

“Life in the Fat Lane: Living a Joyous Incarnation Anyway” Rev. Victoria Weinstein
December 5, 2004

Hello every Body. Welcome to the second Sunday in Advent, which is the season of anticipation for the birth of the divine child. We have a beautiful saying for this time of year given to us by the early Unitarian religious educator Sophia Lyons Fahs, who wrote, “EVERY NIGHT a child is born is a holy night.” The idea is, of course, that as Jesus was an incarnation of God, so are we all. Each child that is born (and that includes you and me, folks!) has the potential to bring the holy presence into our striving, hurting world. And how do we do this if not with our bodies, the little spaceships into which we are born and which carry and contain our spirits until we are released back into spirit at our death? You and I may know each other in the spirit, but if it wasn’t for our bodies we’d have never been introduced!

It seems a little ridiculous and obvious to state this, but much of our original religious tradition, which is responsible for the hard pews you are sitting in right now, hasn’t always encouraged us to consider our bodies as the vehicles of the divine. Religion has, in fact, often treated the body as a fairly troublesome object that plagues us with temptations and urges and unspeakable functions, and taught us that really holy people *transcend* the body. This is why very few saints are chubby. They’re really ABOVE eating, you understand. Or perhaps it is that they’re BEYOND eating.

But we’re not saints, quite obviously. Not only do we have appetites that we like to indulge, we like to move as freely as we are able, to dance when it is possible, to sing loudly, and laugh even more loudly, to make love with those we

love and to do all manner of things that would be frowned upon by this anonymous early Christian writer who said, "Where there is dance, there the devil will also be present. For God gave us feet, not so that we might dance, but so that we might walk on the straight path; not so that we be uncontrolled and not for us to jump around like camels, but so that we join the choir of angels."

I never knew that camels jumped around. If I could find some footage of a camel jumping around I would like very much to see how they do it, so I can join them.

But let's be honest. When we do indulge in the sensual pleasures, we often do so pretty free from guilt except for two big areas: The first is sex, which I am not going to talk about this morning (darn!) and the second is around eating. Sex and food have a lot to do with each other, of course, but that's a subject for another time.

I was wondering. Does anyone here happen to be on a diet at this time? How about this past year: did anyone go on a diet or attempt one in the past year? Well, I'm not surprised. We are Americans, after all, who, according to the latest screaming headlines, are just too heavy (my favorite headline, which I found on December 2 was, "obesity epidemic threatens to bankrupt U.S. economy and threaten financial stability of the world!!") Some Americans – 50 million or so – went on a diet this year, or stayed on one. That's probably a good thing, as apparently 64% of all of Americans are deemed overweight (30% of those clinically obese), and all prone to conditions that come from high levels of body fat: high blood pressure, diabetes, some cancers, gout, gall stones, high cholesterol, and not being able to fit comfortably in the seats on the Braintree T, especially when we're wearing our winter coats.

The weight loss industry, which is expected to rake in about \$48 billion dollars in 2006, doesn't want you to know that only *five to ten percent* of all diets are successful and yield lasting results. The weight loss industry would like you to keep buying their diet products and losing weight and then gaining it back and buying more books and programs and products. The American Medical Association and other health organizations, on the other hand, would like overweight Americans to lose weight slowly and reasonably and adopt healthy practices that will help us maintain a good body weight.

And I think that's commendable. God knows I'm struggling to do it myself, with varying results. But even as I try to eat healthily and exercise, I have this rebellious thought now and then, which I actually said to one doctor: "I'd like to be allowed to die of SOMETHING eventually, if that's alright with you."

My point is not that I have a death wish, it is to point out the kind of morality that comes with messages about the imperative to lose weight; the kind of implied judgment. The message rarely seems to be, "Gee, you ought to drop some pounds because you'd feel better and be healthier" but "You chubsters are costing too much to our health care system!" I have read many articles by health professionals who express the highest level of disgust for the crisis they say is caused by obesity, but who seem not to be nearly as "exercised" (forgive the pun) about the fact that 43 million Americans don't have health insurance.

I think it's important to challenge the moral messages we get about eating and obesity. Whether we are overweight or not, we all internalize these messages! Some of these messages are very familiar to you, for example, the notion that there are morally acceptable foods and morally unacceptable foods.

Which is quite ridiculous, if you think about it. Another message is that if one is able to control one's eating and to maintain a reasonably fit physique, one is morally superior to those who do not.

Pay attention the next time you're around a table of treats during the holidays. You will inevitably hear language of sin and temptation, and you will undoubtedly hear one or more people load their plate or pop something into their mouth with the comment, "Oh, this is BAD" or "I'm so BAD!" Those who stick to their diet or food plan will say, "I was good," and will indeed be considered virtuous people by their friends. For eating carrot sticks instead of brownies. In this culture, where so many of us hesitate to publicly express our morality in clear and definitive terms on most issues, it is always safe to project moral goodness or badness onto the food we eat. A plate of fried chicken is obviously bad and sinful, while the systems that conspire to keep 27 million American children living in relative poverty are... well, maybe too big a problem for you or me to care about.

We have had it drummed into our heads that body weight provides outward evidence of inward virtue or of slovenliness. Therefore, the single mother of three who works two jobs and goes to school at night must, because she is obese, be somehow morally deficient. If only she would watch what she eats! Despite her accomplishments and the killing schedule of drudgery she commits to in order to keep food on her own table, our cultural assessment is that she is simply not self-disciplined enough.

I laughed uncomfortably when I heard an African-American comedian say recently that "Fat is the new Black." I think she's right, in a way. Fat people are considered fair game for ridicule, judgment and condemnation in every

season. Because with all the information Americans have available to us about how to NOT be fat, why is anyone still hefty? All it takes is cutting down on calories and exercising more, right?

Sure, except that gaining weight is not something people do rationally, and rational approaches to weight loss often get overweight folks precisely nowhere in their attempt to reduce. The reasons people overeat are as varied as the foods they eat.

Food is a primitive, easy comfort, an instant gratification that no human being can cut out of their lives the way they can with other potentially addictive substances like alcohol and other drugs. We literally gotta have it. Food is the drug of choice for many Americans who most certainly do know better, but whose days are so full, whose meals are so harried, and whose snacking is so unconscious that they don't know where the pounds are coming from. And exercise? Well geez, it's hard to consider yourself **inactive** or sedentary when you're up at sunrise getting the kids off to school, caring for aging parents, keeping house, working a job or two, and volunteering your non-existent spare time to the church, school, the kids' sports teams and at the local library.

I wish we would institute a national Adult Playtime for about six o'clock every night, where all adults could show up at gyms and playgrounds and run around and play for an hour. No competitive sports, no hamster machines like they have at the health club. Just running around and playing 'til you get sweaty. Wouldn't you show up for that? I would! Or how about town dances, like they used to have? How about some church dances? Contra dances or square dances for the whole family? Now THAT's my kind of exercise!

Where is our joy in our bodies? Where is our love for them, these vessels we were poured into at our birth, and which our parents or guardians tended so carefully to shepherd us to the adulthood we now enjoy?

I remember the first time I read Clarissa Pinkola-Estes' self-description, where she said, without apology, "I am built close to the ground and of extravagant body." I laughed out loud and loved her immediately, because I had just seen her speak and I would have described her as a very pretty, little fat lady. But yes, she was right. She was extravagantly-bodied, and full of humor and vitality and confidence and therefore very appealing. Her obvious love for her body and the lineage it represented made her beautiful. She came from a long line of beautiful little round men and women, and she had decided to live fully in her body despite others' judgments of it as unacceptable.

What a blessing it is when we are able to look in our mirrors and see there the living incarnation of those who went before -- the characteristics, the charming details, the flaws of face and figure, the ailments, the strengths and the talents we have inherited from the genetic composition knit together in our being. We must not absorb into our bodies and life force this culture's shame about hunger, appetite, and extravagance of being.

As I was thinking about what to say to you this morning, I remembered a very sobering bit of dialogue from the movie "Terms of Endearment." Emma, played by Debra Winger, is visiting her fashion model friend Patsy as a special treat because she has been so sick from chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Patsy invites Emma to lunch with a group of very slim, starved-looking other models. They praise Emma for her figure. "Oh, you're so thin! How do you do it?" one asks, very perky. Emma answers with a kind of mocking but

affectionate smile, "I have cancer!" she says. And that shuts everyone right up. As a kind of companion moment to that exchange, I wanted to tell you about a conversation I overheard in the dressing room at Target the other day. I heard one teenaged girl say to another, "I swear, I almost want to be anorexic for awhile just to lose some weight!"

(You will be happy to hear that her friend responded, "Ohmigod, like, shut UP!")

Health is more than numbers on a scale. The body is not a mechanism to be mastered, but a soft and vulnerable animal that contains our being and is therefore always worthy to be most dearly cherished. Walt Whitman wrote, "Behold, the body includes and is the meaning, the main concern, and includes and is the soul. Whoever you are, how superb and how divine is your body, or any part of it!"

Yes, you! You are fearfully and wonderfully made, designed to live among and love the world through that complex and miraculous instrument, your body. It is the vehicle through which you can express the spark of divinity that lies within you, and live out your term on this earth with awareness, appreciation, and gladness. In this season of advent, and in every season, eat, drink and be merry, and know yourselves blessed to share this, our incarnate lives, together.

Amen, and bless you,

every

body.