

VIEWPOINT

The views expressed in this section of the paper are not necessarily those of the *Sojourner* staff. All comments and opinions are welcome.

Fat Liberation: No Losers Here

by Judith Stein

What Is Fat Oppression?

Finally, "fat" has gone public. From the deepest closets of obscenities, denials, and disguise, women are realizing that yes, some of us are fat; and that yes, some of us who are fat are also healthy; and that yes, what we were taught about fat equaling unhealthy is not simply not true. Some women are even reclaiming the word "fat" and using it with pride!

The Fat Liberation Movement is a loose coalition of groups and individuals, all of whom believe that fat people are oppressed *because* of being fat; all of whom know that the effects of fat oppression range from psychological devastation to physical death; and all of whom believe that only profound changes in society will end the oppression of fat people. An enormous part of our work consists of undoing the myths and lies all of us, thin and fat, were taught about the causes of fat, the results of being fat, and the "true" nature of fat women.

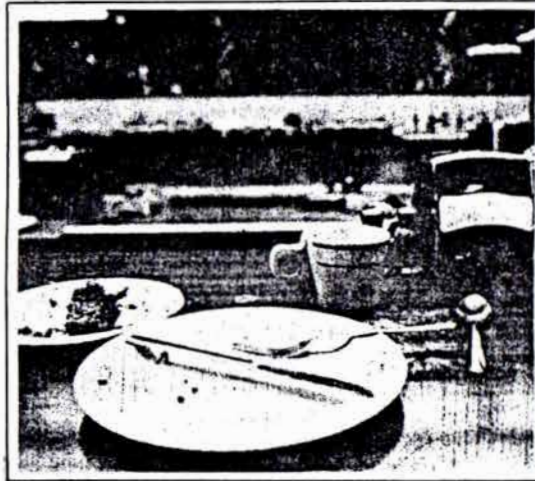
Because the lies about fatness are so deeply ingrained, disbelief and denial are often the first reactions to Fat Liberation material. Every piece of medical information in this article has been documented thoroughly, within the most conservative, established medical sources. More detailed information, including some of the source material for this article, can be obtained from Fat Liberator Publications, P.O. Box 7232, Minneapolis, MN 55407.)

Fat oppression is the systematic hatred, ridicule and discrimination against fat people by this society. It is based on the belief that fat people are not as good as thin people, and that fat people remain fat because we are lazy, eat too much, lack will-power, or are stupid. This belief is part of the social order which oppresses people because of their age, race, sex, sexual preference, and physical abilities or disabilities.

Being fat means being the butt of jokes, hostility, and public slurs in every social situation—from movies, TV, friends, and family—and being expected to tolerate or enjoy the experience.

Being fat means getting lower paying jobs, having less job mobility, and being refused jobs for which you qualify, because you don't fit the company image, or the boss thinks you can't do the work, or they have a "policy" against hiring fat women. Being fat means you have *no legal recourse* if you are refused a job, fired, or harassed on your job because of being fat.

Being fat means living with the constant assumption that you want to be thin; it means living with the public assumption that you are dieting, or feel guilty for not dieting; and it means living with the reality that *any* person, from close friend to store clerk to jerk on the street, feels free to comment about your size, your appearance, and your need to diet.



—Marge Chaset

Being fat means being harassed, ridiculed and discouraged when doing sports or athletic activities, and then being told that your fat is a result of your sloth and inactivity.

Being fat means dieting, maybe losing weight, gaining that weight back (and usually more), and then living with the self-hatred and public hostility this failure produces.

Being fat means literally making yourself sick by dieting and then being told you are sick because of being fat.

Being fat means getting desperate, and having your jaws wired shut, your stomach stapled smaller, or a large piece of your intestines cut out (a surgery with a death rate of six women in 100—from the op-

eration alone), and then, when even these drastic methods fail, killing yourself.

These experiences are not fantasies, and they are not uncommon. They are as frequent for women who move within the feminist community as they are for women from all other walks of life. One step in changing this is for feminists, who are accustomed to examining our other socially-dictated beliefs, to begin changing the attitudes and practices within the feminist community which *continue* to oppress fat women.

The Myths Underlying Fat Oppression

The first and most difficult task of Fat Liberation is to undo the lies that keep fat women weak from dieting, har-

assed on the streets, and dying on operating tables. These same lies keep thin women terrorized about becoming fat, and keep all of us separated and divided. The fear of getting fat, or getting fatter, keeps all of us preoccupied with our bodies, and keeps us from using that energy to fight the real oppression—a sexist society which tells us how we are to look, and how we are to live.

Here are the facts:

1. *Fat people are not fat because we eat too much, eat the wrong foods, or have metabolic problems.* Over 100 studies have attempted to prove that fat people eat more than thin people—and every one of them has failed!! On the average, fat people eat the same amounts, and the same types of food as thin people. In fact, in one study, a group of adolescent fat women said they ate more than their thin friends, even though an actual tally of food consumption showed that they ate far less than their thin friends.

The relationship between food intake and weight is murky at best. Most people seem to have a range of normal body weights, and when repeated dieting does not interfere (e.g. when people lose weight, then gain it back, they often gain more than the original loss), *eating patterns seem to create shifts within that "normal" range.* Women who have dieted over long periods of time may have a higher "normal" body weight, *as a result of the dieting, than they*

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would have had they never dieted. Eating less, even over a long period of time, does not produce permanent weight loss, because the body adapts to the decreased caloric intake.

2. *Fat people cannot change our "problem" of being fat by dieting—even on medically-supervised, "sensible" diets.* Medical research has consistently shown that diets have a long-term failure rate of 98-99 percent. This means that 99 out of 100 fat people who do lose weight will gain all the weight they lost (and usually more) within five years.

In fact, the dieting process itself is unhealthy: it has been shown to increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes, hardening of the arteries, diabetes, gallstone problems, kidney disease and more. The inevitable yo-yo-ing that fat women go through with repeated diets causes repeated exposure to a traumatic body process which is *known* (unlike the fact of being fat) to cause health problems.

3. *Fat people are not less healthy than thin people, nor are we unhealthy because of being fat.* Fat people range from very healthy to very ill—just like thin people. Any attempt to actually prove that being fat causes illness has failed in a confusion of third factors (such as presence of other disease). *Not one study* has successfully proven that being fat causes any of the diseases attributed to fatness. In addition, the diseases thought to be caused by fat are all stress-related (like high blood pressure) and are more likely to be caused by

the combination of repeated dieting (a high-stress process for the body) and fat hatred in this culture.

"Cures" for being fat—like the intestinal bypass surgery, and gastric stapling—have high death rates, and only make fat people sicker. Diets like the liquid protein diet have led to over 60 known cases of death by starvation. These "cures" are medical malpractice at its height—just as clitoridectomy (removal of the clitoris) was when used as a "cure" for women's independent sexuality. Both are rooted in the same hatred of women in this society, and the demand that women conform to men's ideals of female sexuality. It is up to the feminist movement to recognize these "cures" as the barbaric practices which they truly are—and to speak out about the false claims of ill-health which are the basis for these extremely devastating "treatments."

Despite the ever-accumulating evidence to the contrary, the medical establishment continues to use false information as a basis for medical practices. The diet industry is a billion-dollar, multi-faceted industry which includes medical professionals, therapists, publishers, weight loss clinics, camps and salons, and has an enormous stake in keeping women terrorized by the spectre of becoming fat, or getting fatter.

Women committed to the control of our own lives can begin by taking control over our own bodies—and learning the truth about eating and weight and health. Women can trust our own bodies as a guide to eating. *Thin women have learned to believe fat women when we share our lives and experiences, and must let go of their illusion of superiority over fat women.* All of us together are needed to confront and defeat the medical and diet industries which abuse us, cheat us, and keep us physically weak.

Women must re-learn what we know about fat and health, as we have re-learned all other lies we are told about our lives. Fat oppression is no less deadly, and the struggle against it is no less serious. We owe ourselves, all of us, the right to be the size we truly are. And fat women, remember—you have nothing to lose.

Missed Message

Dear SOJOURNER:

I was upset and angry to see the placement of my article juxtaposed with an article from someone advocating Overeaters Anonymous. I had not been informed of this placement beforehand, and had I known, would have objected strenuously. While SOJOURNER may, in fact, see Fat Liberation and OA as the "two sides" of the same "weight controversy," this is a mistaken and insulting viewpoint. In the same vein, the teaser on the cover: "Diets: To Lose or Not to Lose," is not only misleading, it is a false question, and one commonly used to convince women that we do have the power to change our body size and shape in some major way. The teaser is misleading because my article is not about dieting, nor is it about weight loss. It is about medical facts, public mythology around fatness and eating, and about social oppression. The teaser is dangerous and thoughtless because it implies that all women need to do is make a choice: "Shall I lose, or shall I not?" This is a false question, one without a genuine answer, and one which perpetuates the *myth that fat women are fat because we choose not to "do something about it."* If the SOJOURNER staff had really understood the point of my article, I think you would have seen the falsehood to the cover teaser. If you did understand the article, and chose that teaser anyway, then I am even more distressed that you choose National Enquirer's form of journalism.

The same thing is true with the placement of my article next to the article by the OA

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woman. The intent, clearly, was to present "two sides to a controversial issue." But not all controversial issues within SOJOURNER receive the same treatment: the article about the HLA does not have an anti-abortion argument facing it; nor is the article by the Menopause Collective followed by an article promoting the use of Estrogen Replacement Therapy and hysterectomy for menopausal symptoms. Please understand me, I am not saying that these articles should be followed by/faced with an "opposing" point of view. I am saying that the choice, on the part of SOJOURNER to do this "two-sides-to-every-question" approach with the article about Fat Liberation represents a political choice exercised by those with editorial power. This particular editorial power and choice was exercised with no other articles in this issue. I object *both* to this decision being made, *and* to my not being informed that my article was to be presented as "one side" of an issue which the SOJOURNER collective identified and defined.

Similarly, the choice of graphics with my article showed either a lack of understanding, or a lack of sensitivity to the content of the article. One of the grossest myths perpetuated about fat people is that we eat too much, or all the time and *that we are fat because of how we eat.* A photograph of a place setting where a meal was recently eaten supports this myth—it says "this article is about fat people; and an appropriate illustration is an empty place, because we all know that fat people always eat and always eat everything on their plate." If this message was not a deliberate intent on the part of the editors, then it was a thoughtless mistake, and one which continues to sup-

port oppressive myths. I am familiar with Marge Chaset's work, and I think she is an excellent photographer. My objection is not to her photograph itself, but to its placement within my article.

Personally, it has been a distressing process for me around the publication of the article. I was very pleased and excited that SOJOURNER wanted to use my piece. I was very upset at having 12 hours to edit out one page of material. In retrospect, I see that I would have made different cuts had I more time. I was hurt and angry at several editorial "slaps in the face" which the placement of the article, the photograph, and the cover teaser were to me. All three things made me question the seriousness with which my article was read, and, whether or not this was their intent, all three undermine the points I am attempting to make in the article. I suppose these are the risks one takes in writing for publication, nonetheless, I expected more respectful treatment from a feminist paper. It is a shock to find a seriously-researched, carefully written piece placed as one side of a debate, without any prior knowledge that this would be the case.

I offer this lengthy feedback in hopes of improving not only my future experiences with SOJOURNER, but that of other authors who may write on unfamiliar or controversial issues. I know that SOJOURNER strives to be an open forum, and one which presents many points of view. In order to do this well, authors and their writings must be dealt with carefully and responsibly.

Sincerely,
Judith Stein
Somerville, MA