

# doing donahue

by Judy Freespirit

i am sitting in a friend's living room, watching myself on the videotape, watching this Donahue show on the VCR for maybe the twentieth time since it was made two years ago. I have been trying to write the story about it, trying to recapture the feelings and experiences, and failing miserably. What is the problem? I can't quite get my finger on it. I'm depressed; my head droops; my shoulders are slouched; my movement is slow. Something is wrong here. Trying to remember how it came about causes feelings of resistance. What is it I don't want to remember?

I was all cuddled up in bed with my lover one Saturday night when the phone rang. Fortunately the phone was right next to my bed or I wouldn't have gotten up to answer it. It was cozy and warm in bed and I wasn't thinking about anything but feeling good with my Sweetie. Anyhow I answered the insistent ring.

The woman's voice on the other end sounded like it was far away and I didn't recognize it at all. "Judy," she began, "you may not remember me but you answered a questionnaire for my book about three years ago. Do you remember?"

"Uh, refresh my memory. What was the book about?"

"It was about mothers who had left their children. The book's been out for months now, haven't you seen it?"

I hadn't. "You really should read it," she said, "You're called 'Molly' in the book. I gave phony names to everyone so they wouldn't be recognized. I hope that name is all right."

"It really doesn't matter to me."

"The reason I'm calling," she continued, "is that I wondered if you'd be interested in being on the Donahue show?"

My body immediately went into a state of alert. The Donahue show! That was a big deal national talk show. I'd seen it once or twice when I was home sick. Sure I was interested. It would mean a free trip East. I'd be delighted to be on the Donahue show.

"The thing is," she continued, "that the producer will be calling

all the women I've suggested for the program and she'll ask you some questions. She's the one to decide who will actually be on the show, but I told her I thought you'd be especially good because your responses were so interesting. Anyway can I have her call you?"

"Sure, have her call me."

I spent the rest of the evening thinking about what I would say on the show, how would my son feel about it, and how would my mother respond to all that self-disclosure on national TV? I needn't have worried. When Darlene Hayes called on Sunday she wanted to know if I could fly out there the next day. I had a job and it was impossible.

"You want me to drop my life and come to Chicago tomorrow?" I asked incredulously. "I thought you'd at least give me a few weeks lead time."

"No, we have to do this program on Tuesday this week." She was firm. I just couldn't get off work that quickly. The disappointment was just settling in when I got a bright idea. "Listen," I said to the producer, "since I've got you on the phone, I'd like to tell you about a theater group I'm in that you might be interested in having on your show sometime. It's called Fat Lip Reader's Theater and we do performance pieces about our experiences and feelings as fat women in this society."

She wasn't interested in hearing more. I could tell by her voice that she had dealt with this kind of switch before. "We've done several programs about fat liberation in the last few years," she told me.

"But this group is different," I insisted.

"Well we had NAAFA\* on several times and your cause has gotten a lot of attention on our show."

"NAAFA? Listen," I had to talk fast now. "We're very different from NAAFA. They're a civil rights group. We're militant political activists who feel the medical profession is out to kill us."

She sounded only slightly more interested. "Send me some literature and your script and I'll take a look at it," she said. The next day I typed a cover letter and sent it to Darlene along with copies of ten pieces from the script.

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\* National Association to Aid Fat Americans is the oldest civil rights organization concerning fat oppression. For information write them at P.O. Box 43, Bellerose, NY 11426.

Two months later Nancy, Louise and I were on our way to Chicago, each of us in an aisle seat in a different part of coach class. Luckily we had been able to get our seating changed. Originally we had been given three seats in a row. There was no way three women as fat as we could sit together in those three little seats and it had taken some amount of discussion to convince the airline that we needed to have our seating arrangements changed.

Anger/sadness/anger/sadness—the feelings flash on and off like strobe lights, making an eerie and bizarre scene. I hate how hard it is to do the simplest thing, like ride on an airplane. One minute I'm furious at the airlines for their tiny uncomfortable seats and the next I'm feeling sorry for myself for not being able to fit in. I have to admit it—I'm sorry for not being able to fit in. It's sad to be a person on the fringes, no matter how wrong it is of the airlines to have assumed that everyone is a size ten.

The week before we were to do the Donahue show we had a meeting to pick out the pieces we would be performing. They said they would give us three or four slots of two minutes each to do part of our script. We selected some short pieces about the oppression of fat children, some general fat women's pieces and specifically selected one piece that mentioned the word "lesbian" one time. It was important that we not allow ourselves to be presumed heterosexual, which we knew would happen if we didn't make a point of it.

I have to admit I wasn't feeling very trusting of these TV folks. My experience with TV programs in the past had been mostly negative. I've never done one in all the twelve years of fat liberation where I didn't feel like I'd been ripped off in one way or another. They usually pretend they're sympathetic until they get you on the air, then zap you with questions intended to provoke you. Or they insist that if they're going to have you on talking about how fat is all right, they have to have the other side on at the same time, as if the other side isn't on 24 hours a day seven days a week already. Even when they agree ahead of time on the questions they will ask, their verbal promises aren't worth the paper they're written on. They get you on the air and then do what they think will make a "good show" and promises be damned. As we flew across the country I wondered if that would happen again. There wasn't much that could be done to avoid it, but it's necessary to think things through as much as

possible before the fact to minimize the losses.

The plane trip was uneventful. We were greeted by a grey and rainy Chicago and quickly piled into a taxi which took us to the Hyatt Regency Hotel. They don't pay you any money for going on these shows, I discovered much to my surprise, but they do put you up in fancy digs. I had heard somewhere that they paid performers union scale, something like \$350 for an appearance, but we were told we were being given "promotional consideration" which was somewhat of a disappointment. However the hotel accommodations made up for some of the bad feelings. I had figured we would all be staying in the same room, but we were each given a suite of our own. Talk about posh! The livingroom had elegantly upholstered couches and chairs, and glass and chrome tables. There were two color TVs, one in the livingroom and another slightly smaller one in the bedroom. The bathroom had half a dozen thick plush yellow towels, matching bath mats and shower curtains, and even a mirror on a kind of accordion holder that could be swiveled, pulled closer, or pushed farther away for just the right angle. There were three kinds of soap and two kinds of shampoo. And each of us had her own suite. This must be how celebrities and rich people live when they travel. What a trip.

As soon as we finished unpacking we met in the hotel dining-room. It was after seven o'clock and we had to eat and find some time to rehearse. As we sat down to dinner Louise announced that she had invited a few of her NAAFA friends from the Chicago chapter to join us and five more women sat down at the table. This was the last thing I needed the night before a program. We had to rehearse and I had hoped to get some sleep. The studio limousine was scheduled to pick us up at 8 A.M. and there was a lot of work to do before that, but dinner dragged on and on and finally we all went up to my suite for a rehearsal with the women from NAAFA as audience.

At 6 A.M. the operator rang with my wake-up call as requested. I had hoped we'd have time to talk about strategies and maybe do one more run-through of the script, but the breakfast we ordered came late and we just had enough time to eat and hurry with all our luggage to the lobby before the limousine picked us up and took us to the TV studio. The NAAFA women of last night and some other fat activist supporters would be at the studio. At least we would have a few allies in the audience.

When we arrived we were greeted by a woman who introduced herself as the assistant producer. I was very conscious of the fact that except for the man who drove the limousine, all the staff members at the studio seemed to be women.

After welcoming us and explaining that the makeup woman would be there in a few minutes, Darlene Hayes, the producer, began to brief us on how the show would work.

"Phil has read all your material and he knows what you're about," she said. "He really wants to get the message across and he feels that the piece about lesbianism has to come out."

Nancy and Louise looked shocked but didn't say anything. I was furious. "What do you mean? We were told that we could do part of our script," I said in a cool and what I hoped was a self-assured voice to cover the feeling of panic that was rising inside me. "You've had the skits we told you we would be doing for weeks now. You can't just tell us a few minutes before we're going on that we have to leave out the lesbian piece."

"Please try to understand," she said. "We've done a lot of shows about lesbians, a lot of positive shows, but the audiences are generally hostile and if you open up that subject they'll grab onto that and you will lose them on the fat liberation issue." I didn't want her to be right, but on some level I knew she was. I grumbled and finally agreed reluctantly. I'd find some way to slip it in near the end of the program. I figured I'd do it after we had gotten all the fat liberation information out.

The makeup woman was working on Louise now, putting on eye shadow, rouge, eyebrow pencil, mascara, the works. She had already finished with Nancy and it was about to be my turn. Back in Berkeley we had thought a lot about what kind and color of clothes to wear to look best on camera, but we hadn't thought about the damned makeup.

"I don't want any makeup," I said, hoping she wouldn't insist.

Darlene had obviously dealt with this one before. "You'll have to have some or you'll be totally washed out," she said firmly. "People won't be able to see your eyes or mouth and it will look strange."

"OK," I said to the makeup woman, "but please, just put as little on me as possible. I'm allergic to the stuff and it will make me sick. Just a little lipstick and eyebrow pencil."

"OK," she said.

A few minutes later we were being rushed down the hall

toward the studio. As we were dashing out the door I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror on the wall. I was made up with so much mascara, eye shadow and rouge that I could have easily passed for a Vegas showgirl.

"Now remember," Darlene said, "this isn't the kind of talk show where you sit and some moderator asks you questions. Donahue will try to get the audience and you to dialogue and you don't need to wait till someone talks to you to speak up. Just talk when you have something to say. We like to keep it lively."

Then Phil Donahue was there, looking in real life exactly like he looks on television, only thinner and more nervous. "Welcome," he said cheerily, "have you been filled in? Anyway, I'll give you my routine two-minute spiel and then we'll go out there and do the show. You need to remember to speak up and say what you want. Did Darlene explain about leaving out the lesbian stuff?" He caught the look on my face. "It's really not a good idea to confuse these audiences with too many issues," he continued. "They're here from all over the country, just visiting town and out to see a show. Some of them have sent in for their tickets as much as two years in advance and they have no idea till you go out on the set just what the topic is for today. Now I won't promise to take your side. My job is to keep things interesting so if the audience is with you I'll play devil's advocate and give you a hard time. If they're not I'll be more supportive. It's in the best interest of the show that there be some controversy. Makes things more interesting. I'm sympathetic with your cause, but I may or may not show it during the show. Understand? Good, now let's go out there and have a good time."

The butterflies had barely had a chance to start doing their thing in our stomachs when we were marched (I mean literally marched) into the brightly lit studio filled with people. Darlene led us onto a stage area which had a padded bench for us to sit on. As we walked to our seats everyone turned to look at us. Then Phil Donahue said a few words about us being there to talk about how it was OK for us to be fat, and suddenly the cameras were rolling and he was asking a thin nutritionist what she thought about us. She was saying we needed to learn how to eat properly and even if we only ate 800 calories a day and still were fat then what we needed was behavior modification. We were off and running.

After the nutritionist, a woman who ran a hotel phoned to say she couldn't have hired us because we're too fat to work and her boss wouldn't want to see us in the halls anyway because he wouldn't like how we looked.

Then another woman called and said we should learn to eat properly. A man in the audience got up and said he ate a lot and was thin and he didn't think that eating had anything to do with how much a person weighs. Another man called and said he was discriminated against because he was too thin and wanted us to tell him how he could gain some weight. I found myself being very impatient with these callers and was happy that Nancy and Louise spoke to their issues. Louise in particular is more understanding than I and genuinely able to respond with statements to the effect that the man who was thin was also oppressed and that we were allies in our desire to end size discrimination.

Sometimes when we spoke of being angry at the way we have been treated or misunderstood there would be signs of recognition from some of the audience. Many of the women in particular sat with greatly pained expressions and it was hard to tell if they were angry at us for what we were saying or angry at the way we had been treated. One thing was certain, there was no one in that audience who was unemotional about the issue.

As I watched the show once more I became aware that I was waiting for the man who asked about our sex life so I could hear exactly what he had said, and how I had responded. Then suddenly there he was, saying, "Can you pretend that you have healthy sex lives looking the way you do?" It was a perfect opening, "You should have it so good," I told him, and the audience roared with glee. I looked like I really meant it, and I did, but there were several other sides to it. I was furious that he would have the audacity to ask such a question, and with that smug look on his face, and I was delighted that I was able to zap the turkey. Still on another level I felt hurt: hurt that I had to put up with that kind of crap just to try to be heard, and hurt that I had to deal with this misogynist in front of millions of people. I knew that his assumptions in the guise of a question were also in the minds of others as they watched us there, big as life on television, and that my response hadn't convinced them. And more than anything I was hurt because it made a

difference to me what they think about me. Twelve years of fat liberation work and I was still thin-skinned enough to let the venom of anonymous strangers affect me.

However, while the show was being made there wasn't time to be letting myself feel too much of these feelings. Immediately after the sex question a man phoned in to ask how we felt about taking up more space on the planet earth than the average person, and Louise answered that maybe we all ought to move to Wyoming where there was a lot of space. I was glad she fielded that one. The guy hung up before he could get an answer anyway, but again he had voiced one of the questions I'm sure was in the minds of millions of people that day. I know I feel it from at least half of the people on any bus I ever ride on, particularly if it's crowded.

Lest it appear that it was all bad let me say that we were able to make a lot of information public during that one short hour, and Phil Donahue's staff had done some homework as well and came up with statistics about how much Americans spent in 1981 on diet drinks (6 billion), diet pills (200 million), diet and exercise books (50 million). We encouraged parents to support rather than punish their fat children, and we got to perform about half of the pieces we were told we could perform. Some of the audience was supportive. Many were incredulous. They just couldn't believe we could be right about what we were saying. There had to be something wrong with us. They were certain there was something we were doing wrong to make us so fat. One woman asked if we didn't ever eat a whole chocolate cake? None of us had. The most touching phone call was from a woman whose sister had had weight-loss surgery and died as a result. "I'd rather have her alive and fat," she said.

I kept watching for a place to drop the bomb that I was a lesbian and for a long time one didn't come. Then, just near the end of the show someone asked me something about my personal life and for a split second I knew it was now or never . . . and I let the moment pass. As I watched the screen I could see the expression on my face as the opportunity slipped by. It was even more painful to watch than I could remember when the incident actually happened. I've thought a lot about it since then, why I didn't come out. I've pulled myself back and forth with the issues. There were good reasons, of course. I didn't want to upset my mother, for one thing. In a moment of weak-



ness I had promised her I wouldn't tell my Aunt Paula I was a lesbian. But that wasn't the only reason. I didn't want to take away from the fat issue, especially because much of the audience was already so hostile. I felt if I came out they would say we were "just a bunch of dykes" and discount everything we had said about fat oppression. I was concerned about my Aunt Maude and Uncle Simon who were going to be watching in Michigan. They hadn't seen me in 25 years and that was 100 pounds ago. They would have enough to deal with how I look and how I am, so different from the sweet little niece they knew and loved. I just don't know. There are a million reasons why I should have come out then and an equal number why it wasn't right. It's one of those things that you just have to live with. I think I'd feel just as bad if I had come out, but for other reasons. It's hard to know. What I do know is I hate that I have to make these decisions at all.

Somehow, after what only seemed a few minutes, the show was suddenly over and we were rushed out into a waiting room, but not before the gorgeous fat camerawoman in overalls gave us the "liberation fist." One look at her and I wished I had decided to stay in Chicago for a few days. I never could resist a really gorgeous butch.

The show ended at 10 A.M. and our plane was due to leave at noon. We took a taxi to the airport and passed the time in the waiting room. A few minutes after we arrived a man came up to us and asked, "Hey, aren't you the ones who were on the Donahue show this morning?" When we answered in the affirmative he said, "I thought so," and walked away smiling. We noticed several other people poking each other and pointing at us as we walked through the airport toward the departure gate. It was strange to be ogled and pointed at for some reason other than meanness. We were being treated like stars. What a strange feeling, coming out of all that hostility to a kind of neutral awe. I guess just the fact that a person they saw on TV was in front of them live made them feel like we were important. Or maybe it made them feel *they* were important.

In the next few months we received over 400 letters from people who had watched the show all over the world. The mail came in essentially five categories: (1) positive mail that came from fat people who thanked us for finally saying what they had known all along, that they were really all right as they are, that

they had a right to be treated with dignity, that they did not necessarily eat more than thin people (20%); (2) positive letters from people who weren't fat but who felt that every human being has the right to be treated with dignity and respect. Most of these letters ended with something like "God loves you just as you are," or "Bless you for your courage to speak up" (30%); (3) truly vicious hate mail (15%); (4) Moralizers, some of which contained religious tirades about the *sin of gluttony*, and others which were lectures by compulsive exercisers about how we would be thin if we just jogged 26 miles every day like they did (25%); and (5) the hardest letters of all were from children and teenagers, asking questions like how they could get help to convince their parents that they were really OK and that they should not be sent to psychiatrists.

It would be hard to decide which was more interesting, being on the show or receiving the mail. The effects of both are still with me as I watch the show two years later on videotape. People have asked me if I'd do it again if I had the chance and I have to answer that I would. In **one hour** we were able to reach thousands of times the number of people we had reached in **twelve years** of fat liberation work. The responses we had from individual women living in isolation with their pain who received validation for the first time in their lives made it worth all the pain and trouble and more. So yes, I'd do it again. In fact I'd love to, but sometime I'd like to get a chance to talk about something other than fat, I mean I'd like to go on the stage, all 330 pounds of me and talk about something else, *anything* else, and never once mention my size. Wouldn't that blow them away?

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**Judy Freespirit:** I'm still living, working, and writing in Berkeley. The most exciting thing in my life right now is the prospect of my 50th birthday. Sometime in the next 50 years, I will find a way to travel cross-country and read for dykes as I go. Please stay tuned.

COMMON LIVES

# LESBIAN LIVES

*a lesbian quarterly*



*number twenty*

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THE CONCEPT OF *CL/LL*: *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* seeks to document the experiences and thoughts of lesbians as we claim our past, name our present conditions, and envision our evolving futures. *CL/LL* will reflect the complexity and richness of those experiences and thoughts by describing the lives of ordinary lesbians—women who have always struggled to survive and create a culture for ourselves. The magazine is a forum for developing and clarifying our lesbian-defined social and political relationships.

*Common Lives/Lesbian Lives* is committed to reflecting the diversity among us by actively soliciting and printing in each issue the work and ideas of lesbians of color, Jewish lesbians, fat lesbians, lesbians over fifty and under twenty years old, physically challenged lesbians, poor and working-class lesbians, and lesbians of varying cultural backgrounds. *CL/LL* feels a strong responsibility to insure access to women whose lives have traditionally been denied visibility and to encourage lesbians who have never before thought of publishing to do so.

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION—SEE PAGE 128.

COVER: from "Mes Amies, les Amantes," photograph series by Noel Furie

## COMMON LIVES / LESBIAN LIVES

*a lesbian quarterly*

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