

Fat & Choice: A Personal Essay*by Marilyn Wann*

Plenty of people think that I choose to be fat. Currently, it's popular to believe that everyone's weight is a choice, readily influenced by eating and exercise. This is a big, fat lie.

Why would anyone (the government, doctors, advertisers, the media) lie? To make money. Fat hatred -- and fear of fat -- sells. Every year, Americans waste \$50 billion on products that promise (and fail to deliver) lasting weight loss. In fact, the ongoing existence of weight-loss methods (plural) is proof that all of them conform to the medically documented 90 percent to 98 percent failure rate; i.e., if any one of them "worked," the rest would be out of business. (Failure is necessary for their business model. Repeat customers, and all.)

With the billions that Americans invest each year in hating our thighs and our abs and our butts (and our fat sisters and brothers), we could feed all of the hungry and food-insecure people in the US, we could build numerous houses for each homeless person in the US, or we could put more than a third of high school graduates through college for free.

Believing the lie (that I choose to be fat) allows two important fantasies to persist. #1. The fantasy that everyone can access the good life (money, sex, happiness, near-eternal longevity, basic human respect) via calorie-counting or carb-constraint or cardio-crunching or whatever the latest, thin-seeking fad is. #2. The necessary corollary fantasy that fat people like me really are lazy, stupid, gluttonous, undisciplined, smelly, dirty "others" who deserve all the mistreatment we get. After all, we - perversely -- choose it.

Let's call #1 and #2 what they really are: thin supremacies and fat oppression. The negative stereotypes and stigma that American culture currently applies to fat people are the same epithets that have been used to justify every other outsider group. Prejudice isn't a new, or inventive, process. (And no, I'm not equating fat prejudice with the horrifying toll of racism or sexism or homophobia, I'm just saying they have similar mechanisms to their various ends.)

Here's what I choose. I choose what I eat (good nutrition). I choose how I exercise (regularly). I choose to celebrate my unique body, which happens to be fat. (I look like my beautiful, 81-year-old fat mother, which is my honor and my birthright.) The average reader will be incredulous...I **must** be doing something wrong, otherwise our fair-minded universe wouldn't have cursed me with a socially disapproved weight/body. That's called blame-the victim.

I've done nothing wrong. And even if I did eat nothing but donuts, anti-fat prejudice would still be a serious wrong. Instead, I eat when I'm hungry and stop

when I'm full, filling my moderate diet with grains, veggies, all the yummy stuff that's available where I live in San Francisco. No, my hunger is not gargantuan, it's normal. I don't starve myself, so I have no interest in binging. (People who do weight-loss diets are likely to set that purge/binge pendulum in motion and I support them in getting weight-neutral, professional help for overcoming the eating disorders they are likely to develop.)

Well, then, I must be sitting on the couch all day? Not so. I delight in regular exercise. Each week, I do aerobics (with fat positive trainers Cinder Ernst and Jennifer Portnick), yoga (with fat-positive instructor Sally Pugh), and water aerobics (at the Making Waves swim for fat women). I choose to move my body only in settings where my body is respected, not reviled. Happily, fat pride community has rich resources for fitness where I live. If such resources don't exist near you, demand them or create them. Each of us deserves to take good care of ourselves because we're worth it, not because we seek to make less of ourselves.

I choose my behaviors, but I don't choose what shape my body is. That's not something anyone can, or should, attempt to control 100 percent. We are, each of us, a mix of nature and nurture. What our weight-obsessed society currently refuses to acknowledge is that, in the case of weight, nature is stronger than nurture. Based on studies of identical twins, researchers estimate that weight and height are equally genetically predisposed. (In a different world, I suppose we'd spend billions on the height-loss industry.)

As feminists, we should be smart and skeptical enough to see through the lies that justify fat hatred. We should recognize that we're living in dark times, where body image is concerned. Body hatred is the norm, now. It's the rare woman who *doesn't* have a somewhat disordered relationship to food and eating. As feminists, we should be able to recognize the witch hunt on fat and we should be independent and courageous enough to ask the ultimate, unthinkable question: "What wrong with being a witch?" In other words, what is so very wrong with being fat? We should be ready to listen to and join with radical healthcare professionals from the Health At Every Size paradigm who argue that the data do not support this monomania on weight, that people naturally come in all sizes and can be healthiest through good behavior, not through BMI. The sciences have been mis-used throughout history to rubberstamp mainstream oppressions. Doctor doesn't know best when he or she is perpetuating bias, stereotype, stigma, and hate. Correlation does not equal causation. If a fat person experiences poor health, it might just be because we're ridiculed in fitness establishments, because we've undergone repeated, dangerous weight-loss attempts, because we receive less medical care and a poorer quality of care than thinner people, because we are targets of stressful discrimination and social isolation. When Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research head researcher Steve Blair, MD, looked at just one of these important variables (fitness), he found that fatter people who exercised regularly were healthier and lived longer than thinner

people who were sedentary. The only thing anyone can diagnose by looking at a fat person is their own level of prejudice toward fat people.

Feminists should be able to celebrate the diversity of human body shapes and sizes, should understand that people can and should exist at all points along the weight spectrum. We should divest from an oppressive system of thought that, taken to its logical conclusion, expects all humans to exist in a very narrow range of (thin) weights. That's not reality, that's something monolithic that nobody really wants.

As a proud fat person and a feminist, I want to offer a third choice to fat and thin brothers and sisters who have been suffering under a false dichotomy. Our society has had us convinced that there are only two choices: either one is thin (and happy and healthy and socially worthy) or one is fat (and thus unhappy, unhealthy, and socially unworthy). There is a third choice: celebrating everyone's unique body and welcoming all possible happiness and health and social worthiness for every body.

Sometimes, my fat sisters and brothers (at increasingly lower weights) insist they have no other choice but to undergo a mutilation that I refuse to call by its sanitized name of weight loss surgery, but instead give truer names: stomach amputation, gut lobotomy, surgical starvation. They are so invested in the false hope of thin supremacies that they can't imagine (much less hope for) a world that celebrates weight diversity. They have heard so many death threats (really, sales pitches) that they are willing to undergo a dangerous, experimental, undocumented procedure that kills one in 50 people within the first month, post-op. When I argue that there are other choices, they claim I'm trying to take away their allegedly only choice. (They make inapt analogies to abortion and a woman's right to choose). Yes, we each have sovereignty over our bodies. Like early proponents of birth control, I'm in the position of trying to an option other than lose/lose. (I think people are "losing" on both sides of the fat/thin divide, because that divide alienates fat people and thin people from our own bodies and from genuine relations with each other.) What about the win/win option of good health behaviors (good nutrition, joyful movement) *AND* good body image for people of all sizes? I encourage feminists to be 'pro' that powerful, liberating choice.

I choose to fight fat oppression. I find this struggle to be much better for me -- physically, psychologically, and politically -- than the weight-based paradigm ever was. It's actually easier and more possible to change the world than it is to change one's own body. To paraphrase George Clinton, "Free your ass and your mind will follow." Will you stop fighting fat and join in the fight against fat oppression? I could really use the help!