

# Op-Ed

## Out in the Mountains

### It's Not How You Look, It's How You See

BY J. ALISON HILBER

In the July 1999 issue of *OITM*, I read the very insightful article by Alverta Perkins regarding the three-letter word "old." Great article, Alverta!!

As I read it, I realized in how many ways you could substitute three other letters — "f-a-t" — and have a similar result: For instance: "One has only to look in the greeting card displays to see the common joke of old age (fat). It's pathetic, it's funny, it's to be avoided at all costs." "The media portrays old (fat), especially old (fat) women, in a mostly negative way." "Actually, it is past time for us who are old (fat) to stand up and say 'I am old (fat)' and say it proudly." "We can take the word and make it our own - proudly. By using the word "old" ("fat") with pride and self-respect, we can make it a symbol ..., not one of losses and loathsome remarks."

Just as people make assumptions about being old, so do they make assumptions, usually very painful, false ones, about people who are fat, especially women. This is not to demean the wounds of fat men, but let's face it, as Alverta said, "generally, men get better treatment." Women who do not fit the heterosexual male ideal are considered, at the least, defective and, in the extreme, lazy and stupid. Fat people are the last group against which people can discriminate with total social sanction. Fat people are always played for the laugh — watch any sitcom and you will see either a joke about a fat person (usually a woman) or some remark about a pencil-thin woman having major fear about putting on a pound. And look at the size of the women in major roles. With a few exceptions such as Camryn Manheim or Rosie O'Donnell, most female role models in this country right now could also vie for the position of anorexia nervosa poster child.

And don't think this phenom-

enon is limited to heterosexual women. I know from personal experience, as well as from conversations with lesbians and from reading an amazing amount of literature on lesbians

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and body image, that although lesbians may be slightly less likely to buy into the male standard, many of us continue to carry all those misogynist messages from our years growing up in this society.

Lesbians don't like to admit to having body issues. It just isn't politically correct. And, granted, most of the first fat activists and allies emanated from the lesbian community. But there are still many, many of us who not only suffer from body hatred, which is painful enough, but find that there is really no forum to discuss it in the community. So, we add silence to the burden we bear.

Additionally, the lesbian community has created its own microcosm of the patriarchal beauty standard that it imposes on its members. You must look a certain way, wear certain clothing, behave according to a certain standard, or you are accused of not being "gay enough," of trying to "pass," of being too "femme," of not being a good enough femme. You may think this is the radi-

cal view, but it exists on numerous levels in the glbtq community.

All of these demands for looking and behaving a certain way in the world can create a great deal of stress, blame, and self-hatred for women, straight or lesbian.

So, my message is two-fold. Firstly, women must find ways to counter the barrage of body-hating messages we are fed a thousand times a day, and celebrate the bodies we have right now. We must be vigilant and go to our deepest soul spaces to find the self-love necessary to fight back. And we must unite together. This is not just a fat woman's issue.

Two, this society needs to change its emphasis on size and weight as a standard of acceptability for women. This will require a major paradigm shift of the body-mind-spirit. A mentality that objectifies women for the sake of making a buck and maintaining power must change to a morality that encourages self-love instead of self-loathing. My belief is that women who find their way to self-love will be a driving force in creating this transformation. We must take responsibility for healing our own spiritual wounds as well as creating new perceptions outside ourselves.

Scientists say that if 11% of a society's members change, there is a cultural shift. Eleven percent. Just imagine what life would be like then! Imagine if all the energy and all the time and all the money that women currently spend trying to change how we look went instead into changing how we see. The possibilities are limitless.

Of course, imagining what life would be like then is exactly why the heterosexual male patriarchy continues to do everything in its power to keep women unhappy with themselves. I say they have had their way long enough.▼

*J. Alison Hilber facilitates body positive self-acceptance workshops for women.*



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