blaring (among other things). My heartfelt thanks to Mary Nodari. (aka Wisniewski) for turning me on to fat liberation. It saved my life. (2021) In 2015 Meridith and Judith moved to the Bay Area where they enjoyed connecting with fat liberationists. Sadly, Meridith died suddenly in January 2020. She and Judith had been loving partners for 37 years.

Judith Stein stopped dieting at age 15 in an act of teenage rebellion; it was one of the smartest things she ever did. That was the same year she participated in her first sit-in; she's been a political activist in some fashion ever since. Her fat liberation essays and short stories were published in a variety of alternative and feminist press. She wrote and published a series of secular Jewish lesbian holiday materials published under Bobbeh Meisehs Press. She recently moved to senior housing in Oakland where she is trying to foment “good trouble.”³

Susan Stinson is the author of the novels Martha Moody, Venus of Chalk (both recently re-issued by Small Beer Press), Fat Girl Dances with Rocks, and Spider in a Tree, as well as Belly Songs: In Celebration of Fat Women, a collection of poetry and essays. She has taught fiction writing at Smith College and Amherst College.

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³ “make some noise and get into good trouble, necessary trouble.” Congressman John Lewis, civil rights activist, 1940-2020