

The Freedom of Loving Yourself
Rev. Victoria Ingram
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
Sunday, May 17, 2026

I'm fat.

There are euphemistic terms ... curvy, fluffy, pleasingly plump

But there are other words that get right to the point ... fat ass, whale, cow.

I've heard them all over the years. Sometimes from anonymous men who offer their unsolicited evaluation on the street. Those I try to pointedly ignore. But the words, and the criticism, are hard to get out of my head. And I feel ashamed and humiliated.

Sometimes it's little kids, who rush up and say in a shaming tone "You're fat!" Their mothers forcefully pull their child aside and whisper loudly, "We don't say that!" But I know that they've already taught their child that being fat is awful, unacceptable. I try to follow up with the kid by saying, "Yes, I am. And you're little and some people are tall and some thin or different in other ways. Everyone is who they are, and it's not a shame to be different." Sometimes, I see the child register what I've told them, other times I'm sure that Mom tells them I'm wrong.

The concept of body positivity is a relatively new one. For most of my life, fat has been something you wanted to avoid at all costs – a shameful thing, something to disguise or get rid of...something to apologize for, to feel shame for, to believe you deserve less out of life because you are fat.

During COVID-19, I'd read what people would post, and often they lamented gaining weight. They often said it was the worst possible outcome of the pandemic – really, I'd think, worse than possibly dying from this thing? The message it sent was that it would be better to die than to be like me – fat.

Then there are the folks who are overweight. In Canada, about a third of the population is classed as obese, while 65% are considered overweight. When they confront a situation that highlights the reality of poor eating choices, a lack of exercise, and so forth, they often say something like, "Well, I am overweight, but at least I don't weigh 300 pounds."

For some reason, 300 pounds seems to be a watershed figure of the outside edge of what people imagine one can weigh and still be "human." I don't know, but if you're over 300, you might as well not be alive. Imagine how that sounds to someone who overhears, knowing that they are or have been over 300 pounds.

There is little compassion or consideration or accommodation for the large. Thinking of getting on an airplane? They don't accommodate normal backsides, let alone ones that need more than a 17" seat to fit comfortably. Stadiums, theatres, public transit, classrooms, offices -

imagine never knowing if you will actually be able to find a chair that works for you when you have to go out of your home to an appointment, entertainment, or work.

Of course, fat people know that their discomfort, humiliation, and shame are all their fault, because being fat, after all, is always something you bring on yourself. If you made better food choices, exercised more, had more will power you wouldn't be in this situation.

And there is truth in that, of course. And then there's the truth of living a fat life. Science is helping us learn more and more about what causes weight gain and what the chances are of achieving sustained weight loss. And the facts about long term, sustained weight loss are not encouraging.

I have LITERALLY spent thousands of dollars on diet programs, supplements, exercise, therapy, classes, and surgery in the pursuit of being thinner. And I'm still fat.

Perhaps because science tells us up to 80% of the issues that keep us overweight are genetic. Perhaps because there are differences in the brains of overweight people that support overeating and weight retention. Perhaps because we live with processed food dominated by high fat content, salt, and the use of high fructose corn syrup. We are learning more about the issues involved in being fat every day.

I've been big all of my life – admittedly, different versions of big, but big. I come from a big family, on both sides. Genetics were not on my side!

Being big is not something I'm necessarily proud of – in this culture, and in the times when I grew up, it would be impossible for me to be proud of being a fat woman. But, after years of struggling with a fat body, it's also something I'm not necessarily ashamed of, either. It's taken a long time for me to embrace my talents, skills, and worth instead of focusing on the things I have less control, power, or opportunity to change.

Back in the dark ages, when I was about 7, I thought I could fly. Every day, I experienced the sensation of flying around the school yard, over the heads of my friends playing below. I sat in the classroom and my mind floated above the words of my teacher. I felt light and free and I didn't want to eat - anything.

That went on about two weeks, I guess, and then my Mom made me stop taking those pills. I was 7 years old and they gave me speed to lose weight.

When I was about 11, my doctor tried to encourage me to lose weight. He told me I needed to start eating differently and he gave me two weeks to prove I was "serious" about losing some pounds.

He told me to lose 10 pounds in two weeks, or not bother coming back, because that would prove I wasn't serious about losing weight. I lost 8 pounds and refused to go to my doctor appointment because I'd missed his goal and he'd told me to not come back.

Months later, when I did see him again for some childhood issue, he asked why I hadn't kept the appointment. I told him I had only lost 8 pounds. Then he said I was silly for taking him at his word and that I should have come back. I was very confused.

When I was a kid, I shopped in the Chubettes department at Sears – boys shopped in Huskies – which were mostly shapeless clothes in generic colors designed to make you disappear. As I got older, large size clothes – at least at that time – came in black, brown, navy, and grey with only vertical stripes. All the better to help you appear slimmer, more acceptable, to hide your bulk. But let me tell you, there is no little black dress that will make a large body disappear.

These days, clothes for large women come in bright patterns and amazing colors, they are often clingy and fitted to the body – fashion forward for the fat body. Colorful patterns show off curves and extremely tight dresses caress large, rounded hips and breasts. Ah, but I learned my lessons young – I could no more wear those clothes than I could fly. And, I can't fly..

Over the years, I've been told that I'm lazy, weak, disgusting, unlovable, and a freak. I've been told I would never have a relationship or a spouse. I would never have a professional position or find success in the workplace. That I could not be healthy or happy or respected. That being fat was being lower class, showed I didn't take care of myself, or was less intelligent. And, I know that I have been passed over for promotion, lost jobs, been paid less, and gotten less consideration at work because I'm fat.

In my late teens, I applied at a high-end retailer for a clerk position. I was called in for an interview and I selected my best outfit. The woman interviewing me was thin, dressed in severe high fashion, made up and coiffed to the nines. She started the interview, then stopped me in the middle of my answer to the third question. She said, "There's really no reason to go on with this. I mean, you don't really fit our company image. You understand, don't you?" This in a store that carried plus-size clothes, which I could buy, but apparently not sell.

I'm sorry to admit that I let people's words and prejudices become my truth – I've believed them. I carry some of that shame with me still. It's hard to shut those voices up when they've been so well embedded in your brain.

When you are shamed and ashamed it takes a lot of positives to make up for even a few negatives. There are still times I struggle to see myself as talented, capable, worthwhile...let alone beautiful.

Fortunately, I've also been surrounded by people who love me who tell me those things aren't true. I have wonderful friends. I'm married. I've had a number of fabulous jobs. I'm happy. I have made a place for loving myself in my heart and soul, and that has liberated me to live my life fully, to follow my path and do what I feel called to do.

After 25 years in various versions of work in corporate settings, primarily in human resources, I went to seminary to enter the Unitarian Universalist ministry. I was repeatedly told that I would "probably" not ever be offered a ministerial position because of my weight.

That's right – in one of the most “accepting” and “welcoming” religious denominations, it would be better if I were anything but fat. But, obviously, I have been able to minister and serve congregations, even as a fat woman.

I'm not looking for pity - fat people don't need your pity. Or your diet advice. Or your judgment or condescension, either.

It would be nice to just be included and considered, seen for what lies beyond one's exterior presentation. Let us succeed or fail on our own merits, not our clothes, dress or your preconceived notion of what we "must" be like because we're fat.

It's great to know you're truly welcome because there are chairs available that fit your body and your needs. To not have every medical appointment be about the need to lose weight – even if you've come to see the doctor about a broken bone. Not to dread having to get on an airplane. To avoid having endless conversations with people who assure you that THEY are not fat phobic, but just “concerned about your health.”

I'm older and more experienced now with being in a body that's different, that's fat, that needs things that are different than the "usual". I'm more willing to ask for what I need and do that with assurance instead of quiet humiliation. I'm more comfortable with being seen and speaking up and feeling worthy and taking up the space I take up without apology or shame. I'm stronger and less willing to accept limitations than I used to be. And, I'm still fat.

It's taken me years to know that that one small word doesn't have to limit and define my life in the image of what others think I deserve or need or should do. To know that what other people think of my body is not my problem and to let myself trust and love myself beyond their limits, prejudices, and fear and into a radically joyful, and fulfilling, life.

Yes, I'm fat, and I'm so much more.