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# Revisiting Health at Every Size® with Lindo Bacon, PhD

- November 11, 2020

by **Chelsea Fielder-Jenks, LPC-S, CEDS and ASDAH Education Committee Chair**

When I heard Dr. Lindo Bacon was releasing a new book, *Radical Belonging: How to Survive and Thrive in an Unjust World (and Transform it for the Better)*, I was eager to read an excerpt that they generously sent along (see full excerpt below).

In the excerpt, Lindo revisits their first book *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight*, which was written over a decade ago, and expresses how they have personally and professionally evolved since that time.

While impatiently waiting for my copy of *Radical Belonging* to arrive, I caught up with Lindo over email to see how they are surviving this year and asked them the questions I couldn't wait to see answered by the book.

Note to reader: the following conversation is edited and condensed from original e-mail correspondence that took place between September 30 and November 10th, 2020 between Chelsea Fielder-Jenks, ASDAH's Education Committee Chair, and Dr. Lindo Bacon.

Chelsea: Lindo, how are you doing? Not the perfunctory "how are you doing," but really... how are you doing?

Lindo: Honestly, I'm feeling raw and vulnerable, and susceptible to mood swings that span a wide range, from despair and grief to love and gratitude.

Which I suppose is a somewhat "normal" response to these abnormal times.

I'm conscious that if I write what I'm feeling in the moment, it doesn't reflect how I'll feel in an hour, let alone when this is read. I think that's a big part of the stress of these times—the uncertainty of even the near future. Will Trump steal the election? When will I be able to hug a friend?

I guess in sum I can say that I'm doing well, mostly because I'm riding out this vulnerability by taking good care of myself, practicing acceptance and self-compassion. My challenge is that I've retreated socially too much, not engaging my wider circle of friends in a way that might be helpful but doesn't feel particularly safe to try right now. The irony is that I've written a book (released the week this blog will be posted) that's all about connection with others. A close friend just sent me the advance review copy and advised that I take my own advice. She bolded relevant sections for me. That alone was a pick-me-up—it did make me laugh and feel loved—though I haven't followed through.

Chelsea: Oh, yes. I think so many of us, myself included, are right there with you — figuring out how to take care of ourselves during this strange time, as, perhaps, our typical ways of taking care of ourselves are not accessible or are less effective as they once were. I find our self care has to evolve along with the upsets and changes in our life — I wonder if maybe you're just needing less connection right now, and that's okay?

Speaking of changes and evolution — your first book “Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth about Weight,” published over a decade ago, was named after the Health At Every Size (HAES) movement and offered a paradigm shift away from the conventional health notion that weight is an accurate indicator of health. How do you see HAES as having evolved since that time?

Lindo: In thinking about this question, I revisited the book, and these paragraphs from the “Community Acknowledgement” chapter jumped out at me:

“Choosing a book title was a conflicted process. As I intended to bring attention to the Health at Every Size movement and share my perspective on it, the main title “Health at Every Size” was a natural option. The first edition of the book has been out for a year now, and I'm thrilled to feel successful in both aspects.

The downside to using the words in my title, however, is that it may give off the impression that this is THE treatise on Health at Every Size, and the only way to articulate the movement. It's not. There are many divergent viewpoints within the Health at Every Size movement and this book represents my perspective.”

In the years since writing that, I have become increasingly aware the disclaimer wasn't sufficient—too many people assign too much authority to me to define the movement. My social privilege, being white and thin, for example, played a role in how I got to — and still remain — in this position.

I am also feeling less confident that I can adequately represent HAES ideas. Revisiting *Body Respect*, (my second book, co-authored with Lucy Aphramor), I'm still unsure whether what we wrote represented the prevailing HAES views or our views and our hopes for the HAES movement. In my more recent book, I'm more careful to express my views and hopes for HAES advocates, rather than speak for the HAES movement. You can find an excerpt where I revisit my book, *Health at Every Size* (excerpt provided below).

For these and other reasons, I prefer to step back in defining HAES values and, instead, support others in exercising their voices. I am appreciative that there are so many amazing folk who are rising up as spokespeople, and particularly to see many marginalized folk among them (I suppose I did just reveal one evolutionary feature!).

Nonetheless, the question of how HAES has evolved is vital. Currently, there's a mismatch: many people are being introduced to the old HAES values without awareness of its evolution. Which means many people are promoting HAES values, that aren't, well, HAES values.

So, I want to throw it back on you. How about ASDAH commissions an ASDAH member(s) to write that blog post? Knowing that marginalized folks are usually overworked, underpaid, and often asked for free labor, I'll donate money to pay that person—that can help ASDAH expand the pool of possible contributors.

Wow, that was a rather long-winded way to not answer a question, wasn't it!?!

Chelsea: Oh, yes – we'd happily accept a donation to fund a marginalized member's blog contribution! We love to feature our members' unique voices on our blog. Thank you for offering a donation to help support our mission – we will get to work with setting up that fund and a process to make it happen!

Note to reader: If you are an ASDAH member who is interested in writing a blog for ASDAH that is funded by Lindo's contribution, please let us know! Email us at [education@ASDAH.org](mailto:education@ASDAH.org). And include in the subject line: Lindo follow-up blog.

Chelsea: What advice do you have for people who are beginning to practice from a HAES® perspective?

Lindo: Find community. There's so much you can't get from reading and that only comes from connection with others. I can't stress how important community is, not just for learning, but for bolstering you, particularly when you have a marginalized identity, or if the views you ascribe to are marginalized in the larger culture, as HAES views are. Consider joining ASDAH, if you're not already a member, and getting actively involved.

Chelsea: Speaking of community — you've been active on Twitter and Facebook (@LindoBaconX) for some time now, and I saw that you just recently joined Instagram (@LindoBacon), which I was personally excited to see since that's the social media platform where I mostly engage with my HAES community — how can I or your other HAES community members provide a warm welcome?

Lindo: As part of book promotion, my publisher is coordinating with Instagram accounts in a sort of casual online book tour. If anyone reading is interested, we could schedule an Instagram Live or a pre-recorded Question & Answer. It doesn't matter how big or small your following is. Email Jennifer at [jennifer@benbellabooks.com](mailto:jennifer@benbellabooks.com) to get those plans rolling. My publisher has also created user-friendly social media graphics with quotables to make sharing easy. Please check them out to see if anything resonates, and know that this page will be frequently updated. You can start following me at @LindoBacon. (I'm @LindoBaconX on Twitter and Facebook.)

Chelsea: Going back to the new book for a moment, what are you most wanting readers to take away from reading *Radical Belonging*?

Lindo: Like most people with marginalized identities, my experience has taught me that it's hard to be yourself and feel like you belong in a culture that is hostile to your existence. So many of us feel wounded by a culture that has alienated us from our bodies and divided us from each other. My biggest goal in writing the book was to help readers come away with a feeling of belonging through seeing themselves in the book. To help them understand that the problem is in the culture, not their bodies. I hope, too, that I've provided meaningful strategies to help readers reckon with the trauma of injustice, as individuals and as members of a collective, and that it will contribute to transforming the culture to one of greater belonging.

Ijeoma Oluo is a Black activist and author of the NYT bestseller, *So You Want to Talk About Race*—her next book, *Mediocre: The Dangerous Legacy of White Male America*, will be released Dec 1—a woman I admire tremendously. A mutual friend put in a good word for me and she kindly agreed to review *Radical Belonging* and consider writing the foreword. I sobbed when I read the foreword she ended up writing.

Most meaningful for me was learning that my words carry meaning across our very different social identities. This sentence put me over the edge: “*Radical Belonging* is a rare book in which I saw some reflection of myself in every chapter.” I hope other readers have that experience, and that they walk away from the book with the understanding, in Ijeoma’s words, that “I deserve that connection, my community deserves that connection, and you do too.”

Chelsea: What’s next for Lindo?

Lindo: In-person gigs aren’t currently possible, so I adjusted and designed the infrastructure for a COVID-safe online *Radical Belonging* Community. It’s a place to connect, where we can meet each other, validate each other, lift each other up, challenge ourselves and grow.

I’m proud of what I created (in consultation with many others, many of whom had different identities than me): engaging content, discussion forums where we can chat and interact about our lives and the world we live in; online happy hours for meetups; book clubs; watch clubs for provocative podcasts, lectures, movies and more; private affinity groups for discussions with people who share your social identities or mission; and so much more.

As excited as I was, my finger trembled when I considered hitting the “publish” button. It’s quite vulnerable to be in the public eye and to host this space, and I delayed launching for months due to my fear of whether we can meet the challenges of really helping all people feel like they belong, across the range of all of our social identities. The resistance I get from the fatphobic detractors—the insults, the trolling, the infiltration of my social media community, the doxing and death threats—is much easier to weather than concern about potentially harming people who are genuinely seeking community. I really want to get it as right as I can, and make sure that everyone who shares our values feels like they belong.

Isn’t it ironic that I have just written a book about belonging and yet I am terrified to risk the vulnerability that I/we may fail to be able to establish conditions where others feel like they belong? I do see it as a healthy fear, though, signaling that I need to be more thoughtful about my privilege and what needs to be in place for people—particularly people with oppressed identities—to feel safe, welcomed and valued. I suppose the challenge of these times is to take the risk of doing something imperfectly and committing to learning and improving as we go.

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Bye for now, and I hope to see you around the community, whatever form that may take.

With love,

Lindo

Chelsea: Thank you, Lindo! It was great catching up and I deeply appreciate your vulnerability and willingness to connect. I look forward to reading more in Radical Belonging and learning more about the Radical Belonging Community!

Excerpt from Radical Belonging

Introduction to excerpt by Lindo Bacon, PhD:

My ideas expressed in my first book, Health at Every Size – and my name! – have evolved. What follows is an excerpt from my soon to be released book, Radical Belonging: How to Survive & Thrive in an Unjust World (While Transforming It For the Better), from a section entitled “‘Lifestyle’ Approaches to Health Improvement Rely on Privilege.”

“I used to be a big believer in promoting the idea that good health is achieved by taking personal responsibility for habits like eating well and exercising regularly. That’s much of the premise of my first book, Health at Every Size, often said to be the “bible” of the movement it’s named for.

I appreciate that the book has been transformative for many. I’m proud to hear ongoing stories from readers who tell me the book saved their life or invigorated their professional practice, inspiring a much more rewarding path. Yet now I can also see the limits of the personal responsibility argument, how it leads readers astray, and how it reflected my unexamined privilege.

Valuable as it may be, it’s also important to acknowledge that the ability to make personal behavior changes is a class privilege. By not naming this in my first book, I entrenched the problem. When not properly contextualized, a self-help book like the one I wrote takes responsibility off our culture’s shoulders. The shame I carry now is that this individualized response to health and eating, which I promoted in my first book, is still strongly embedded in many people’s conception of the Health at Every Size® movement. The ethos in my second book, Body Respect, coauthored with Lucy Aphramor, is different. It grounds the Health at Every Size concept in a social justice/systems-oriented frame. These newer ideas are supported and actively endorsed by the Association of Size Diversity and Health (ASDAH), the organization that has trademarked the HAES name, yet this approach does not have full traction in the HAES movement. I urge people who advocate for HAES to adopt this more updated understanding and to recognize the interplay between the personal and the political as we conceptualize healing. This requires a radical revisioning of health care and recognizing that it is not possible to define a health practice divorced of social context.

As Lucy Aphramor and I discuss in Body Respect, a focus on behavior change deflects attention from the more pernicious problem of systemic injustice, obscuring the reality that lifestyle factors account for less than a quarter of health outcomes. It puts the burden on the individual to assume personal responsibility for discomfort around food and weight and disease and adds a new stressor on one’s health, because it lets people be blamed for not doing more to manage or improve their health issues.

Maintaining the primacy of individual lifestyle change is also problematic because it diverts efforts from the more important systems-level issues which might be addressed through collective action. Additionally, it gives the false impression that lifestyle components, like eating and activity habits, are in fact individual “choices,” while ignoring the influence of social context and how it constrains or supports certain behaviors. Well-intended strategies like advising people to eat “a rainbow of foods” and prepare home-cooked meals are easier to follow if you have greater resources, like access to nearby grocery stores, money to spend in them, and time to cook up what you buy while it’s still fresh.

It is well established, too, that lifestyle-oriented changes yield greater health improvement for people with greater privilege in their lives. Paradoxically, some of the “downstream” methods of tackling inequalities in health can widen the very inequity gap they target.

To be clear, behavior change is valuable, but it can’t remove the stressors you face. No matter how you change your eating or activity habits, the factors that make up your lifeworld—challenges like discrimination, stigma, job insecurity, poverty, and caregiver responsibilities—will remain unchanged. Naming inequity and systemically working toward a fairer world is important not just on a systemic level. On an individual level, naming and acknowledging the social roots of health inequities can help a person lighten up on the self-blame, realistically consider their life circumstances, and come up with solutions that best allow them to engage in self-care.

While health-promoting behaviors make sense for everyone, for individuals with hard lives, building a fairer society and helping them manage the challenges of poor treatment will matter far more to health outcomes than whether they eat their veggies. Focusing on systemic roots over individual-level paradigms helps not only marginalized people, but everyone, though the relative impact might be stronger for those who face more barriers.”

[Next, “The Systemic Approach in Practice.” Check it out in *Radical Belonging*.]

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*Radical Belonging* will be released by BenBella Books November 10th, 2020.

About the author and book:

For two decades, Dr. Lindo Bacon has been a thought leader, their best-selling books *Health at Every Size* and the co-authored *Body Respect* challenging the weight discourse and supporting a more hopeful course for the global body positivity movement. In *Radical Belonging*, they dig deeper, widening the lens beyond body-based oppression and into belonging. *Radical Belonging* addresses this and more:

- How oppression results in trauma to our body, and can translate into anxiety, substance abuse, diabetes, eating disorders, and more

- How shame is a tool of oppression that can be deployed against marginalized people to maintain inequity
- How to understand our social anxieties not as psychological problems or flawed, weak, bad parts of ourselves, but aspects of our humanity and opportunities for connection
- How to rewire our nervous system, build our shame-resilience, and heal from the trauma of oppression
- Why a focus on self-love is “a spoonful of sugar to make the oppression go down,” not a substantive fix
- Why the popular admonition to be your “authentic self” can be damaging and is heavily influenced by privilege
- How mainstream body positivity reinforces oppression, and how to instead help it align with the more inclusive body liberation movement
- How to create pockets of refuge where we can be ourselves, come together in our woundedness, and trust each other

Masterfully blending science and storytelling, Dr. Bacon has written a powerful manifesto rooted in healing, liberation, and building a world where everyone — whether you are transgender, queer, Black, Indigenous or a Person of Color, disabled, old, or fat — belongs.

\*\*\* Do you want to get more involved with ASDAH? Become a member! Members are also welcome to join our Education Committee — if you’re interested in joining the Education Committee, please email Chelsea Fielder-Jenks at [Education@asdah.org](mailto:Education@asdah.org)

Chelsea Fielder-Jenks is a Licensed Professional Counselor-Supervisor in private practice in Austin, Texas. Chelsea works with individuals, families, and groups utilizing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, and EMDR frameworks. Chelsea is committed to ASDAH’s mission and incorporates HAES® principles throughout the various roles in her life. Chelsea also serves as the Education Chair for Central Texas Eating Disorder Specialists, a HAES-principled non-profit for eating disorder professionals. She is an expert contributor for Eating Disorder Hope and Addiction Hope. She has extensive experience working with adolescents, families, and adults who struggle with eating, substance use, and various co-occurring mental health disorders and has presented at regional, state, and national conferences. You can learn more about Chelsea and her private practice at [ThriveCounselingAustin.com](http://ThriveCounselingAustin.com).