

Reflections on Fat Acceptance: Lessons Learned from Privilege
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Abstract: Drawing on her personal experience and observations of internalized oppression and thin privilege, Linda Bacon identifies stumbling blocks to fat acceptance and strategies for personal empowerment and effecting change in others.

I'd like to start with a personal disclosure, so you can have a better frame of reference for the ideas I discuss. I want to be very clear about the stakes for me.

I profit enormously from fat discrimination. Let me repeat that, because it's going to be an essential point to understand as I develop my thesis today. I profit enormously from fat discrimination. That fat people get screwed over daily has made my life a hell of a lot easier.

I'll give you an example of one of the many instances when I was made acutely aware of this. I was on a hiring committee interviewing candidates for a nutrition professorship. When it came time to discuss the lone fat candidate, one of my colleagues dismissed her by saying, "Well she really isn't the role model for someone who eats nutritiously, is she?" My colleague had made this assumption based entirely on the candidate's weight. I was horrified, and what it reinforced for me was that had this candidate been up against a thinner woman similar in other aspects – or even with lesser qualifications - the thinner person would have gotten the job – just by virtue of what she weighed.

That led me to think about the many challenges this job candidate had probably overcome to get her PhD in nutrition. Even attending an introductory nutrition course can be a threatening and disempowering act, given the common assumptions that most nutrition instructors – and her fellow classmates – may have had about her weight and her relationship to food. It's safe to guess for example, that she took classes from conventional nutrition instructors, like the one we ended up hiring in her stead, despite my protests. She routinely starts her weight management section by having people calculate their body mass index (BMI), which she uses as a lead in to name health risks for people who are in the overweight or obese categories. She then discusses the root causes of "overweight" and "obesity," in her view, overeating and inactivity, and the solutions: diet and exercise. You get the general idea: fat people are lazy, undisciplined gluttons, destined for disease and early death – but with the right strength of character, anyone can lose weight and become a better person. I can't imagine how taxing it may be as a fat person to endure those lectures. That this woman managed to withstand that kind of misinformation and stigmatization to actually get her PhD is just extraordinary.

Up against a similarly credentialed thinner woman, I imagine this fat woman would actually be a supremely better choice – the resilience and survival skills she has developed, her determination, her belief in herself, her ability to withstand a culture informing her that she's defective, and what an incredible role model she could be for her students. That is, unless she's internalized the fat hatred, apologizes for her size, and reinforces conventional thought, which is the more common route undertaken by fat dietitians. It's much easier to survive that way.

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There's a term that helps us to discuss this issue. It's called "thin privilege." Privilege is about receiving unjust advantages at the expense of others. I can think of very little in my life that is untainted by thin privilege. For example:

- Because of thin privilege, I had a larger dating pool, which made it easier for me to find the incredibly wonderful and supportive partner that I have.
- Because of thin privilege, I have had easier access to meeting and gaining approval from other people socially, some of whom have provided career opportunities for me.
- Because of thin privilege, I can go into a clothing store, get treated with respect, and have a larger choice of fashions and at cheaper price than fatter people.
- Because of thin privilege, I can be assured of only having to pay for one airline seat, making travel and its accompanying opportunities much more accessible to me.
- Because of thin privilege, I have developed a platform and persona that resulted in being asked to speak to you today.

I of course could go for days listing the ways I have benefitted from thin privilege, but I'm sure this audience doesn't need to hear my litany, and I believe I've made my point with these relatively simple examples.

Most people who have thin privilege don't think much about their privilege, and may not even be aware of many aspects of it. That is, until a fat person comes along and forces them to think about it. I thought I was being generous and kind when I bought a large drink for my buddy before our plane flight and then got informed that she preferred not to drink because she couldn't fit in the airplane bathroom. I didn't have to think much about thin privilege when taking my son on a row boat until we realized that they didn't have a life vest that would have allowed our fat friend to join us.

Keep in mind throughout this talk that I will be simplifying issues in our short time together. Thin privilege is not a binary phenomenon that you either have or not, but expresses itself differently across the weight spectrum. Also, there is a very complex system of overlapping privileges, causing a man, for example, to experience his thin privilege differently than a woman might, or a wealthy woman to experience her thin privilege differently than a woman of lesser economic means.

Thin privilege only exists, of course, because fat oppression exists – because we have this sick cultural idea that there is something wrong with fat and that a fat body is a marker of a defective person. This idea is so strong, so deeply entrenched in the culture, that we absorb it, it gets lodged in our psyches, and most people, fat and thin, come to believe and act as if this oppressive idea is reality. Most people want to be thin – and view thin as better. The internalization of this belief drives the body anxiety most people – fat and thin - experience. It fuels our preoccupation with trying to obtain or maintain that thin weight - and the feelings of shame if our bodies don't measure up.

I understand that it's not news in this room that fat oppression is painful and pervasive and that there are unearned privileges that come by virtue of being thin. I name these issues because I want to turn the discussion to how we can move towards undoing this system of oppression and privilege.

I'd like to do this through some personal stories as I think they can shed light on a helpful framework.

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I've thought a lot about my motivations in getting involved in fat rights, and it's a question I am frequently asked. I hear that I have a reputation for being fair-minded and compassionate. If you believe that's why I do this work, you're way off-base.

Being kind and compassionate is not enough to help people come to terms with fat prejudice, and there are many caring people on the other side of the fence, actively conducting the war on fat. In fact, I believe that most people get involved in fighting "obesity" because they sincerely care about fat people and want to improve the quality of their lives.

The obesity war-mongers are not our enemies. Rather, they are the logical result of living in a fat-phobic culture. All they did was absorb the world around them. When people are subjected repeatedly to images of fat people as lazy gluttons, to images of thin people as attractive, desirable and healthy, to notions that weight is controllable by diet and exercise or that fat causes people to get sick and die early, it should come as no surprise that these ideas become ingrained in their psyches and they come to believe them.

No, my motivation for working against fat oppression has little to do with being a caring or fair-minded person. When it comes down to it, working in this field is really about my own survival. I fight fat-phobia because it's ugly and mean and I need to save myself from it. I do what I do because I'm really afraid – because I believe that the costs of not challenging this system are too painful for me to bear. My whole world shifted once I understood that. **The war that was originally waged against my self – the fat on my body – was more appropriately waged against oppressive attitudes about fat.**

Let me share a little more about why fat oppression feels so painful for me, because it may not be so patently obvious given my body size. The cultural perception of fat bodies as "wrong" hurts those of us in the "right" bodies too. In fact, most thin people suffer from anxieties about their weight. An individual's weight tells you very little about whether it feels problematic to them.

I share this not because I expect you to feel sorry for the poor skinny woman harmed by fat attitudes, but because I think it may be helpful to get inside the psyche of someone with thin privilege, to team my experience with information that NAAFA's mostly fat membership already knows from their insider perspective as we conceptualize a strategy for social change.

My colleagues in the Biology Department where I work learned that fat phobia plagues people of all sizes the hard way. They had asked me to conduct a seminar on weight regulation, open to our student body and the general public, as part of their ongoing seminar series. Previous seminars had never filled the 70-person conference room. I warned them that it was a hot topic and I had some name recognition and suggested a larger venue, but no one took me seriously. When the time came, I did in fact conduct the seminar in front of a packed house, and later found out that while I was calmly lecturing behind heavy closed doors, there was a riot in the hallway that required police involvement. Apparently some women were fighting to get in. My department chair observed the rioters and commented, "And they didn't even have a weight problem." I was stunned. That they were rioting and feeling so desperate to attend made a pretty clear statement to me, but apparently he couldn't see beyond their thinness. But I assure you – fat or thin, most of us suffer deeply from cultural ideas about fat, although this suffering of course manifests in each of us in different ways and to different degrees.

Let me provide some examples that will help you understand why fat phobia has taken such a toll on me personally.

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First, as long as it is more difficult to live in a fat body, I have to fear becoming fat. This resulted in an eating disorder I endured when I was younger, along with accompanying difficulties with food, body image and self-esteem. It's also behind the occasional bad body days I experience to this day. You'd think with all my education and awareness on this topic, with all the processing I've done over the years, with all the time I've spent in the fat pride community, with the incredible role models I have among my close friends, that I'd be over it. But it just goes to show how insidious the culture is, how it gets lodged deep inside our souls.

I'm also saddened to think of all the energy I wasted trying to maintain or achieve a thinner body when I was younger – the social interactions I missed out on and how much more I could have contributed to the world had I applied that time and energy to more substantive concerns. There were parties I didn't attend, job searches I postponed, and many occasions that I hid in the background not wanting to draw attention to myself, waiting until I lost weight and could be more presentable. Imagine all the body hatred in this world – and the enormous power we would have if it were harnessed for social change.

Also painful to consider is how the oppressive values that I've absorbed have limited my world. When prejudice rears its ugly head, I get blinded by my preconceptions and can't see people for who they really are. I get cheated out of seeing people in all their wonderful uniqueness because ideas about who they are have formed long before I know someone. How many friendships and networking opportunities do we miss out on due to unchallenged prejudice? Remember that fat chick everyone ostracized in high school? Who is she? Someone in the audience here, perhaps? What did we miss out on by not befriending her? I say "we" specifically here because the research shows that people of all sizes hold these same prejudices when they see fat people. We're all trained to see fat people as less valuable as friends, lovers and colleagues.

I already mentioned the obvious point that I get enormous advantages from thin privilege. I also pay costs for accessing my thin privilege, though these may not be obvious. Let me explain.

First, I can't fully feel a sense of legitimacy for what I do accomplish, knowing that it was partly unjustly earned. Understanding that there are so many greater demands placed on fat people in order to achieve, how can I have a sense of legitimacy in *my* achievements? I landed my nutrition professorship in part because most people who could be potential competition were eliminated before they entered the rigors of academia, and others have gotten weeded out along the way. Indeed, I have long since given up belief in meritocracy. My life is not solely what I made of it; many doors have opened for me through no virtue of my own making.

I hear so often from people who lose weight and suddenly get more attention that they can't truly appreciate it because they don't feel confident that they are being valued for who they truly are. And they feel enormous pressure: if they ever regain the weight, they suspect that they would lose their new-found admirers.

Have you ever cheated before? I remember playing in a tennis tournament when I was a teenager. I was hot and tired, and there was a lot riding on my victory. I was a point away from victory and my opponent hit a deep lob that I just couldn't get to in time; it hit the line – a fair, well-played shot - but I called it "out." It's down on the record books that I won the match, but it was a hollow victory and I still feel dirty to this day. **Inequity hurts the oppressor as well as the victim.**

By now, I think I've well established that everyone – fat and thin - pays an enormous cost for fat oppression - and for maintaining the system of advantages and privileges extended to thinner people.

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My goal is to use this information to define a strategy for social change – and I promise you I will get there soon – but I want to first digress by naming the two most common strategies we have been invoking so far. These are: 1) an appeal to fairness and equity; and 2) education.

The appeal to fairness and equity is of course logical. Most thoughtful people agree that discrimination just isn't okay and should not be tolerated. However, appeals to fairness have proven surprisingly unconvincing to most people when it comes to fat rights. The main reason appears to be that most people believe that fatness is a personal choice, a result of poor lifestyle habits, and that individuals deserve to hold responsibility for their choice. After all, the argument goes, if fat people want to escape discrimination, they should just lose weight – and thinner people should not have to absorb the costs of someone else's fatness, whether it's about sitting in a cramped seat or the taxes incurred from health care costs. In effect, this attitude often justifies more discrimination, with the belief that the unfair treatment may motivate people to lose weight.

It's interesting to note that many mainstream forums are now trying to encourage fairness. Even the *Surgeon General's Call To Action To Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity* states that one of the priorities should be to "change the perception of overweight and obesity." The Rudd Center at Yale University provides another example, with a program dedicated towards exposing and fighting weight bias.

As positive as an appeal to fairness may be in some regards, however, when it gets conducted without substantive challenge to the weight paradigm, it backfires. Because thinness is still seen as normative and ideal, even when well-intentioned potential allies get involved in these issues, the tendency is to fight fat bias in order to support fat people in getting thin. The Rudd Center is classic in this regard. There is a dual mission: at the same time that they conduct anti-bias work, they undermine it through their other mission: fighting "obesity."

Put in other terms, their platform is one of "love the fat person, hate the fat." Historically, we know that this attitude stands in the way of civil rights. Consider the common religious belief to "love the homosexual, yet hate the homosexuality." That attitude may have supported my in-laws in loving their daughter and her partner (me) - or at least their conception of who we are - but it sure didn't help them to celebrate the announcement that we were having a baby, which was viewed as a product of our sin. It also required that we maintain superficiality in our relationship because there were so many aspects of who we are that they couldn't engage with because they didn't want to acknowledge as a part of us.

It's just not effective to tell someone to "love the sinner but hate the sin" when the "sin" you're referring to is integral to who they are. It's just not possible to separate me from my queerness, just as there's no guarantee that you can separate a fat person from their adiposity in a healthy manner. The result is that you end up instead giving power to the "thin person within fantasy," all the while denying the reality of the real person in front of you.

The other strategy that is commonly employed, particularly by those of us in the Health at Every Size movement, is education, using well-reasoned academic arguments bolstered by scientific research. Unfortunately, experience repeatedly shows that this also has limited effectiveness. Fat-phobic assumptions are so strongly part of our cultural landscape that it becomes difficult to help someone understand the fallacy even when they're exposed to statistics, logical arguments, or examples of the disparities and pain caused by these attitudes.

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Consider one of the more egregious examples of this: an enormous body of peer-reviewed epidemiologic research consistently indicates that people who are in the overweight category live longer than people in the category deemed to be normal and advisable. Even government statisticians at the Centers for Disease Control found this to be true – and under pressure, published this result in the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

But in the world of fat politics, biased assumptions typically trump evidence. Lest people actually allow the data to inform practice, the CDC issued a disclaimer to state health agencies stating that “despite the recent controversy in the media about how many deaths are related to obesity in the United States, the simple fact remains: obesity can be deadly.” In effect, the CDC warned us against allowing the evidence to distract us from prejudice. No, evoking science and truth is not enough to get us out of this mess.

I used to believe that education was the cornerstone of change, before I actually started doing this work. If only people knew the truth, they would act in ways that support what they know. But this just isn't true. Certainly we need to provide education on these issues and expose the myths. Indeed, a large part of my career is dedicated to educating people about the myths and realities associated with fat. And I applaud NAAFA for the recent *Size Discrimination Toolkit*, another crucial component in our arsenal. I don't want to suggest that attempts at education are unimportant — just that, when it comes to weight, academic and other rational arguments hold limited *independent* value as social change strategy.

Most people have internalized fatism and believe that there is something wrong with fat, from the perspective of appearance as well as health. We're all subject to what psychologists call “confirmation bias.” Once a belief is in place, we screen information in a way that ensures our beliefs are proven correct.

Also, because we like to believe that our values are derived from a well-reasoned thought process of our own volition, there's a natural resistance to the notion that we're basically pawns who have absorbed an oppressive system, actively complicit in our own oppression and that of others. It makes sense that people have a strong defense system – denial - that prevents many people from seeing this.

People also reach for denial when an intolerable situation has been pointed out to them but the means for change are hard to grasp and the penalties for contributing to that change are high, causing even those who may be more willing and capable of challenging hegemony to get suckered back into the denial. Myths about weight are so deeply entrenched that it is difficult for some people to imagine that they can live happily and successfully in a large body. Similarly, it is hard for professionals to believe that they can capture an audience if they support size acceptance.

Contrast this, on the other hand, to the promise posed by weight loss, which is that we can find our way out of the pain merely by losing weight or maintaining a low weight – and that weight loss is attainable with the right attitude. It makes sense that many people want to grab on to weight control as a lifeline. The advantages associated with weight loss are very appealing.

So how do we help people understand that the source of their pain is not the weight itself – but the weight prejudice and the thin privilege?

Rather than viewing this as a problem that's out there – changing others – I'd like to focus in on key lessons I have learned in my own ongoing process of saving myself. As I mentioned earlier, it is this drive

to save myself that I believe is at the heart of being effective in changing others. I'm hoping this model will be valuable for others to consider in our efforts at social change.

So let me pepper this with more story-telling and show you what I've learned from some of my experiences.

I am a nutrition professor, and one of the most common questions I get is predictable: "how can I lose weight?" Early in my career, I used to address the question directly, responding, for example, that no method has proven successful, that the body has mechanisms that resist weight loss, etc.

But over time I came to realize that regardless of the value provided by that kind of myth-busting, I was tacitly allowing fat-phobia into my classroom. The question assumes that weight loss is desirable and my silence made me complicit. I was supporting students in their belief that thinner was better – and I wasn't protecting the rest of the class from this judgment. It was an important moment for me to see an example of how I had been allowing fat oppression into my class.

At first, I felt a tremendous sense of guilt. But over time I've lightened up on this. Just as I'm becoming gentler in my outlook with the obesity war-mongers, I'm learning to be patient with myself when I collude with the enemy. Like all of us, I've been well trained to tolerate fat-phobia – it's not surprising that I continue to be a work in progress in this regard.

The first time I took on the fat-phobia in this question was rather spontaneous. I tried to show some courage in the moment, though I was feeling anything but. "It must be painful for you to look at your body and feel as if there's something wrong," I said. "And likewise, I wonder if it's hard for others in the class to hear your self-judgment and wonder what you're thinking about their bodies."

Silence followed, an unusual occurrence in my classroom. Was it insensitive on my part to publically call the student on her internalized oppression in that way? Yes. Could I have handled it differently, better? Yes. I've since learned more effective ways of handling that question. We didn't have the magical discussion that day, you know the one where people actually reflect on how they've internalized a value system predicated on self-hatred, how they become the arbiters of culture, transmitting and imposing that value system onto others. Perhaps I wasn't experienced or skilled enough to facilitate that discussion, perhaps they weren't ready, or perhaps the epiphany was too personal for people to process out loud in a large class.

But another lesson I've learned over time is that resistance isn't valuable only when it sparks an immediate and visible change. The power of resistance is to create a safe zone – even if it's just for a moment - where fat-phobia isn't tolerated, to set an example. You may not necessarily change the other, but you plant a seed. I can't tell you how many times people have told me over the years that they heard this message once, but it wasn't until years later that some other event catalyzed a new awareness. Without those earlier seeds, the later events wouldn't have had their impact.

Also important, that resistance empowers me. I'm getting better with practice, I feel stronger, more honest, and each time I do it, it gives me confidence and the strength to go further.

This issue of helping people to see their internalized oppression and privilege I think is key in changing values. There are a lot of well-intentioned people who want to help our cause but don't have the

necessary awareness to be as effective. Consider the tension on this topic in the feminist and eating disorders communities, and even, to a lesser degree, in the Health at Every Size community.

Let me give an example by providing some historical perspective.

In the 1980s, I was struggling with compulsive eating. At the time, there was a movement happening in the eating disorder and feminist communities which supported women in getting together in consciousness-raising groups that helped us come to terms with the cultural roots of our personal experience of body insecurity.

This marked a critical transition in addressing body image concerns. On the one hand, the power of the movement was in acknowledging that cultural ideas about appropriate body size kept women from developing a healthy relationship with food and their bodies. It got us talking and helped us to realize that we weren't alone. Like the more modern response of the Rudd Center, however, the movement pathologized the fat body and made claims that a healthy relationship with food and body would result in a thin physique. We were told that fat represented an unconscious response to a sexist culture, that we could change our response, and that weight loss would follow.

Despite the explicit fat-phobia, this model was very personally meaningful for me and helped me resolve some of my eating issues. Consistent with its prediction, I even lost weight as I developed a healthier relationship with food.

I then went on to use this model in my work as psychotherapist specializing in eating disorders, and that's when I realized that my results were not typical and that the model was quite damaging. While many clients were able to successfully address the emotional issues underlying their drive to eat and make inroads into taking better care of themselves emotionally, weight loss didn't always follow. Yet the model taught them that their weight was a visible representation of their failure, resulting in them feeling like they had failed and not being able to give value to their significant psychological gains. It limited their ability to accept their own bodies and contributed to their fat prejudice when viewing others.

Because some individuals do have the personal experience of losing weight – and because this idea that weight loss results from eating well is commonly assumed in the conventional paradigm, it is easy for people to latch on to. Indeed, these ideas still persist – and in fact, dominate - in the eating disorder and feminist communities.

Health at Every Size (HAES) represents the next generation. It incorporates the best of the model that was championed several decades ago, the cultural critique of body ideals and the belief that the body can be trusted, but it disentangles ideas such as fat as representative as pathology, the expectation that weight loss is likely outcome to this journey, and instead celebrates size diversity. In theory, HAES is a social justice model, free of fat oppression.

There is current tension in the movement today, however, with many members of the HAES movement still clinging to the privilege that comes with invoking aspects of the old paradigm. For example, some members still use the oppressor's vocabulary, using terms like overweight or obesity uncritically, or rely on fear-mongering about obesity to get attention for their cause. Others promote HAES as a means towards weight loss. While many are unaware of their compromised values, some do it consciously and justify this as an acceptable compromise to get heard.

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Also, privilege is often unexamined. I thought about this during a recent controversy within the Association for Size Diversity and Health (ASDAH), the HAES professional organization. A speaker was invited, and while her work is in many ways consistent with HAES, her recent book and other writings show that she is not fully on board: she pathologizes fat, viewing fat as a marker for eating problems and the fat body as an indictment of a culture gone wrong. A fat member quit in response to her being chosen as a speaker and other members, fat and thin, expressed concern. The real issue that underlies the controversy is privilege. Let me explain.

Some ASDAH members may be capable of hearing her speak and be able to take what they need from it and discard the rest. An interaction of different privileges, perhaps being thin and/or educated and/or in a more respected socio-economic class, allows them to do so.

On the other hand, consider the experience of a very fat person who posted to the ASDAH listserv in response. She reported that she rarely has a day go by where she is not subject to stares, derision and ridicule, where every visit to a book store, a movie, or a restaurant feels like an assault on her psyche. When you consider the amount of psychic energy it takes for that woman to just go into the world, it may be easier to understand that if fat phobia comes into the presentation, it's a lot more difficult for her to pass it by and not feel wounded.

The speaker may be educable and is likely to be able to craft a speech consistent with HAES values. Yet the fear of personal assault will be there, and the vulnerable fat woman may not feel safe coming to the talk, or even participating in ASDAH. Perhaps more at issue, many people joined ASDAH with the belief that they would find a supportive community opposed to those concepts; that this speaker was welcomed felt like a betrayal of trust, a loss of safe haven. Participating in ASDAH now requires defenses for some of our members.

Privilege allows some ASDAH members to rationalize the value of hearing other perspectives and to label the distressed individuals as the problem. They may not be aware of the role privilege plays in facilitating their response.

Once privilege is acknowledged, important questions can be asked: Is this a responsible use of privilege? Does the value of the dialogue justify the cost? What role does the degree of privilege we hold play in our responses to these questions?

These are not trivial questions. The war against fat people has been led by well-intentioned professionals – and I suggest that unexamined privilege factors strongly in making the best of intentions go awry.

One last story and then I'll draw this to a conclusion. I'd like to go back to the point I raised initially about being a relatively thin woman and outspoken about fat rights, as I believe it brings up some other thorny issues. While I know I get respect in the fat community, it also makes sense that there should be some distrust for me. What right do I have to play a strong role in the fat acceptance movement? Aren't ideas about fatness best defined and expressed by fat people themselves? As I speak now, I wonder if anyone in the audience is disturbed that I've been given this platform.

I remember in one class that I was teaching, a thin woman broached this subject in our class discussion, and my insecurity about this issue came front and center. "How is your work received by fat people?", she wanted to know. She talked about how she would like to speak out about these issues, but she was

afraid that she didn't have the right to speak for others, and that she wouldn't be trusted by fat people because of her appearance.

Before I got very far in my response, I couldn't help but notice that in the back of the room, there was a fat woman, hand up, obviously enraged, nearly jumping out of her seat to get my attention.

I felt waves of panic coming up, but figured I had to ride this out, so I called on her. "You don't represent me," she said belligerently. "I don't trust you. You're just another skinny bitch telling me and everyone else what it's like to live in my body. It's not okay that you get to define my experience."

And here's another disgusting fact about thin privilege. When we make the decision to resist a system that bestows privilege on us, we discover that even in our resistance we have power. She is absolutely right that she deserves the space to make her experience known and fight the good fight. But unfortunately privilege rears its ugly head: my academic credentials, my thin body, and all sorts of other privileges team up to give me a ready audience for my material, and it is much less easy for her to find a forum to have her important message heard.

It's not just about having an audience, it's also about gaining the trust of the audience. When I speak out for fat rights and against thin privilege, in most audiences my words are seen as far more credible than the same words spoken just as articulately by a fat person. People attach more of a sense of legitimacy to my words – they can't write it off as a way of rationalizing my fatness the way they might with a fat person.

Anyway, back to the moment. This was extremely hard for me – it was like my worst fears confirmed. I do feel like an imposter in my role sometimes – and I do recognize the dangers inherent in being seen as a spokesperson for fat people. I can't tell you how scary this is exposing these ramblings at NAAFA, in front of so many people I consider to be my heroes, with different and very personal perspective on the topics I address.

Stay cool, don't get defensive, I thought, honor her concerns. "I'm sorry to hear that," I said to her. "But it makes sense that you don't trust me. In fact, we've been set up to hate each other. There's a system out there teaching us that I've got the right body, you don't, that there's something defective about you that resulted in your body, and something virtuous about how I live that resulted in my body. And I certainly don't have your lived experience. Why should you trust me? But that's okay. You don't have to. Do you have any advice for this woman – or for me - about how people with thin privilege could best support fat people?"

An incredible discussion followed. And it comes back to that point I raised earlier. What we say may be less important than opening up the space, creating a safe zone where people can talk about their experience.

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The framework I laid out here is daunting, but I don't think we need to be overwhelmed. I actually feel great optimism for the future and I want to make sure to leave you on a hopeful note.

I could of course cite the usual platitudes to get you pumped up and believing that we're going to see a big impact. You know, stuff like committed people can move mountains. Or to list some of our great civil rights achievements that were unfathomable years ago. Or to remind you that people used to be convinced that the earth was flat.

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But I think there's a much bigger point to be made.

It may just be that we don't eradicate fat oppression. I'd like to have faith in the inevitability of justice being done, of good triumphing evil, but I need to be honest here and acknowledge that I'm just not confident that's going to happen. The civil rights movement based on race began long ago, and while some of the more explicit forms of racism are less tolerated, racism still permeates our psyches. Last month I watched a Latino pop the door lock on a car with a file and assumed he was breaking in to someone's car; had he been white-skinned, professionally dressed, I wonder if I would I have guessed the more accurate scenario: he had locked his keys in his car.

But before you get down on me for pessimism, I challenge you to look at it in a different way, because it can be very liberating to reframe it. Maybe the point isn't victory, as much as we would like to see that done. **Maybe the real issue is that through the effort to achieve freedom and equality we get our humanity.**

Desmond Tutu offered this advice as rationale for the work of a freedom fighter: "You don't do the things you do because others will necessarily join you in doing them, nor because they will ultimately prove successful. You do the things you do because the things you do are right."

I don't know the future of fat rights. I don't know whether anything I do, or write, or teach, will make a difference. But I do it, write it, teach it anyway, because it's the right thing to do. And as uncertain as the outcome may be, the outcome of silence is clear. Change doesn't happen if you don't try. And given the choice between the uncertainty of taking action and the certainty of non-action, I opt for trying. It allows me to sleep at night and it gives me hope.

Letting go of the preoccupation with outcome, even while we fight for it, makes us more effective. If you require payoff, you'll burn out quickly. But if you are committed to the struggle, you can keep on keeping on. Even when you don't "win," there is fulfillment in your involvement in something worthwhile.

So here's the final advice I'd like to leave you with. Your primary source of power lies within you. Strive for integrity. Your value system has to come from you, not just something you've absorbed from your culture. Exorcise the oppressor's values lodged in your psyche. This is not an easy task I am recommending. It is tough sifting out what's legitimately right and good and in the best interest of you and our community, and ridding yourself of the ugliness of fatism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and all the other toxins in our environment. Have compassion for yourself throughout your journey. Recognize that it may be a destination you never get to, but it is the journey that is important.

Remember that those that have power currently are really quite vulnerable. Their power depends on the obedience of others. The military cannot be sustained if the soldiers refuse to fight. And each soldier that opts out weakens the troop. Your individual journey *is* important. When you take pride in your beautiful body, you opt out of the war. It will have its impact. Cliched as it may be, Ghandi was right: we need to be the change we wish to see in the world.

Challenging yourself to uncover your privilege and use it responsibly is the next suggestion I'd like to encourage. Until our society fundamentally changes, we can't escape or renounce the various privileges we have, whether it's our skin color, our socio-economic status, our size, our education, or any others. Being confronted with my privilege has been a painful process for me. Even though I am not responsible

for this unfair system, I live with its consequences. It's easy to feel guilty, to beat myself up over a system that supports me and excludes and harms my fat friends.

But as I have little control over the huge system of inequity, the guilt doesn't seem very effective. In fact, the guilt essentially just turns me into another victim of the unfair system. So I've found it much more helpful to feel my anger instead.

And I look for ways to channel my anger, so it doesn't eat me up. I can choose to resist. I can speak truth to power. I can write educational materials, facilitate empowerment groups for individuals struggling with these issues and training sessions for professionals. I can conduct research that exposes the inequity. Indeed, the possibilities for resistance are endless.

I've put the emphasis on the personal journey in this discussion, because I believe internal grounding and role modeling are critical aspects of social change. And it is precisely this journey that we need to support others in engaging in. As you direct your energy outward, I urge you to remember that many people who express fat-phobia are not malicious, but do so because they are cultural pawns. They need help disentangling their internalization of cultural values and the resultant pain before they will be able to celebrate diversity. I also want to encourage you to continue to develop a welcoming and safe haven. I applaud NAAFA for its efforts and success in this regard.

Before I close, I also want to name a concern I have in pushing this agenda. I have focused on personal change when addressing a mostly fat audience. It's just not fair to put the burden on an oppressed group to take personal responsibility for effecting change when the root problem is structural and institutional. I urge people to remember that as much as I highlight the personal aspects, please don't let this advice distract you from understanding that you are not the problem, though you live with its consequences. Nor do I want to distract you from simultaneously directly fighting for institutional change. Our second speaker, Sondra Solovay, is more educated and skilled than I am at addressing those issues, and I look forward to her developing the conversation when she speaks about the legal fight. I also look forward to the update from Lisa Tealer on NAAFA's superb work addressing institutional change.

I appreciate having this forum to air my perspective today and thank NAAFA for the honor. Thin privilege, in tandem with my other privileges, gives me a powerful advocacy voice in the fat rights movement, and I will continue to try to be responsible with that privilege. As more thin allies use our privilege responsibly, perhaps it will help people to listen to what fat people themselves are saying about their own lives. Likewise, I encourage all of you to use your privilege responsibly and see the connections between fat rights and other struggles for equality and freedom. Because ultimately we're all looking for the same thing: the right to inhabit our bodies with respect.

Thank you.

Thanks to the following reviewers for helpful feedback: Lucy Aphramor, Kristen Dunn, Jaqui Lowe Abigail Saguy, Scotlyn Sabean, and Marilyn Wann.

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