

A Weight That Women Carry

By Sallie Tisdale

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I don't know how much I weigh these days, although I can make a good guess. For years I'd known that number, sometimes within a quarter pound, known how it changed from day to day and hour to hour.

I want to weigh myself now; I lean toward the scale in the next room, imagine standing there, lining up the balance. But I don't do it. Going this long, starting to break the scale's spell – it's like waking up suddenly sober.

By the time I was 16 years old I had reached my adult height of 5 feet 6 inches and weighed 164 pounds before and after a healthy pregnancy. I assume I weigh about the same now; nothing significant seems to have happened to my body, this same old body I've had all these years.

I usually wear a size 14, a common clothing size for American women. On bad days I think my body looks lumpy and misshapen. On my good days, which are more frequent lately, I think I look plush and strong; I think I look like a lot of women whose bodies and lives I admire.

My mother was a size 14, like me, all her adult life; we shared clothes. She fretted endlessly over food scales, calorie counters and diet books. She didn't want to quit smoking because she was afraid she would gain weight, and she worried about her weight until she died of cancer five years ago.

Dieting was always in my mother's way, always there in the conversations above

my head, the dialogue of stocky women. But I was strong and healthy and didn't pay too much attention to my weight until I was grown.

It probably wouldn't have been possible for me to escape forever. It doesn't matter that whole human epochs have celebrated big men and women, because the brief period in which I live does not; since I was born, even the voluptuous calendar girl has gone.

Today's models, the women whose pictures I see constantly, unavoidably, grow more minimal by the day.

When I berate myself for not looking like...whomever I think I should look like that day, I don't really care that no one looks like that. I don't care that Michelle Pfeiffer doesn't look like the photographs I see of Michelle Pfeiffer. I want to look – think I should look – like the photographs.

Even when big people become celebrities, their weight is constantly remarked upon and scrutinized; their successes seem always to be in spite of their weight. I thought my successes must be, too. I feel myself expand and diminish from day to day, sometimes from hour to hour.

If I tell someone my weight, I change in their eyes: I become bigger or smaller, better or worse, depending on what that number means to them. I know many men and women, young and old, gay and straight, who look fine, whom I love to see and whose faces and forms I cherish, who despise themselves for their weight. For their ordinary, human bodies. They and I are simply bigger than we think we should be.

We always talk about weight in terms of gains and losses, and don't wonder at the strangeness of the words. In trying

always to lose weight, we've lost hope of simply being seen for ourselves.

My weight has never actually affected anything – it's never seemed to mean anything one way or the other to how I lived. Yet for the last 10 years I've felt quite bad about it. After a time, the number on the scale became my totem; more important than my experience – it was layered, metaphorical, metaphysical, and it had bewitching power. I thought if I could change that number I could change my life.

In my mid-20s I started secretly taking diet pills. They made me feel strange, half-crazed, vaguely nauseated. I lost about 25 pounds, dropped two sizes and bought new clothes. I developed rituals and taboos around food, ate very little and continued to lose weight.

I lost more weight until I was rather thin, and then I gained it all back. It came back slowly, pound by pound, in spite of erratic and melancholy and sometimes frantic dieting; dieting I clung to even though being thin had changed nothing, had meant nothing to my life except that I was thin.

Looking back, I remember blinding moments of shame and lightning-bright moments of clear-headedness, which inevitably gave way to rage at the time I'd wasted – rage that eventually would become, once again, self-disgust and the urge to lose weight. So it went, until I weighed exactly what I'd weighed when I began.

I felt I should always be dieting, for the dieting of it; dieting had become a rule, a given, a constant. Every ordinary value is distorted in this lens.

The fat person's character flaw is a lack of narcissism. She's let herself go. So I would begin again – and at first it would all seem so.... easy. Simple arithmetic.

After all, 3,500 calories equal one pound of fat – so the books and articles by the thousands say.

I would calculate how long it would take to achieve the magic number on the scale, to succeed, to win. All past failures were suppressed. If 3,500 calories equal one pound, all I needed to do was cut 3,500 calories out of my intake every week. The first few days of a new diet would be colored with a sense of control – organization and planning, power over the self. Then the basic futile misery took over.

I would weigh myself with foreboding and my weight would determine how went the rest of my day, my week, my life. When 3,500 calories didn't equal one pound lost after all, I figured it was my body that was flawed, not the theory.

I believed that being thin would make me happy. Such a pernicious, enduring belief. I lost weight and wasn't happy and saw that elusive happiness disappear in a vanishing point, requiring more – more self-disgust, more of the misery of dieting.

The possibility of living another way, living without dieting, began to take root in my mind a few years ago, and finally my second trip through Weight Watchers ended dieting for me. This last time I just couldn't stand the details: the weighing-in by the quarter-pound, the before and after photographs of group leaders prominently displayed. I hated the endlessness of it, the turning of food in to portions and exchanges, everything measured out, permitted, denied. I hated the idea of "maintenance."

Finally I realized I didn't just hate the diet. I was sick of the way I acted on a diet, the way I whined, my penny-pinching behavior. What I liked in

myself seemed to shrivel and disappear when I dieted.

Slowly, slowly I saw these things. I saw that my pain was cut from whole cloth, imaginary, my own invention. I saw how much time I'd spent on something ephemeral, something that simply wasn't important, didn't matter. I saw that the real point of dieting is dieting – to not be done with it, ever.

I looked in the mirror and saw a woman, with flesh, curves, muscles, a few stretch marks, and the beginnings of wrinkles, with strength and softness in equal measure. My body is the one part of me that is always, undeniably, here.

To like myself means to be, literally, shameless, to be wanton in the pleasures of being inside a body. I feel loose this way; a little abandoned, a little dangerous.

That first feeling of liking my body – not being resigned to it or despairing of change, but actually liking it – was tentative and guilty and frightening. It was alarming, because it was the way I'd felt as a child, before the world interfered. Because surely I was wrong; I knew, I'd known for so long, that my body wasn't all right this way.

So I imagine losing weight again. If the world applauded, would this comfort me? Or would it only compromise whatever approval the world gives me now?

What else will be required of me besides thinness? What will happen to me if I get sick, or lose the use of a limb, or, God forbid, grow old? By fussing endlessly over my body, I've ceased to inhabit it.

I'm trying to reverse this equation now, to trust my body and enter it again with a whole heart. I know more now than I

used to about what constitutes "happy" and "unhappy," what the depths and textures of contentment are like. By letting go of dieting, I free up mental and emotional room. I have more space, I can move.

The pursuit of another, elusive body, the body someone else says I should have, is a terrible distraction, a sidetracking that might have lasted my whole life long. By letting myself go, I go places.

Each of us in this culture, this twisted, inchoate culture, has to choose between battles: One battle is against the cultural ideal, and the other is against ourselves. I've chosen to stop fighting myself.

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