

HEAL

(Your)

Body Image

An Inspiring, Step-by-Step Guide to Loving Your Body,
Losing Weight, and Feeling Beautiful

By Karly Randolph Pitman, Founder of firstourselves.com



Welcome

“Love is a great beautifier.” -Louisa May Alcott

At First Ourselves, I've been writing a series on loving your body that has become my most popular material. This series sprang from my direct personal experience: like many women, the body image issue plagued me for much of my life.

My writing is the result of many years of study: I spent decades hating my body. Learning how to love my physical self has been one of my greatest challenges. When I shared this journey with other women, I found that I was not alone. This ebook was born from this spirit of interconnectedness, fueled by my desire to share what has worked for me with other women.

I hope these steps help you as they have helped, and continue, to help me in my journey of self-acceptance. If I can learn to love my body, with all of my neuroses, perfectionism, and criticism, any woman can. This includes you.

I would love to hear how this series has helped you. You can email me at karlyp@firstourselves.com.

In love and encouragement,

Karly Randolph Pitman
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Why this work is important: Why loving your body matters.

My life mission is to free women from bondage: to release them from the need to be perfect, especially in their bodies. I want every woman to love, adore and treasure her body, her outer physical package.

Why? Who cares if you love your body? Why is it important?

If women are preoccupied with their bodies, on an endless quest for physical perfection, that preoccupation prevents women from living a free, full life. Body obsession keeps women from being present in their relationships; from directing their time, energies, and talents towards their unique passions; from doing their life's work. We cannot serve two masters: we either serve our spirit, which wants to be loved and cherished; which wants us to enjoy health, beauty, and joy; or we serve our ego, which keeps us trapped in competition, which believes that life is a beauty pageant; which keeps us striving and unsatisfied; who blocks our creativity, compassion, and courage.

I spent years chained to my ego, berating myself for gaining weight, for looking like a woman (versus an adolescent girl), for aging, for changing. This focus translated into irritability, low self esteem, depression, anxiety, fear, worry, and envy. How could I be the woman I wanted to be when I suffered from such pain?

I couldn't.

But neglect of the body is not the answer, either. I've been overweight. I know what it feels like to look in the mirror and feel sad: a sadness that arises not so much from the extra pounds as it does from what those extra pounds represent: an inability to care for myself in healthy ways. That was the deeper pain I felt when the scales tipped too high.

My spirit wants to feel pretty. It lives in a physical body, and while this packaging doesn't define or determine its worth, my spirit wants to feel cherished, celebrated, and embraced: this includes its unique beauty. But what creates beauty? Beauty is

cultivated when I allow my spirit to radiate outward. Beauty is also cultivated when my body is nourished; when it's strong and vital. Contrast this image of beauty with the typical fashion model, where gauntness, edginess, and emaciation are celebrated. Loving my body means appreciating the beauty that comes from good health and regular self care: a definition of beauty that honors a woman who uses, feeds, cares for, enjoys, and nourishes her body.

As you release your body obsession, also release the guilt that arises from putting yourself first. Lose the outdated notion that a woman's life is solely about sacrifice. Resolve to care for yourself excellently: allow your natural beauty to shine forth. Embrace all of the habits---whole, nutritious food, sleep, pampering, exercise, and solitude---that help our bodies feel and look their best.

Ultimately, when we feel good about our bodies, when we feel beautiful, when we take excellent care of ourselves, when we feel good about who we are, then we are able to be the women, daughters, mothers, wives, partners, and friends that we wish to be. We are able to offer our true selves to the world---a world that needs what we have to give.

In the following 22 steps, you'll find my pathway to loving your physical self. I hope that you find inspiration and encouragement to love your body, and more importantly, to offer your true self to the world.



Step 1: Understand How Your Environment Affects Your Perception of Beauty

“The art of being wise is knowing what to overlook.”

-William James

My approach to helping women, and myself, love their bodies, is to accept total, 100% responsibility for our body loathing. I don't advocate blaming the media, the fashion industry, Hollywood, or the diet industry for our feelings of shame and inadequacy about our bodies. I say this knowing that the media and our society as a whole put terrible pressure on women to look a certain way. And I know that this pressure causes much pain for women, as it did for me.

But, ultimately, the choice to love and accept our bodies is ours, and ours alone.

However.... while I don't believe in blaming our unhappiness on others, I think it's important to be aware of how the media and society frame our perceptions of our bodies. You can't get to where you want to be---self love---unless you can see where you've been: why you've been. You probably know where you've been. Now let's explore the why.

Why is about creating awareness, not blame. Awareness and blame are two totally different things. Blame is putting someone else in the driver's seat. Blame is absolving yourself of any responsibility for your beliefs or your behavior. Blame prevents you from growing, changing, and evolving. It will keep you stuck.

Awareness, by contrast, is recognizing the influences that shape your beliefs and behavior. Awareness puts you in the driver's seat. Awareness is about education, empowerment, and enlightenment. Awareness breeds mindfulness, which begets compassion, which creates acceptance; which fosters true, lasting change.

Before you embark on a path of loving your body, it's helpful to begin by examining the influences that affect your perception of yourself in today's culture.

Here's the truth: Our culture is weight obsessed, neurotic, and eating disordered. When I say eating disordered, I mean that our current ideal female prototype is that of a woman with an eating disorder: a super thin body that for 99.9% of us, is

impossible in our natural state. (Yes, there are some women who are naturally---and beautifully---that thin. They shouldn't feel badly for being who they are, just as a woman whose natural body shape is curvy or muscular---and beautiful at that size---shouldn't feel badly for being who she is.)

One definition of an eating disorder is striving for a body that is thinner than necessary for health. That is exactly what we're facing and seeing, in magazines, actresses, musicians, celebrities, and athletes. We've faced it for so long, we're so used to these images, that we are unaware of just how screwed up this definition of beauty is. We are desensitized.

The saddest evidence of our culture's absurdity is that pregnant women aren't even allowed to look pregnant anymore---the highest compliment an expectant woman gets is that "she doesn't even look pregnant," as if the ideal maternal shape is one that disguises the growing life within. Then postpartum, as we see celebrities shrink back to their prepregnant size in record time, we feel concerned---like there is something wrong with our bodies, and not the rigid expectation for rapid change---when our weight loss is more prolonged.

This absurdity is not just about body size. As technologies improve and become more rampant, as plastic and cosmetic surgery becomes more popular and "normal," women feel great pressure to stay youthful looking. Looking your age is considered an insult. No wonder women are so hard on themselves.

It's important to be aware of how screwy modern beauty standards have become, because if you don't realize that this beauty ideal is unhealthy and unnatural, you can't have a realistic view of yourself. You'll see yourself through the lens of this absurdity, and then wonder why you feel so lacking. You'll feel like there's something wrong with you when there's nothing wrong with you: there's something wrong with these crazy, impossible beauty standards.

This is why it feels ridiculous when certain celebrities are called "fat," women who are a size 6 vs. a 2. What's absurd is the definition of beauty---calling a woman who isn't as thin as a rail curvy, fat, or large---not the woman herself. It is a case of the emperor's new clothes; we are not talking about real women's bodies. We are talking about women's bodies which are constantly, incessantly manipulated, controlled, contorted, disguised, and operated on to appear a certain way. This isn't even counting the ways that women's bodies are altered by computers to erase flaws, pounds, lines and

“imperfections” in magazines and other media.

When you come down to it, it’s actually quite funny. It’s ludicrous. But it’s not so funny when we buy it. And for the millions of girls and tweens who don’t know any better: devastating.

The first step to freedom is to become aware: to understand the absurdity of the beauty ideal. It’s important that you recognize the lie: the lies that will have you believe that you aren’t beautiful unless you fit an image that is unattainable, and, more importantly, unlasting. We can’t fight the impermanence of our bodies: it’s a losing battle. A basic truth about our bodies, and life itself, is that change is inevitable. Our appearance doesn’t stay the same. Beauty fades. Our bodies age. That, my friends, is perfectly normal, and not something to be feared, to control, or to regret. Our bodies are meant to be used, not preserved. When we die, they return to dust, to the earth. We don’t take them with us when we go.

While this may sound morbid, by contrast, recognizing this truth is quite liberating. It frees you from fighting what is; and what is to come. It frees you from bondage to society’s insane definitions of beauty (yes, they really are insane, because they are denying reality). I am a beautiful, strong, fit, 140 pound, 33-year-old woman. I do not have to lose 15 pounds and squeeze into a size 4 to be okay. I don’t have to look like I did at 18, or 25, to be okay. When I am 50, 60, and 70, I don’t have to look like I do now at 33 to be okay. And, I don’t have to look like a woman in a magazine to be okay, either.



Step 2: Create a Supportive Environment

“Cherish your visions; cherish your ideals; cherish the music that stirs in your heart, the beauty that forms in your mind, the loveliness that drapes your purest thoughts, for out of them will grow delightful conditions, all heavenly environment; of these if you but remain true to them, your world will at last be built.”

-James Allen

When I embarked upon my quest to heal my body image, I sheltered myself in many ways. I didn't read fashion magazines, because the super skinny models hooked me into fat feelings. Victoria's Secret catalogs did the same thing, so I tossed those. I avoided certain women who always complained about their bodies. And I stayed away from the gym and its wall of mirrors, exercising outside instead.

Why? I recognized that unless I minimized my environmental triggers---those things that hooked me and made me feel fat or inadequate---it would be really, really hard to love my body.

No, you can't run away from the world, or the millions of women who feel badly about their bodies. Yes, you need to be able to face your triggers and be unaffected by them. And yes, eventually you'll want to have peace about your body no matter your environment. But you aren't there yet. You need to start where you are. And while you're working to get from where you are to where you want to be, you can be kind to yourself.

People vacate to spas when they are attempting a significant change, because it's much easier to do so in a supportive environment. Creating a supportive environment is planning for your success. It's giving yourself a strong set of roots so that you can grow. It's acknowledging your limits. It's not making change any harder than it has to be.

Likewise, you are in detox. You're detoxing from harmful thinking, behaviors, and beliefs. While you are in detox, it's important to create your own spa environment: one that makes change as easy and as comfortable as possible.

How can you support yourself while you learn to love your body? As an experiment, keep a log for a week. Every time you feel triggered by something in your external environment----maybe a fashion magazine; or seeing an overly thin actress on TV, or a friend complaining about her fatness--write it down. Then, when you have your list, look it over. (If you're like me, it'll be a long, long list.) Can you eliminate or minimize some of those triggers?

Here are some suggestions:

- Remove magazines and catalogs if looking at them makes you feel badly about yourself.
- Refrain from body bashing with girlfriends.
- Limit your media consumption (TV and movies) if seeing overly thin actresses triggers you.
- Limit your exposure to women who are constantly slamming their bodies.
- If dressing rooms and clothes shopping leave you in tears, refrain for a while.
- Move your skinny clothing out of sight, for now. I know you like to think its inspiration, but notice how you feel when you see it. Does it make you feel good, or does it make you feel denigrated for gaining weight?

I know this list is full of no's and don'ts. It's easy to think of this step as deprivation. But you're not trying to deprive yourself, as much as nurture yourself with things that make you feel good. And as your body confidence grows, you'll be able to go clothes shopping and buy your real size, without the tears. You'll be able to enjoy fashion magazines as creative inspiration without feeling fat. You'll be able to listen to girlfriends body bash with detachment, or even surprise.

I love fashion magazines. But when I realized that they made me nuts about my body, I knew that I had to take a temporary reprieve. Now I occasionally read In Style and it doesn't trigger me. But in the beginning of my journey, it was too much, so I supported myself by abstaining.

I find it helpful to remember this equation: as you subtract things from your life, add in extra care. So if reading People was one way you indulged yourself, find a creative alternative. Maybe it's reading Cottage Living instead. Pick up a juicy novel. Take an art class or learn how to make jewelry.

Trying to change your thoughts about your body will feel like detox. You may feel worse before you feel better. You may throw your hands in the air and want to give up. You may feel like you'll never feel good about your body. This is completely

normal. This is a sign to keep going, not a sign to give up. You are in detox. It may suck for a while.

And while you're in detox, remember:

1. Be very, very kind to yourself.
 2. Be very, very kind to your new behavior patterns.
- And, 3. It won't be this painful forever. One day, loving your body will be easy; criticizing it will be hard. That, my friends, is a worthy challenge, and one I know that you can meet.



Step 3: Add Care

“Self-love, my liege, is not so vile a sin, as self-neglecting.”

-Shakespeare

In step two, I talked about creating a supportive environment by minimizing triggers: those things that spark your inner body critic (and we all have one) into overdrive. This step is important, because it gives you roots: a strong foundation as you learn to love your body. However, it can feel like deprivation, like a loss, in that you’re temporarily subtracting things from your life: certain magazines, TV, and maybe even time with body bashing girlfriends.

That’s why it’s important to counterbalance step two, removing obstacles, with step three: adding care. Otherwise, you’ll starve your spirit. Your spirit doesn’t like to be squelched, and if it feels deprived or ignored, it will react, by overreacting. This is what leads to overspending, overeating, and overdrinking. It’s where nothing can fill you, when your appetites are insatiable. So instead of a new outfit, you charge a wardrobe that you can’t afford; instead of one bowl of ice cream, you eat the entire container.

A deprived spirit will almost always manifest itself in your physical body. Ever wonder why you can’t stick to an exercise program, eat foods that nourish you, or silence your inner critic? If your spirit is weakened from neglect, it can’t be the supportive friend that you need it to be. We transfer our negative feelings from our spirits to our bodies, and before we know it, we’re beating ourselves up for an extra ten pounds, wrinkles, or stretch marks.

A neglected spirit is what drives you to nitpick at your body, magnify faults, and obsess over shortcomings. A neglected spirit is never satisfied: you’re never thin or pretty enough. Your self-confidence will flag with the scale, the mirror, and your mood.

But there’s a solution: a regular habit of self-care. Care is giving your body attention: respect, love and pampering. Even if you’re not happy with your current form, even if you want to lose weight or become healthier, the path to change starts with treating yourself excellently. You can’t hate your body into change. You may think you

can “beat” your body into submission (“I’m so gross and fat I will do anything to lose weight!”) but this is not the path of lasting transformation. (Vanity only motivates in the short-term; love motivates over the long haul.) You have to love your body as it is now. That’s the why. Self-care is the how. Here are several ways to care for your body:

Mother Yourself

When we’re feeling sad or overwhelmed, it’s common to pine for our mothers. Usually, we don’t want our mother per se as much as we want a mothering figure: someone to care for us with tenderness. We long for unconditional love, especially when we’re bitchy, irritable, and cranky. But it’s not someone else’s job to mother us. The key to self-care is mothering yourself. You love yourself unconditionally. You give yourself what you need, whether it is a nap, a pedicure, or a walk. Do you know how you comfort your children when they’ve gotten hurt? Give yourself the same tenderness when you’re hurt, inside out, or sad.

Feed the Beauty Meter

As Mama Gena reminds us in her book, Mama Gena’s School of Womanly Arts, we all have experiences that make us feel beautiful, whether it’s getting a facial, exercising, getting dressed up for a girl’s night out, or taking a long bath. Make your beauty list: What makes you feel beautiful? Then, list in hand; find ways to increase those opportunities, so that you feed your beauty meter. How can you expand your beautiful feelings, so that you experience them more often? Just last week, I bought myself new make-up. I felt so girly, feminine, and yes, beautiful, when I took thirty minutes to choose new colors. I wore my new lipstick today and shined as I walked down the street: not because my new make-up made me beautiful, but because my new make-up made me feel beautiful.

Another way to add beauty to your life is to beautify your surroundings. What kind of dishes do you eat on? Is your bedroom a sanctuary? What about your closet? Is it a pleasure to open; does it invite you to play dress-up every morning, when you choose an outfit for the day? Make your environment beautiful, a pleasure for the senses. This doesn’t mean overspending or buying things you can’t afford; my make-up came from the drugstore. I’ve found delightful trinkets at Target and garage sales. Beauty comes from an attitude, not a bank account.

Treat Yourself Like a Queen

Don’t settle for burnt toast, as Teri Hatcher so eloquently put it. Eat food that makes you feel good; that tastes good, looks beautiful, and satisfies your hunger. While

you're at it, eat it on your best china, set on a beautiful table.

Wear clothes that flatter you and make you feel smashing, even if it's a tracksuit. (Cute tracksuits do exist.) And who says you have to live in jeans if you're a stay at home Mom?

Treat yourself to sexy underwear, gorgeous lingerie, and stunning loungewear. When my son was born last winter, he was colicky and fussy: I rarely got dressed. I was also heavy with pregnancy weight, so none of my clothes fit. I figured if I was going to live in my pajamas, I might as well embrace the opportunity. So I bought myself richly colored, comfortable loungewear, that made me feel good in my curvy figure. (Nothing can make you feel fatter than squeezing into too-small clothing.)

If you like flowers buy yourself flowers: regularly. (Have you seen Costco's fabulous, inexpensive bouquets?) If you like chick flicks, make a date with yourself: tonight. If you love a fabulous restaurant meal, put it in the family budget.

Relish in Your Physical Self

Pamper your physical body on a daily basis. Paint your toes, style your hair, groom yourself impeccably. Get a facial, buy a new lotion; spend an afternoon doing nothing: what is known as the fine art of puttering. Try a new eye shadow, find your best colors, add highlights. Isn't it fun being a woman? Relish in it. Treat your body like a temple, treat yourself like a Goddess, treat your spirit like a Queen. This, my friends, is the path to loving your body. Doesn't it sound like fun? Dive in.



Step 4: Create New Mental Pictures

*“Whatever is happening in your life is coming
from an image you hold about yourself.”*

-Sanaya Roman

This step was inspired by Sanaya Roman’s book, Personal Power Through Awareness. Did you ever wonder why being around certain people triggers outdated or old behaviors that you are trying to change? For me, this was true with my parents. Whenever I was with them, I found myself acting like a bratty teenager.

Why is this? It’s because your mental pictures---how you see yourself in your mind ---and others’ mental pictures of you---how they see you in their minds---has an incredible influence on your behavior. This also explains why a formerly obese woman who has lost considerable weight may still view herself as fat: her mental picture hasn’t changed along with her body.

Sit down, close your eyes, and think about your mental pictures. How do you view your body? Is it positive? Or are you holding onto outdated, untrue pictures? Do yours tell you that you’re fat, old, ugly, and not good enough? Guess what? Your behavior will prove that true, over and over and over again. You will treat your body as if it’s fat, old, and not good enough.

Can you be motivated to go to the gym when your mental picture is of a flabby, unhealthy body? Not at six a.m. If your mental picture is of a frumpy Mommy, can you put on a skirt and feel comfortable? I’d say not. If you envision yourself as a faded beauty, how will you feel when you encounter a smashing 20 year old with perky breasts and dewy skin? Probably really, really jealous of her, or really, really bad about yourself.

Try this instead: Imagine yourself as a poised, polished princess. Or as a glowing mother-to-be, radiantly beautiful. Maybe you’re a strong, powerful athlete. You can be a graceful dancer, a transcendent matriarch, a funky artist, a fashion diva. You can form a mental image of whatever you want to be.

One of the easiest ways to create a new mental image is to make a dreamboard, a photo collage of images that speak to you. Gather pictures, words, magazine clippings, and poems, anything that makes your spirit sing. Make a collage of your ideal physical self.

I've made several of these over the years. In the first one I made, I chose images of super skinny fashion models. Not the smartest move I ever made. Today, my collage has an elegant lady in a beautiful white suit; a sweaty runner; a woman playing on the beach; a woman without make-up, laughing and carefree; and me, with my family. These images speak to the way I want to see myself.

Once you've constructed a new mental image of yourself, try it on. Everyday, every hour, every time you look at yourself in the mirror. Let it become your new mantra. When your inner critic tells you that you're fat and dumpy? You now have a reply. No, I'm a sensual, curvy new mother.

But don't stop there. First, focus on creating a new mental picture for yourself. But then send others---your lover, your girlfriends, your peers---this new mental picture, too. Why? By sending others a new picture, you can influence their expectations and beliefs about your appearance. Then, move onto step three: send other women a new picture of themselves. Do you have friends who body bash? You can help elevate their mental pictures about themselves into something better. I do this all the time: whenever a woman shares a story about how she dislikes her body, I send her a mental picture of herself as a beautiful woman. I send her an image of how I see her, which is one hundred times more generous than how she views herself.

This is part of the way we can heal this body image issue for women once and for all. It starts with one woman, loving her body. Then as her mental images grow and evolve, she can grow and evolve other women's mental images, too. And then it starts to grow, and grow, until more and more women have higher and higher mental images of their bodies.



Step 5: The Importance of Rest and Sleep

“No day is so bad it can’t be fixed with a nap.”

-Carrie Snow

Have you ever heard that quote about the “difference between hope and despair being a good night’s sleep?”

While on vacation with my family in San Diego, I could’ve been a guinea pig in a sleep deprivation study. Due to a combination of factors---late bedtimes and early morning risers; a sleepless baby; and the excitement of much to do---I spent many days tired and unrested. I noticed how my attitude flagged with my fatigue. On days when I was rested, I felt positive, appreciative towards my body and myself. But when I was tired? I felt dumpy and frazzled. I looked in the mirror and heard my harpies, the voices of my inner critic: “You’re fat. You’re ugly. You’re losing your beauty.” Because I was tired, I did a really dumb thing: I believed the lies. This did not make for a good day, both for myself, and for those around me.

When we approach something like loving our bodies, it’s easy to overestimate the importance of big things, like changing our mental tapes, and underestimate the importance of seemingly little things: sleep being foremost among them. But sleep isn’t a small thing in the overall scheme of mental health. I’ve learned the hard way that I neglect my basic needs for rest, healthy, whole foods, exercise, time outdoors, and prayer to my own detriment.

Caring for yourself excellently means giving yourself strong roots: a firm foundation that grounds you. Sleep grounds me. Lack of sleep is one of the quickest ways I become unmoored and fall prey to my inner critic. This situation is common among women, especially college students, working mothers, mothers of young children, and caretakers of older parents: we are a chronically sleep deprived lot.

This does not bode well for loving your body. If you are tired, you won’t have the will power or strength to make choices that empower you. You’ll go for the quick fix---the donut; the fast food---because you’re too tired to make a meal that meets your need for both taste and nutrition. You won’t feel motivated to exercise. You will look in the mirror and see a fat, tired, haggard woman staring back at you. You’ll hate everything in your closet, and think you have nothing to wear. You will feel envious of every fit, graceful, beautiful woman that crosses your path. This will not help you appreciate

your unique beauty.

We think we can go, go, go and keep pushing ourselves onward and upward. But, if you're like me, your body reaches a point where it won't be pushed anymore. This usually manifests as illness (in this way my body demands the rest it needs) or a feeling that something's amiss; what I call feeling inside out, as if you're a garment that's turned the wrong way.

Sleep restores our equilibrium. It restores our optimism, our compassion, and our patience. After a good night's sleep, I saw a different body in the mirror. My body hadn't changed; my attitude, however, had. This is the power of rest.



Step 6: Find Your Conduit

“Oh, darling, let your body in, let it tie you in, in comfort.”

-Anne Sexton

In this step, we’re going to get physical. Why? Because while loving our bodies is ultimately a spiritual issue, we need a conduit: a way to connect our amorphous, spiritual self with our juicy, earthy humanity. What better avenue for learning to love the body than by using the body? After all, we are human beings: we learn and grow by experiencing life in a physical form. In our focus on what our bodies look like, we forget their true function: to be used. Author Susan Kano (she wrote a fantastic book, [Making Peace with Food](#).) says a body doesn’t want to be just an ornament; it wants to be an instrument. I’m reminded of a poem by Marge Piercy, “To Be of Use.” She writes:

Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Our bodies are like those Greek amphoras: created for both beauty and utility. Celebrating your body’s appearance without appreciating its purpose would be like having a beautifully decorated kitchen, outfitted with professional appliances, a fabulous layout, and ample counter space, that is never used for cooking.

Let’s cook in our kitchens. As Marge Piercy reminds us, our bodies are crying out “for work that is real.” For centuries, social norms kept women from using the full physical power of their bodies. No wonder women felt disenfranchised.

There is a tie---an invisible umbilical cord---between how you feel in your body and how you feel in yourself. If you are uncomfortable using your body---getting sweaty, getting dirty, giving and receiving sexual pleasure---you will be uncomfortable with all aspects of yourself, and not just your physical form.

So let’s dig in the dirt, literally: What makes you feel strong, tough and invincible? What makes you relish in your physical self?

For me, running is my conduit. I feel strong, powerful, and alive when I run: like I can do anything. I love nothing better than pushing myself on a beautiful, crisp morning run, returning to my door sweaty and wrung out. Running reconnects me to the young girl I once was: the girl who approached life with confidence and optimism. After a run, my formerly insurmountable problems are diminished, my outlook more positive, my confidence increased. Running restores me to myself.

What restores you to yourself? It may be walking, rock climbing, or biking. It may be ballroom dancing, Tai Chi, or competing in triathlons. I know a woman who loves her work in a mine, a stereotypical “man’s job.” She has biceps that Angela Bassett would envy, and feels incredibly powerful using her body in such a physical way. Another friend feels best when she’s sweaty and hasn’t showered in several days and is in the middle of a weeklong hike, packing all her goods on her back. Another finds delight in conquering a difficult yoga pose.

Can you think of two or three things that make you feel strong and powerful? How can you add these things to your life? Start where you are: what can you begin to do today? You may not be able to perfect that handstand tomorrow, but you can start working towards it, one push up at a time.

The important thing is to start: there is incredible delight in the process. Why? Because you’re aligning your actions with your values. It feels good when your behavior and your beliefs match. If you say you want to love your body, using your body to tackle a physical challenge will align those goals in synchronicity. And as you use your body, and appreciate its strength and abilities, guess what happens? You naturally start to feel good about your physical self. Lo and behold, you start loving your body.

But our bodies are not only for growth: they are also for celebration, joy, and delight. There is a time to work, a time to sweat, a time to reap. But there is also a time to dance. A time to celebrate. A time to relax. Your body should make you happy; do you use your body for joy, beauty, and delight?

I feel beautiful when I’m dancing with my husband, even if I’m in my sweats in the kitchen. I feel beautiful when I’m enjoying a girl’s night out, laughing so hard with my girlfriends that I nearly pee my pants. I feel beautiful when I’m making love, when every nerve ending is exploding with pleasure. I feel beautiful when I’m driving in the car with my children, as we sing along with the ipod at the top of our lungs. What do all these events have in common? They have nothing to do with my appearance. They have everything to do with my experience. I’m using my body as

my vehicle to experience joy, pleasure, delight, and gratitude. I'm honoring my body's greatest gift: the ability to experience the crazy, loopy roller coaster of life. I'm not thinking about the size of my thighs or whether my butt looks big or about the zit on my nose. I'm relishing what is: a chance to celebrate life, through the most tangible vehicle I own: my body.

So dust off your body. Take the running shoes out of the closet. Are you itching to dance? What are you waiting for? If you're worried about being the largest woman in the room, I guarantee that you'll have company: there's at least one other woman who's concerned about how big she looks, too. Start. It feels incredible to use your body: to recognize that you're not a vase that is put up on a shelf, but one that is filled with flowers, to enjoy.



Step 7: Chart Your Progress

“Nothing contributes so much to tranquilize the mind as a steady purpose--a point on which the soul may fix its intellectual eye.”

-Mary Shelley

In this journey of loving our bodies, we are aligning our behavior, beliefs and emotions. This feels good. It creates wholeness, and integrity. While you're working at changing your thoughts, and beliefs, while you are adding care---new behaviors---it's important to give yourself proof: evidence. The simplest way to do this is to keep a victory log.

What's a victory log? Abby Seixas wrote about victory logs in her amazing guide to adding balance and meaning to women's lives, [Finding the Deep River Within](#). Simply put, a victory log is a journal of your successes. A success can be anything, however you wish to define it. Maybe it's getting out of bed to exercise when you feel like sleeping in. Maybe it's noticing your reflection in the mirror and feeling good. Maybe it's wearing your bathing suit for the first time this summer. Maybe it's refraining from beating yourself up when you eat half the cheesecake. Maybe it's stopping at one slice of cheesecake.

The victories themselves don't matter, as much as your decision to honor them. Tracking your victories keeps you focused on where you're going, rather than where you've been. It's also a way to enjoy the journey, rather than solely focusing on the end result.

Why is it important to log your victories? When you're trying to change, it's easy to become discouraged by the small march of progress. You may not even notice how your thoughts or behaviors are evolving without conscious awareness. I know when I climbed out of my depression, my mood was so fragile that I had to chart my progress by hours, not days. Feeling better for an hour; that was a success. Then that built up to several hours. Then that became a day. Then that turned to several days. Healing my body image has followed the same course.

A journal is indispensable for this very reason. When you're only feeling better for hours at a time, you can dismiss that one small victory. But a written record brings your attention to these miniscule changes, to make you conscious of your growth.

The truth is, you will have setbacks. You'll have days when you feel discouraged. You'll have days when those harpies will rear their heads. So I'm encouraging you to be prepared. The best preparation against a formidable offense is a strong defense. A victory journal is your first line of defense. It can counter those voices that doubt your progress. So when you're feeling badly about the size of your thighs, it's helpful to know that, while you may not be where you want to go, you're not where you were, either. As your record of victories increases, your confidence increases. And as your confidence increases, your thoughts about your body grow more positive. As you feel better about your body, you record more victories: a win-win, all around.



Step 8: Adopt Feel Good Habits

“If I could change one thing for women, it would be helping them to believe they have the inner strength they need to make their lives better.”

-Alice Domar, Ph. D.

What makes you feel good? What brings your body joy and delight? I’ll share some of my bodily pleasures: running; long walks with my husband; doing a handstand; taking a leisurely bike ride; sitting outside in the sun; a perfectly grilled steak; raspberries, right off the bush; tomatoes and fresh basil; macadamia nut butter; creamy risotto with spring vegetables. A perfect balance of food: where I’m full, but not stuffed. Dancing with my husband in the kitchen. Nursing my baby. Hugging my kids. Making love. Painting my toes. Getting dressed up for a night on the town. The high after giving birth. Trying a new lipstick.

That’s my list. What’s yours?

It’s important to know what makes you feel good, because without this knowledge, your habits are at the mercy of your inner taskmaster. You’ll do things because you should: eat certain foods because they’re healthy; exercise because your doctor says so; take supplements because an expert recommends them. Or you’ll exercise and eat certain foods, not for the pleasure that they give you, but because you believe they’ll bestow a thinner or more beautiful body.

The problem with these scenarios is thus: duty is a terrible motivator. So is vanity.

If our habits are motivated by fear, duty, or vanity, will they stick for the long haul? Probably not. But if our habits are motivated by joy and delight, will they remain long term ones? Probably. Why? Because joy and delight have intrinsic motivation: your reward comes from doing them, not from some future benefit.

Adopting feel good habits increases our integrity, because they align our external behaviors with our internal desire to love ourselves. When we choose poor habits: undereating, overeating, eating food that makes us feel icky, saying yes to obligations that we don’t want to do, we feel bad. Why? Because we’re experiencing the dissonance that accompanies a lack of alignment.

Here's how this plays out in real life: instead of eating the pasta that you really want for dinner, you have a salad. Then, feeling unsatisfied, you root around the kitchen, nibbling on some fruit, maybe a cracker, until you finally give into the pasta that you wanted in the first place. But, at this point, you're overstuffed and you feel terrible. By contrast, if you would've given yourself permission to eat the pasta, most likely, you would have enjoyed a bowl, and then stopped when you were full.

The destructiveness of bad habits isn't derived so much from the habits themselves as the damage they leave in their wake. When I was in the throes of overeating, the extra calories weren't as ruinous as the mental and emotional anguish that accompanied my binges. It was afterwards, when I berated myself for overeating, that I felt such pain. Why? Because I was ignoring my inner voice, which wanted kindness towards my body, not abuse. I was in turmoil because of my inability to stand up for myself and treat my body in ways that made me, and it, feel good.

Feel good habits, by contrast, do what their name implies: they help you feel good. They're a way of putting your desire to love your body into action. It grounds your intention into something tangible: a physical landmark on your journey. As you create more and more landmarks, they serve as reminders of the ways you are loving your body. This feeds upon itself, until destructive habits are the exception, and not the rule.

Do I have you convinced? Great. Now for the scary part: I can't tell you what will make you feel good. No other expert can, either. You're the one with the answers.

My role, you see, is to support you on your journey. I am not the food, exercise, or body police. Your external behavior doesn't matter to me: anything can arise from good, or bad, intentions. Are you eating broccoli because you enjoy the taste and it gives you energy? Or are you eating it as punishment, because you believe it's good for you and you should eat it? Do you get a facial because it feels relaxing and pampering? Or is it fueled by anxiety about ageing? Do you go to the gym because a sweaty workout refreshes and energizes you? Or do you go to the gym to cancel out the calories you ate last night at dinner?

See: anything can be construed as a good, or bad, habit. That's why, at some point, you have to stop reading the latest diet book, fitness magazine, and even this e-book and dive into yourself. While others can serve as guides, you are the only one who knows what does and doesn't work for your body. You are the only one who knows the motivations behind your behavior.

Loving your body means believing that you have the ability to be an excellent caretaker of yourself. As Alice Domar said, it's believing that you have the strength to do what needs doing. It's trusting that you can say no to requests that don't mesh with your values. It's believing that you will know when to exercise and when to rest, when to celebrate and enjoy the birthday cake, and when to choose more vegetables.

One way of doing this is by creating space in your life for connection. Give yourself moments of stillness, when you can reconnect your body with your mind. Before you fix yourself something to eat, stop and ask yourself: What do I want to eat right now? What sounds good to me? Before you say yes to a party invitation, stop and ask yourself: Do I want to go? Before you do your usual routine at the gym, ask yourself: What exercise do I want to do today? Do I want to exercise at all?

I know this sounds scary. We're afraid that if we relax our standards that we'll adopt no standards at all, and end up obese, unhealthy, and lazy. But loving our bodies means trusting that as we bring all ourselves into alignment, we'll balance our needs, finding a way to meet them all. So we'll meet our fashionista's need for pretty clothes. We'll meet our body's need for rest, good food, and physical activity. We'll meet our inner child's need for play and fun. We'll meet our spirit's need for quiet and solitude.

This is what coming home looks like: becoming your own best friend.



Step 9: Make One Change at a Time

*“Only in growth, reform, and change, paradoxically
enough, is true security to be found”*

-Anne Morrow Lindbergh

With this step, we’re exploring growth and change; or rather, how to manage the ever-evolving scope of growth and change. As John O’ Donohue wrote, “Though the human body is born complete in one moment, the birth of the human heart is an ongoing process.” We never stop growing. Loving our bodies is a lifelong journey.

This can feel overwhelming, especially for those of us who like a finish line, or a stopping point: a time when we can cross something off the list, and say, “Done.”

Here’s how I manage growth’s never-ending nature: I make one change at a time. In my experience, food and body issues come in pairs, or triplets. Usually, if you have a poor body image, then you may have accompanying habits, such as undereating, stringent dieting, or overeating. That was true for me. I had it all: a screwed up relationship with food, overeating, undereating, food addiction, a poor body image, and low self esteem. But just because you have more than one issue doesn’t mean that you should tackle them all at once.

This would topple even the most devoted, dedicated, ardent woman.

I would begin with one habit, and make it a goodie: tackle the habit that is causing you the most pain. If you conquer your biggest challenge, you’ll also release the massive amounts of negative energy behind it. It will feel like removing an enormous boulder from your path. In my case, my boulder was my sugar addiction. I put aside my other goals---losing the extra pounds that were a consequence of my sugar binges; loving my body; exercising more regularly---in order to exclusively focus on removing sugar from my life.

Why did I approach growth in this way?

Growth is messy. Growth can feel like you’re moving backwards. Growth is uncomfortable. I think of how my children grow: how they spend weeks in an oinky phase, where they regress into old behaviors, pick on their siblings, bounce from one

emotional extreme to another, and lash out in frustration. They sleep more, eat more, and cry more. Then, seemingly overnight, whammo: they wake up one day, and they're in an entirely different place, with new emotions and behaviors, added maturity, and an extra three inches.

This is how we grow, too. I'm reminded of childbirth, and how transition was always the stage of labor when I felt like giving up; when I felt like I couldn't go on anymore---at least without a few illegal mind altering substances. But my midwife always reminded me that the moment when you feel like you can't go on: that's a good thing. It's your body's way of telling you it's almost over; that the end is near.

If you are growing and evolving out of old, outdated behaviors, beliefs, habits, or pain, if you are climbing up the next rung on the ladder, then you may feel worse before you feel better. Growth creates turbulence. It stirs things up. Imagine your journey as a wagon, with the wheels following a well-worn path. As those wheels climb out of the wagon ruts, it's going to make for a bumpy ride.

If we're unaware of this, we can get sidetracked when change comes at a slow, painful march. We can mistake turbulence as a sign that we're not changing; that we're going backwards, instead of forwards. But just like fear doesn't mean stop, but go; turbulence is a sign that you're progressing, not regressing.

Here are some things that I notice about myself when I'm growing out of an old stage: I need more time to myself, or insulate myself from too many social outings. I need more sleep. I'm weepier, as if my heart has softened: everything touches me. I cry more. I am more easily angered. I lash out over little things. I experience powerful negative feelings and emotions that I haven't experienced in months or years---I call this "the last hurrah" before they are (hopefully) surrendered for good. I am especially tender, vulnerable and sensitive to other people's comments or opinions. I want my Mom. I dream vividly. I feel like my heart is walking outside my body, like my body is walking around without skin, like I am watching myself outside of myself. I often feel so scared and terrified by this turmoil that I want to run back to the way things were, just because their familiarity made them comfortable.

But discomfort is a sign of progress. It's a sign to keep going, not to give up.

Transitions are a time to shower us with extra support, compassion, and loving kindness. Keep asking yourself, "What do I most need right now?" as you go about your days. Maybe you need more sleep. Maybe you need more solitude. Maybe you need

more reflective time---time for writing, journaling, creating art, or praying. Give yourself the tools you need to navigate your rocky road; treating yourself kindly is one way of loving yourself.

The cool thing about growth is how its cycle of success propels you forward. As you adapt to one change at a time, you gain confidence; confidence that you will use when approaching your next transition. Use this momentum to your advantage. So where will you start?

Just begin. Start somewhere, with one change. Then add another. And another, until your string of successes forms a new foundation, a new rut---a positive rut---by which you steer.

In the meantime, if you're feeling turbulent and unmoored, be of good cheer: it means your end is near. Just like my children, you're going to wake up one morning and find yourself in a completely different place.



Step 10: Get Your Body History Straight

“History is a part of becoming truly free.”

-John Hope Franklin

We all have stories: a framework that we use to interpret the events of our lives. If you're a woman, you probably have a story for your body. There's probably a chapter where you loved your body; maybe a chapter where you went on your first diet. You have a chapter when your body changed---puberty, pregnancy, or menopause. For some, this was a positive journey; but for most women, accepting the body's changes are hard.

It's strange, really; we don't expect our emotional, mental, or spiritual bodies to stay the same throughout our lives. But why do we hold our bodies to such rigid standards? Why do we expect our bodies to remain as they were at 18, before pregnancies, breastfeeding, and decades of use?

With this step, we'll uproot these expectations by journeying through your past. Our goal is to bring awareness to your story, so that you can see how it influences your attitudes today. You can't get clarity about your relationship with your body until you recognize where you've been. If you're holding onto shame or guilt about your past, this will often manifest in the present as a food issue. This will make it really, really difficult to care for your body in a healthy manner. Through this process, you will have the opportunity to accept, forgive, and release your history.

Write Your Story

If you're the journaling type, it's helpful to physically write your story. Break it down into several parts: Write about your body from ages 1-11; 12-19; 20-30; 30-40; 40-50, and so on. For each decade, answer these questions: What did you look like? How would you describe your relationship with food? What did you think about your body? What did you think about yourself?

After you've written your story, look it over, as a whole. Do you see any patterns or consistencies over the course of your life? What's stayed the same? What's changed? What decade did you feel the best about your body? Can you see any behaviors that

led to these good feelings? When did you feel the worst? What behaviors led to those feelings?

Releasing a Painful History

How do you feel when you look over your past? Does your past feel painful? Do you feel regret, shame, or guilt for certain behaviors, such as dieting, hating your body, having an eating disorder, or denying yourself joy until you'd lost weight?

Shame and guilt are joy robbers. They will keep you from accepting yourself, just as you are, today, tomorrow, or yesterday. For years, I carried deep shame about my college days, when I alternated between starving myself and throwing up in toilets. The irony is that in my 20s I used food for comfort; one of the reasons I overate was my low self-esteem. Do you know what triggered my low self-esteem? Shame about my past.

I released my shame when I recognized two things: 1. I did the best I could, and 2. When I knew better, I did better. When I was in college I was terribly lonely and insecure; I knew nothing about proper nutrition, or how to care for myself. Bingeing and starving myself was the best I could do at the time. As I grew in knowledge, confidence, and self-esteem, I stopped bingeing and starving. Ultimately, I was able to forgive myself for abusing my body, recognizing my misguided attempt to feel good.

Now it's your turn. Look at your story. Imagine it's a movie script. Imagine it's your best friend's story. Imagine it's the story of a small child. How do you view your story now? Can you embrace your mistakes with compassion? Can you see that you were doing the best you knew how? Can you see how your behaviors were an attempt to feel good about yourself?

What's remarkable about forgiveness is how it short-circuits shame. Today, I am free and clear to treat my body with love and respect. My past is just that: an old story. I know better, and so I do better.

Find the Good

Now let's take it one step further: Can you see how your past helped you get to where you are today? Can you see the good in your past? Can you see how your past made you stronger, taught you important lessons, and, like weight lifting, built your internal muscles so you could grow and evolve?

For me, it was only through hating my body that I was able to love my body. My body image issues were my way inside: the vehicle for my growth. If I had loved and accepted my body, I would never have embarked on my spiritual quest for health and wholeness. If I hadn't hated my body, I wouldn't be able to write this e-book that you're reading.

Do you know that saying, "It's all good?" This is what it means: that all our circumstances, both those we label "good" and "bad," are bringing us back to basic truths: life is for learning, loving, and forgiving. The universe has a perfect plan, getting you to where you need to go. Hating your body may be an important step on the journey.

Embracing an Imperfect Present

There's a flip side to this exercise: What if your past isn't painful at all. What if it's your present story that causes you pain? Do you long for an earlier time, when you were beautiful, thin, or younger? Do you pine for your former beauty?

I think this scenario is very common with women who've had children. Our bodies change considerably after giving birth: stretch marks, spider veins, wider hips, bigger feet, added pounds, poochy bellies, and saggy breasts are just some of the ways pregnancy and childbirth can alter a woman's body.

I know hundreds of women in their 30s and 40s who are trying every diet, eating and exercise program they can to regain the body they had when they were 18. I know women in their 50s and 60s who are doing likewise. Instead of recognizing that the goal itself is absurd, women think there's something wrong with them: they haven't tried hard enough, or used enough willpower. Or they haven't yet found the perfect diet.

I can relate: I spent my 20s dieting to regain the super-skinny body that I had when I was 19. I thought that if only I could control myself and eat super, super, healthy food, then I could be that thin again---without the eating disorder. But nope. The only way I could be that thin again was if I starved myself.

The Pathway to Change

So how do you release your fixation on the past? How do you embrace a new image that fits who you are today? Here's what I did: I called in the troops. I prayed, "Please, God: take away my desire to be skinny." I knew it wasn't something I could tackle on my own. I had to release my will, and trust that God had something better for me than I could ever want for myself.

We don't want to release our hold on our bodies, because we're afraid that loving and accepting our bodies means being fat. We're afraid if we let our bodies eat until they're satisfied that we'll weigh 1,000 pounds. We're afraid that if we release our high expectations we'll settle for something really, really low, and end up slothful, unhealthy, ill, and obese.

But do you know what this is? This is a lack of trust. We don't trust ourselves enough to believe that we will care for our bodies. We don't trust that we'll know what our bodies need; instead we rely on experts and dieting rules to tell us what to eat, how to eat, and when to eat. We don't trust that we'll want to exercise, even if there's no one telling us we should go to the gym.

But remember? God, your spirit, your authentic self--wants something even better for you than you can imagine for yourself. Your spirit wants you to be healthy. Your spirit wants you to be beautiful. Your spirit wants you to enjoy your physical body.

Let It Go

So let it go. Release your past, your shame, your regret, your guilt. Release your pining for a perfect time, which, ultimately, didn't exist. (Let's be honest: Did you really love your body 15 pounds or 15 years ago? Or was there something, even then, that needed fixing?) Release your pining for the future, when you think you'll finally love your body, after you've lost those last ten pounds. (Let's be honest: Will you really love your body after losing 10 pounds? Or will there be something else that'll need fixing?) Release your need for your body to be perfect.

Love Your Present

Love your present. Love your body, right now, as it is. If you're in waiting mode, waiting to love yourself after you've gotten in shape, lost weight, had a facelift, or broken a bad habit, then you're putting self-love into the future. You're discounting who you are, right now. As Sanaya Roman says, you're making "who you are inadequate."

Think of someone you love; think of a small child. Do you love them any differently if their hair's unbrushed, or if they're covered in dirt, or if their body is dimpled and round? No, we usually love them more for the cowlicks, the dirty faces, and the rolls. It's what makes them unique. It's their imperfections that endear them to us.

It's your imperfections that are endearing. I have a crooked nose with a deviated septum. I love it; it's hooked and imperfect, but it makes me unique. I have stretch

marks on my hips, thighs, and belly. They are beautiful reminders of the four people I brought into the world. My broad shoulders are a gift from my father: I can look in the mirror and see him in me. My body is my geography; it's a map of where I've been, where I'm from, and a compass to point me where I need to go.

Your geography is your map. Can you love your map of the world? You're okay, just as you are. Do you think you'll only be okay when you finally lose the baby weight? No, you're okay right now. Do you think you'll only be okay when you're no longer round and pregnant? No, you're okay in this very moment. Do you think you'll only be okay when you erase the wrinkles? No, you're okay just as you are.



Step 11: Examine Your Triggers

&

Step 12: Include Yourself in Your Definition of Beauty

“Nothing makes a woman more beautiful than the belief she is beautiful.”

-Sophia Loren

In step two, I wrote about eliminating or reducing your exposure to triggers: those images, people, or situations that make you feel badly about your body. Now that you’ve traveled some distance in your acceptance of your body, I believe you’re ready to examine those triggers, to uncover why and how they hook you.

I didn’t jump into these tasks right away because you probably weren’t ready. My first priority was to remove your triggers to give you breathing room: a vacation from those negative harpies that decimate your self-esteem. Now that you’re stronger, I believe you can face those triggers, and turn them around.

Step 11: Examine Your Triggers

Do you have your list of triggers from step one? Divide them into three piles:

1. People

Are there certain people that make you feel badly about your body: co-workers, relatives, and girlfriends? Is it a person that criticizes your body or who has criticized your body in the past? Is it someone to whom you (unfavorably) compare yourself? Is it someone who bashes her body and makes you feel like you need to join in?

2. Places

What places or events trigger you? Is it a fancy social situation, where you have to wear more formal, or form fitting clothing, than you usually wear? Is it a “big” event like a college or high school reunion, where you feel sized up by your peers? Is it wearing a bathing suit? Is it in the bedroom, with your lover? Is it clothes shopping and seeing yourself in dressing room mirrors?

3. Media

Do certain actresses make you feel bad? TV shows or movies? What about magazines, advertisements, or window displays? Websites? Do you spend a lot of time comparing yourself to celebrities?

Look at your lists. Do you notice any patterns? Any overlap? How do you feel in your body? Do the thoughts of certain friends make you feel heavy? Do certain situations cause a tightness in your chest, a fluttering feeling of anxiety, or muscle tightening? That's great: these are clues. Your body is giving you hints, biofeedback: do more of this; stay away from that. Your body's clues can also serve as markers for the hidden beliefs that set your triggers in motion.

My ultimate goal is not to isolate you from your triggers: you can't run away from the world. My goal is to locate the reasoning behind your triggers, so you can disarm them. Your triggers are only able to affect you as long as they reflect an internal belief that finds you lacking. In this manner, your triggers are guideposts, pinpointing a (limited) definition of beauty. When another woman triggers you into feelings of fatness, ugliness, or frumpiness, it's because you're applying her standard of beauty to yourself, and omitting your body in that definition. So of course you feel bad: your comparisons create stress, and make you feel inferior. This can appear as sadness, tightness in the chest, anxiety, depression, fear, hatred, disgust, or envy.

I'll give you an example from my own life. I encourage you to apply these same steps to your triggers, to uncover the false beliefs that abide with them.

My trigger: Vogue magazine

I love fashion, and have since I was a girl. For years, I ritually read dozens of magazines, every month. I even covered fashion for a newspaper. But surrounding myself with images of extremely thin women triggered feelings of fatness and inferiority in me.

Here's what happened, internally, when I read Vogue: I would see an extremely thin, beautiful model. Then I would look at myself and think I was fat and ugly by comparison. I would look at the beautiful clothes, and because they were on rail thin women, I would think that I couldn't wear those clothes unless I was rail thin, too. This is compounded by the fact that I was extremely thin at one small point of my life: when I was a bulimic college student.

So my stress was caused not by the models themselves but by what they represented: a woman who, in my mind, could wear anything. They also represented myself at a

time when I believed I could wear anything. Vogue fed my sense of lack: the lack I felt because I no longer was the stick thin woman the models represented.

But let's turn my thinking around: What if I gave myself permission to wear high fashion, even if I'm not a size 2? What if I gave myself permission to feel I am beautiful at my current size? The models aren't the problem. The clothes aren't the problem. The problem is that I exclude myself from something that brings me tremendous joy and delight.

My body isn't the problem, either. My thoughts about my body are causing me pain. My belief that a woman is only beautiful if her figure is thin and flawless is what is preventing me from indulging my inner fashionista.

The fashion industry is also not the problem. (I know this a tough one to swallow: but my focus is on what we can change---ourselves---rather than what we can't change---other people.) A designer may say my body is too big for his clothes. Who cares what a designer thinks? That's his definition of beauty. His opinion can influence me only if I let it. This leads right into:

Step 12: Rewrite Your Definition of Beauty

In order to ease your suffering, you have to include yourself in your definition of beauty. Otherwise, you'll feel pained every time you look at your body in the mirror; every time you go clothes shopping; every time you interact with other people.

If you don't believe you are a worthwhile, attractive, sexy, beautiful woman, then no amount of pampering, exercise, or stylish clothes will fill that void. You can do everything "right," and have a "perfect" body, but as long as that internal voice says, "No, you're not good enough," then you will always be striving, never satisfied. You will be on edge, even when you are at your ideal weight or age, because you'll be afraid that you won't stay there.

Therein lies the rub: you won't stay the same. Our bodies do change. Your definition of beauty has to be flexible, to accept yourself as your body fluctuates. Can you find a way to deeply and completely love and accept your body, as it is today? Can you put aside your desire to fix yourself, and recognize that you are not any less or more valuable if you lose ten or one hundred pounds? Can you believe that you'll be okay and acceptable even if you gain ten or one hundred pounds?

Can you release your assumptions about beauty? Can you find the beauty in what you believe is ugly or unattractive about yourself?

Let's look at some common beliefs: You have to be in shape to look good. Grey hair and wrinkles make you look old. Fatness is unattractive. Now ask yourself, who says so? Who says you can't wear a bikini? Who says you can't go swimming unless you have a "perfect" body? Who says all athletes are skinny? Who says a woman looks the most beautiful at her thinnest and youngest?

Most often, it's not us who says so: it's someone else (the media, society, a boyfriend, girlfriends, family, peers.) We've simply co-opted their beliefs without stopping to question whether they are our own. What do you think? Do you think that you're beautiful? I look at my baby, who is totally at ease with his body. He delights in himself, in his little fat rolls and dimples and chubby cheeks. He thinks he's fine.

If we're living with an outdated definition of beauty, if we believe we have to be as we were ten or twenty years ago, then we're denying who we are in the present. We don't expect our minds, dreams, passions, goals or beliefs to be as they were ten years ago. Why do we hold our bodies to such demands?

On my 30th birthday, I realized that I had been living by an outdated definition of beauty for over a decade. My definition had stalled at who I was at 19. Every year thereafter, I was trying to be that 19 year old again. But I'm not 19. I'm a 33-year-old woman who has born four children. My definition of beauty needs to encompass who I am today, with the path that I've traveled to become who I am now, in this moment.

I have wider hips, I have stretch marks, I have saggy breasts, and I have a poochy belly. I am a woman. I have a woman's body. And I'm okay with that. I'm not a teenager. I don't have a teenager's body. I can find my beauty in who I am, with the body I have, today. Can you find the beauty in who you are, right now? You are beautiful. I know it. I see it. Can you?



Step 13: How to Change Your Thoughts

“Change your thoughts and you change your world.”

-Norman Vincent Peale

If loving our bodies is simply a matter of altering our thoughts, that’s great. But how? How do you change your thoughts? If you’ve been stewing in body hatred for years, there’s a lot of power and momentum in that negativity. It takes vigilance to switch gears. Changing your thoughts may feel like trying not to think.

I don’t try to control my thoughts as much as I choose thoughts that make me feel better. So when I feel frumpy, I can find a new thought like, “I am beautiful, even without make up.” Or, if that feels too far fetched (and sometimes it does), I can say, “I am okay, just the way I am.” Or, “Even though I’m feeling frumpy right now, I accept myself.” I can be honest; I can find a more positive thought even if I’m not harboring loving thoughts about my body at the moment.

In their book [Ask and It is Given](#), Esther and Jerry Hicks say that the key to changing your thoughts is to reach for the next higher thought. We make the mistake of trying to go from, “I’m so fat and ugly,” to “I’m a beautiful goddess.” The problem with such a giant leap is that we don’t believe it. It’s trying to do too much at once.

Changing your thoughts is like working your way up a spiral. Start where you are, at this moment: Maybe you woke up this morning and feel icky because your pants are tight. Or maybe you’re regretting the three bowls of ice cream you ate last night. So you’re not where you want to be. We all have these feelings; we all have moments when we’re not feeling our best.

Start there, and try to find a thought that feels even a little bit better. So instead of, “I’m a fat pig,” say, “I can make healthier choices today.” Doesn’t that feel better? Then you can move to, “Even though I ate three bowls of ice cream last night, I deeply and completely love and accept myself.” Then you can go one more step up the spiral to, “I make choices that support my body.” Then take one more step to, “I love and accept my body.”

Imagine your mental patterns like a wagon wheel, forming deep ruts in the road from miles and miles of use. You're trying to form a new pattern, to shape a new set of tracks. But getting out of your current rut will feel bumpy, rocky, and uncomfortable while you make the transition. Knowing this is one way of supporting yourself while you adopt any change, including your thoughts. Over time, your new way of thinking will get easier and easier. Over time, your old patterns will feel like speaking a foreign language, and your new way of thinking will be second nature. One day, you will wake up and your thoughts won't criticize your body, but celebrate it.



Step 14: Relax in Your Journey

“Taking joy in life is a woman’s best cosmetic.”

-Rosalind Russell

Right now, you may feel a need for levity. We’ve dived headfirst into your past, examined your beliefs about your body, and may have brought up an assortment of painful memories. Your current situation may be painful, too: you may feel hopeless, like you’ll never learn to love your body.

I’m here with glad tidings. I’m here to tell you to take it easy, to make it easy, too. How? At this stage in the game, it’s important to remember three things:

1. Your body image issues are a blessing.
2. Laugh at yourself: this is all pretty funny.
3. You’re okay, whether you love your body or not.

The Gift of Hating Your Body

I believe our “stuff,” my name for our stumbling blocks, serves a higher purpose: to help us grow and evolve. If you are like nearly every woman I know, then loving your body is part of your “stuff:” something that needs healing, care, and lovingkindness.

But while I am calling you to heal this part of yourself, I ask you to do so with an attitude of thankfulness. Be grateful for your body image issues. Be thankful for being fat. Be grateful for feeling fat. Why? Because this is God’s way of waking you up to yourself: of showing you your true nature. It’s God’s way of getting you to pay attention. It’s a gift, if you’ll accept it: your avenue of growth. Instead of labeling your body image issues as garbage, a negative, or something bad, look at it as the rich soil, the compost, out of which you will grow your garden.

I believe everything happens for a reason. There is a reason why nearly every woman has struggled with loving her body, at one time or another. Instead of blaming others for this problem, ignoring it, or wishing we had a different issue, let’s embrace it as our greatest opportunity for change, growth, and self-acceptance.

Make a List of Your Blessings

What good has come out of your body bashing? What lessons have you learned? How have you grown? As you progress on your journey, come back to this list, and add new insights. See it for what it is: a return to wholeness.

Laugh at Yourself

We've all done dumb things. We've all also done dumb things because we dislike our bodies, are trying to lose weight, or are stewing too much about our appearance. Would you like to see my list of dumb deeds?

- I nearly passed up a free trip to Florida because I was ten pounds heavier than I wanted to be.
- I've bought dresses for fancy occasions (weddings, in particular) two sizes too small as "inspiration," only to drive myself nuts trying to lose weight to fit into them.
- I've avoided certain stores because the lighting or dressing room mirrors made me feel "fat."
- I've declined party invitations because I didn't feel confident enough in my appearance to go.
- I avoided opportunities to take my children swimming because I didn't want to wear a bathing suit.
- I didn't go out with girlfriends because I was intimidated by their beautiful clothes and body confidence.
- I denied myself dance lessons, something that I adore, because it was too hard to watch myself in a mirror.
- I've shied away from yoga classes because I felt like the biggest woman in the room.

My list is absurd. It's absurd behavior. Now this can either cause laughter, or tears. I'm choosing to laugh. Write out your list. Can you laugh at yourself?

Laughter is the leavening that enables you to rise above your current situation, however you feel about your body, and feel the joy of acceptance. Laughing at yourself disarms your inner harpy, your inner critic. She may scream and moan and kick her feet, trying to convince you that your fat thighs and flabby belly are really, really, really the end of the world. But if you can laugh at her tantrum, her words are powerless against you.

Taking your body image issues too seriously makes your thoughts heavy and oppressive.

If you're thinking too hard about your body, you're making it more difficult than it needs to be. The mind likes to make things hard; it likes a problem, because then it has something to solve. You want to operate from your heart, and from your spirit: where there is lightness, and ease. You activate your heart with levity, mirth, and laughter: joy. If you can laugh at your foibles, you can---literally---rise above them. And the next time you are tempted to squeeze into a dress that's two sizes too small? You'll see the idea for what it is: ridiculous.

Completely Love and Accept Yourself

If you are currently beating yourself up because you think you're too fat, too flabby, too out of shape, too ugly, too_____ (fill in the blank here with however you define "Not good enough,") you may think that the problem lies in your body. You may think that if only you stop overeating/cut out certain foods/get in shape/lose weight/get a makeover/get Botox/get a boob job/stop smoking/go on a diet/get your teeth whitened/fit into a smaller size then you will feel okay. While, yes, those things may change your aesthetics, if you haven't adjusted the internal barometer, the external changes won't mean a thing. No amount of pampering, primping, or make-up will make you feel good. Pampering, primping, and make-up are wonderful ways to boost confidence; but if they are not accompanied by an abiding sense of love and acceptance, their power will be temporary and fleeting.

Loving and accepting yourself means understanding that your true worth does not fluctuate with your body weight. You are just as worthy at 200 pounds as you are at 150 pounds, or 120 pounds. Loving and accepting yourself means softening your expectations. It's believing that you are okay, whether you love your body or not. It's lightening up, understanding that while you would like to love your body, you are still a worthy, wonderful human being even if you don't. Until you deeply accept yourself, in all your incarnations, you will make loving your body one more project; one more task to accomplish before you will feel worthy of love and respect. So instead of beating yourself up for being fat you're beating yourself up for feeling fat.

It's all good. You're all good. Just as you shouldn't wait to love your body until after you've lost weight or got it together, you shouldn't wait to love and accept yourself until you love your body.

Accept yourself now, with all your peccadilloes, all your screw-ups, all your errors and shoulda, coulda, wouldas. Accept all your good moments, too. Accept it all, as your beautiful humanity, as your path home.



Step 15: Appreciate the Connection Between Self Care and Loving Your Body

“Care is the actualization of love assumed.”

-Doc Childre

As I see it, self care and loving your body are not that far apart. How are they related? Their appearance or absence in your life is primarily influenced by how you feel about yourself: your value and self worth as a person. Self-care and body love are merely behaviors, the effect, not the cause. They are following your internal belief system, not guiding it.

What are guiding your behavior are your internal beliefs. If you want to love your body, if you want to say no to obligations that leave you drained, if you want to add more joy to your life, if you want to honor your needs, you must first and foremost believe that you are worthy of these things. And you believe that you are worthy of pleasure, joy, love and acceptance by embracing that you are worthy, joyful, beloved, and accepted.

Yes, it’s primarily an inside job. If you believe you are a worthy, lovable human being, then you will most likely believe your body is worthy and lovable, too. If you believe you are worthy and lovable, then you will treat yourself as someone who is worthy of love and care. By contrast, if you are harsh, critical and demanding towards your body, I will bet that you are also harsh, critical, and demanding towards yourself. Believing that you need to be a size four to be worthy is just one more version of the lie that your entire being needs to be perfect to be worthy.

If you beat yourself up for gaining ten pounds, you’ll probably beat yourself up for burning a dinner or losing your temper with your children. Why? These thoughts are all the work of our inner critic, which feeds off our unworthiness until it seeps into every area of our lives: home, work, family, and health.

I think about the years that I spent dieting, desperately trying to lose fifteen pounds. While I exercised punitively (one mile for every indulgence the preceding night), and punished myself with stringent food restrictions, I also denied myself comfort, care, friendship, and nurturing. I treated my body as I treated myself: harshly. I treated

others as I treated myself: harshly. I was prickly with my family and loved ones, because the same criticism I directed towards myself I directed towards others.

Thank goodness for the grace of change. Today, I can see correlations, the varied offspring of my journey of self love: as I give myself permission to relish and enjoy food, I've given myself permission to relish and enjoy my other earthy, lusty desires for sexual connection, pleasure, and joy.

As I relax about my weight and the number on the scale, I relax about money and the number in my bank account.

As I relax my expectations for what I should look like, I relax my expectations for what my house should look like.

As I've relaxed my perfectionist standards for myself, I've also relaxed my standards for my children, my husband, and my family.

As I let myself feel beautiful, I let other women be beautiful, without the jealousy I'd previously felt.

As I nurture my body with good food, exercise, fabulous, flattering clothes, and pampering, I likewise nurture myself with juicy novels, afternoon naps, girlfriend time, and window-shopping.

As I deeply and completely love and accept my body, with its quirks, imperfections, and blemishes, I am also able to completely love and accept others with their quirks and imperfections. As I've loved my body, I've loved myself; as I've loved myself, I've extended that love outward, to others. It's a spiral of change that softened my ego, quieted my judgments, and created peaceful relationships where heretofore was friction.

As I love myself, I love my body. As I love my body, I love myself. As I love myself, I love others; I love my life. It's a mutually reciprocal road, which extends inward, outward, and eventually, upward, reawakening each of us to our true, divine nature.



Step 16: Embrace Your Stuff

“The difficulties of life are intended to make us better, not bitter.”

-Author Unknown

Hating your body is a spiritual issue. Although it manifests in the physical, its roots stem from a denial of the spiritual: your innate goodness, worthiness, and divinity. Your body is simply the message, the vessel, the container for the lack of worthiness you feel.

The more I travel on the path of accepting my body, the more I understand this truth: hating your body is no different than any other stumbling block. They share a common purpose: they're all pathways to our deeper selves, our spirits. In the end, we're only here to learn how to love, both ourselves, and others. What greater reason for life than love itself? What greater reason to cherish your body, your vehicle for love?

When I was in the thick of my body image struggle, frustrated at how this issue kept reappearing in my life, I was exhausted by my inner tapes: the tapes that told me what to eat or what to look like. I was equally tired of trying to transform my tapes into something positive.

What I really wanted was to stop thinking about my body at all. I wanted to escape from my “stuff.” Why couldn't I deal with alcoholism, or a difficult relationship for a while? You may laugh at me, but I share this story to demonstrate how the grass is always greener: even someone else's pain looks better than your own.

My message is to embrace your stuff as your greatest teacher. When I embraced my body image stuff, welcoming its lessons, I found my gold: a connection with my spirit.

My connection had been severed, for years. We are born craving that connection. Without it, we wither and fall prey to lies. My lie was that I had to be skinny, young, beautiful---perfect---to be acceptable. Underneath my desire to accept my body was my desire to accept myself. When I welcomed my body image issues, offering myself up to the lessons they had to teach me, I reclaimed my spiritual connection.

And here's the breathtaking genius of it all: If I had never hated my body, I never would have found my peace. My void might still be empty. I could still be searching.

What a gift.

Hating your body is God waking you up, bringing attention to your void. Until you fill that void, it won't matter how many pedicures you get, or how many pounds you lose: you'll never be satisfied. Until you fill that void, you'll never feel beautiful... for long.

That is why I believe this work, loving your body, is important. It's about discovering your true worth. It's about filling your void with something lasting, and something true. It's about uncovering the inner radiance, to match the outer.

If you hate your body, embrace it as your pathway to your spirit, your higher self. Don't question your issues. Don't wish for a different one. It's all part of the perfect, unfolding plan, to bring you back to yourself. Beating yourself up with statements like, "Why do I care so much about what I weigh or what I look like? It's vain and selfish," is counterproductive. Because it does matter. It matters because these feelings are holding you back, shielding you from your true worth.

Instead of looking at your body image issues with fear, anger, or disgust, embrace them with compassion. Approach yourself with curiosity: Why do I feel this way? What beliefs do I harbor that cause me to believe such lies?

Follow the questions. Don't demean this work as trivial. If body hatred is consuming your thoughts and keeping you from experiencing the full measure of who you are, it matters. If it's preventing you from being happy in the present moment, it's worthy of exploration, time and attention.

It takes courage to face who you are: to face and release the lies that hold you back. If body hatred is holding you back, accept it as a glorious invitation: an invitation to dive into yourself.



Step 17: Be Willing to Be Vulnerable

“We all need somebody to talk to. It would be good if we talked... not just pitter-patter, but real talk. We shouldn’t be so afraid, because most people really like this contact; that you show you are vulnerable makes them free to be vulnerable.”

-Liv Ullmann

One of those insidious little lies that keep us blocked says that if people knew us as we really are, if they saw us without any filters, they wouldn’t accept us.

This is cousin to the lie that says your body isn’t acceptable unless it’s perfect: at a thin, ideal weight, unwrinkled, unblemished, hairless, toned, muscled, and polished.

Another version of the lie is that your children must be well behaved at all times. Or that you must be well behaved at all times.

This lie can make you insane: Your dinners must be Food Network worthy; your house, like Martha’s. Your body, a model’s; your spirituality, Mother Teresa’s.

It’s a lie that keeps you from accepting yourself. It’s a lie that keeps you from life, itself.

I’m inviting you to drop the lie. Be willing to be vulnerable. Be honest. Be real. Strip off the mask, and let people see who you really are.

I’ll warn you: this is life changing.

Honesty and vulnerability, you see, are excellent bedfellows; each is influenced by the other. As you become more honest, revealing the whole truth about yourself, you also become more vulnerable. You’re stripping off your armor, exposing yourself to others’ slings and arrows.

When I began First Ourselves, I was initially uncomfortable being so open. My

honesty felt like walking around without skin. But it's that very willingness to be real that has generated a connection and response with other women. I'm not rejected by others because of my honesty; I'm accepted because of it. This is true not only for me. Think of the relief you feel when someone whom you've always admired, someone that you look to as the epitome of the perfect mom, woman, wife, reveals her weaknesses. Doesn't her vulnerability make you like her more, not less?

We all have mean thoughts. We all judge others. We all can be petty, unforgiving and self absorbed. What a relief to know that we're not alone; that we're not the only ones who think this way. How nice to know that we're all in this, together.

On the other side of vulnerability awaits a precious commodity: freedom. The truth sets you free in many ways. On a practical level, honesty creates freedom because you aren't expending time and energy constructing a false front. You don't have to remember your story, or prop up your lies with backup.

But, more importantly, the truth sets you free by releasing you from shame. We hide the truth of ourselves because we're ashamed by it. We're ashamed of our secret corners; those dark habits that mar our divinity. It's why we hide our addictions, our fears, and even our hopes and dreams. But putting those habits and dreams out in the open, where everyone can see them, is what releases the shame. When you own all of who you are---the good, and the bad---shame disappears.

I've revealed it all; my eating disorder, my depression, my overeating, my body hatred. I reveal it all because I own it all. I hold no shame against myself. And because I hold no shame, I don't feel vulnerable in sharing my story. You can call me on anything, any piece of my past or present, and I won't flinch. I don't run from whom I am.

You see, in owning who I am, in accepting the truth about myself, I also accept a greater truth: The real me, the real Karly, isn't the overeater, the body hater, the depressive. The real me, my spirit, is so much greater than that. I am not my habit. I am not my thoughts. I am not my behavior.

You aren't either.

I'm free to accept my stumbling blocks, just as I am free to accept my divinity. I'm free to love others unconditionally; to accept their stumbling blocks, and their divinity.

Being vulnerable, you see, will change your world. It will split your heart wide open;

it will tear down the wall that separates you from others. Sometimes, the tenderness of this world, of all of those aching, lovely souls that cross your path, will bring you to tears. Being vulnerable will mean you'll cry more, you'll laugh more, and you'll experience everything in greater depth. Being vulnerable is really about one thing: being willing to love.



Step 18: Trust Your Instincts

“Self-trust is the first secret of success”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Someone posed this question to me yesterday: How do you know what to eat? For every diet, there's a counterpart, claiming its opposite. Likewise, how do you know which exercise program you should follow? What about supplements? Alternative medicine?

We are fortunate to live in a time of multiple options for health care, food, and lifestyle. But our depth of choices can also lead to overwhelm.

For years, I was a diet book junkie; I've read and tried them all. I was a sucker for the magazine cover that proclaimed, “Lose 10 pounds in ten days.” Or, “The Best Foods to Fight Depression.” Diets were hope in a book: finally, I had a solution to my problem.

Until.... the diet didn't produce the nirvana I sought, and hope turned to frustration; then, to despair.

The alternative was trusting myself to know what to eat, when to exercise, or even knowing whether or not my “ideal weight” was realistic and attainable. (The ego, you see, would have me on a constant diet/beauty regimen until I was “perfect,” and even then, it wouldn't be satisfied.)

I knew trusting myself was the way to go. I also knew, unlike the latest diet, this way of living would bring me peace: peace from my need to control my body, and its desires. But this process was scary. It felt risky, for if I don't trust myself enough to make supportive choices---relying on my internal guidance---how can I survive without the external guidance; the food lists, diet phases, and meal guidelines?

But this is exactly the risk that I had to take. I stumbled upon this quote: “Progress always involves risk. You can't steal 2nd base and keep your foot on first.”

It took me a long time to switch from external guidance to internal guidance. I had to let go of my rigidity: my extreme expectations for my body (only a size 4 will do), my food choices (You can never have carbs!), and for myself in general (you're a bad mother whenever you lose it with your children.)

I spent months veering from one extreme to the other, where I let myself eat whatever I wanted to, because I could, but making choices that didn't make me feel good (this translated into lots and lots of sugar.) Then I would feel so badly that I would veer to the other extreme, which meant going back to the food lists and diet restrictions. Now, I've found a healthy balance. Most days, I wake up, and ask myself what I want to eat. If I want to run, I run. If I don't, or if I'm really tired, I don't force myself. If my pants are tight, I change them: I don't freak out about a few extra pounds or believe there's something wrong with me. (What are wrong are the pants, not my body.) What's remarkable about this way of living is how much I don't think about food, calories, my appearance, my body, my size, or my looks. I am remarkably comfortable being free of make-up or a hair-do for much of the time, even contradicting my earlier advice of keeping myself well groomed at all times.

What has happened, is that as I trust myself, I love myself. As I love myself, I accept myself. As I accept myself, I am comfortable with myself. This means I don't feel a need to change myself to feel okay about who I am: the false hope I sought in all of those dozens of diets.

The coolest thing about this process is how trusting myself with my food and health habits carried over into every other area of my life. As I relaxed about my weight, I relaxed about my messy house. As I relaxed about going to a party with "forbidden foods" a-plenty, I relaxed about attending a party full of intimidating people. As I relaxed about my food choices, I relaxed about my other choices.

It's a beautiful, symbiotic circle that blossoms and grows and expands with each turn of the wheel. Learning to trust myself on the small things enables me to trust myself with the big things: decisions beyond chicken vs. risotto; choices that are not so much about what I eat, or how I feel, but about how I live my very life.



Step 19: Use Love as Your Motivation to Change

“People who have a self-image of worth are going to see value in what they do. This is the attitude that motivates them to be and to do their best. It’s a drive that comes from within people.”

-William Walton

Many women who want to love their bodies, myself included, go about it backwards: they treat it as a then-when proposition: When I lose weight, then I’ll love my body. This makes for a hard, hard road.

If you want to create love for your body, and attain the peace that comes with it, one of the easiest ways to manifest this desire is to think about the essence of what you want; to be unattached to the outer form in which it appears. This means letting go of a number on a scale, a clothing size, or a wrinkle free face. Instead, dig underneath that desire for a better-looking body (however you define it) to find the essence of what you want.

What’s the essence? I think what you really want is self-acceptance. What you really desire---the motivation behind the wish for weight loss, a more youthful complexion, or a toned body---is to feel good. To look in the mirror and like what you see. To go clothes shopping and feel terrific. To frolic on the beach in your bathing suit with ease. To go to a party filled with other women and not feel envious or lacking in comparison.

Here’s the kicker: those feelings have absolutely nothing to do with what you see in the mirror. Those feelings have everything to do with what’s in your head. I think of when I looked my physical best, at least according to Hollywood’s standards, when I was an emaciated 19 year old. Did I feel pretty? Um, no: I still had a long list of things to “fix” before I felt thin and beautiful. By contrast, when I’ve felt the most beautiful is after giving birth to my children, when I’m naked, unstyled, flabby, sweaty, and make-up free.

Here’s the good news: You can give yourself those feelings of body love without losing weight, getting a face lift, or tightening your butt. You can give yourself those feelings by loving and accepting your body as it is, now.

Here's even better news: By giving yourself the essence of what you want, first, your body will naturally cooperate and evolve to be its best self: the best you that you can be. If you are over or underweight, your weight will stabilize at its natural set point: the place where your body looks its best. If your body looks icky from poor health or bad habits, it will become more beautiful through self-love, as a result of your tender loving care and good habits.

How? Let me explain.

It's all a matter of motivation: Are you trying to look your best in order to compete with other women? Are you pursuing health for appearance only, for vanity? Are you willing yourself, fighting yourself, in an effort to control your eating, control your ageing, or control your body? Is your ego in charge?

I've lived this way---under the thumb of my ego, my vanity, and my need to be better than others. It's what kept me nuts, trying to be a size 4; trying to lose my baby weight as quickly as possible; trying to fight the changes of pregnancy, age, and motherhood.

Compare those motivations to those that come from love, your higher self; motivations that are driven by your higher good: Giving yourself enough nourishing, delicious, healthy food that offers nutrition and pleasure. A body that loves to be used and appreciated, whether it be its physicality or its sexuality. A desire to let your inner beauty shine outward. A healthy appreciation for your outer physical beauty, yet free of clinging or attachment; flexible to accept the changes that come.

Doesn't that sound like a better way to live? Doesn't it feel freer, more joyful?

Vanity, you see, is a terrible motivator, because it's never, ever satisfied. The will isn't any better: forcing yourself to do something that you really don't want to do, or forcing yourself to do something that harms your body, can never last over the long term. The ego is even worse, because it keeps you fearful and neurotic: even if you lose the weight or get the Botox, it will immediately start harping and fretting over the regain of the lost pounds or the return of the frown lines.

How do you get off this track? Tap into the essence of what you want. Spend time meditating on what loving your body feels like: Can you remember a time when you felt okay about your appearance? Sit with those feelings until you feel them in your body. Bring about the essence and feel it: in your gut, your heart, and your mind. Now, can you give yourself that gift, that essence of acceptance and self-love, to your body as it is, right now, in this moment?

That is love. Following love, not your will, is the quickest, easiest path to changing habits that harm your body. If you love your body, and love yourself, looking your best will happen naturally, organically, without extraordinary amounts of will and effort. You won't need to find motivation to exercise, or eat foods that make you feel good: you will automatically do these things as a consequence of self-love. You won't stuff yourself with food until you feel sick. You won't starve yourself, either. You will give your body what it wants: a variety of foods and textures. More importantly, you'll trust yourself to give yourself these things, and silence the critical voice that goes ballistic when you enjoy a piece of pizza.

As you trust yourself, and honor yourself, and treat your body like the precious creature that it is, this becomes a regular pattern that feeds your self love, until it becomes a mutually beneficial cycle: as your self love grows, then your self care increases; as your self care and self love increases, your body looks better than ever; and as your body looks great, you feel more love towards your body, and yourself, which only increases your self care.... Then a beautiful thing happens: your body will find its natural set point/equilibrium: where it looks its best, as a naturally, unfolding consequence of kindness. Just as a house that is loved and cared for will look its best, as you treat yourself kindly, your body shines from the love and care you bestow upon it.

When love is your motivation, you'll know whether to lose weight, gain weight, eat more, eat less, exercise more, exercise less. You'll know when your body needs a day off, and you'll rest, instead of pushing yourself on the elliptical machine. What's even better is that you'll be able to rest without your inner critic/taskmaster going haywire: ("You need to go to the gym or you'll get fat!") You'll know whether you are loving yourself or you are berating yourself. (Berating yourself is doing something because you think you should---because you feel like you have to. Loving yourself is doing something because you want to.)

Which do you choose: the will, or the heart? Vanity, or acceptance? Hatred, or love?



Step 20: So What If You Want to Lose Weight?

*“Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air,
drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself
to the influences of each.”*

-Henry David Thoreau

In step 19, I wrote about using love as your guide in helping your body feel and look its best. This brings me to a question that I hear often: So does loving my body mean I can't lose weight? What if I am fat, and need to/want to slim down? What if I am unhealthy? Does loving my body mean I can't also work to change it?

These are good questions. While I ultimately believe that the only one who can answer whether or not you should undergo a weight loss, makeover, or anti-aging program is you, yourself, and you; I will offer how I answer this question for myself.

My short answer is: Yes, you can love your body and want to change it. (I promise: I am not the body or food police.)

My long answer is: Yes, you can love your body and work to change it. But you will succeed (and experience all of the good feelings that you imagine coming with the changes) only if your motivation comes from your higher energies: from your higher will, your higher emotions, and your higher self.

Your Higher Will

I've already written about using your higher will in step 19, so I'll only touch on it briefly here. But the gist of your higher will is this: your higher will is operating from your intuition, your heart, and your spirit. Contrast this with your ego, your will, or your mind: your lower will. The difference is wanting to (your higher will) versus having to (your lower will); could versus should. When you are doing something because you feel as if you must, without any real love or desire behind your actions, you eventually rebel, manifesting in self-sabotage. Meanwhile, you're left wondering why you don't stick to your exercise routine or why you overeat, when you're so focused on wanting to be healthy.

My path is to use your higher will---tapping into your internal wisdom that wants what is best for you---instead of your lower will---the part of you that feels as if it has

to do something. I suggest aligning your desires with your higher will, so that you naturally care for your body excellently (giving it proper rest, nutrition, exercise, etc.) as a natural consequence of love. The end result is the same: habits that create excellent health and beauty. But the motivation is different. It's the motivation that will make the behaviors both lasting and adaptable, so that you can bend and flex with the changes of your body while maintaining a high level of self-care.

Your Higher Emotions

But there's more to the puzzle than just your will. In her book *Excuse Me, Your Life is Waiting*, author Lynn Grabhorn writes about the amazing power of our emotions: how they raise or lower our vibration to shape our experiences.

This explains why so many well-intentioned exercise or healthy eating programs don't achieve lasting results. How many are motivated by love, and how many are motivated by fear, anger, hatred, or disgust? It's very common to hear about a woman who decides to lose weight after reaching her breaking point, where she was fed up with her weight and wanted to change. I've been overweight, and I remember those feelings of being too heavy: I felt anxious, sad, critical, unworthy, and even a little obsessive.

The truth is it hurts to look in the mirror and not like what you see. But it's also true that if pain or negativity is your motivation for change, you won't gain the long-term peace that you seek. Sure, you may lose the weight. But will it last? Even if it does, will you feel self-love, acceptance, and peace, or will your weight loss morph into a quest to lose five more pounds, a few more wrinkles, a few more years? Will you truly be satisfied? Will you honestly love your body?

This is why loving your body is the only way to motivate yourself to change your body: it's coming from a higher energy, from a higher vibration, not from the lower energies of hate, disgust, criticism, or neuroticism. This is why you can't hate your "fatness" or your wrinkles or whatever bothers you about your body and expect it to change. Using our will, our disgust, our shame, our hatred won't give us what we really want---to feel good about our appearance, and ourselves---because these feelings aren't coming from a high energy or a high place to begin with: they are coming from our lower natures.

It's like trying to make a delicious pie out of rotten apples: no matter how much sugar or butter you add, even if it's hand churned organic butter, the best you've ever tasted, your pie will still taste terrible. Similarly, you can't make yourself feel good about your body without coming from a place of love and acceptance. That's why you can

live at the gym, spend countless dollars on expensive beauty treatments, and have a stunning wardrobe of size 4s, and still feel terrible and inadequate: you've got rotten apples.

Your Higher Self

Here's how you get a good apple: start with a sweet one that's fresh from the tree. The tree is the source; your source, God, the Universe, your angels, your Higher Self, whatever you call it. The apples are the good feelings that flow from a strong, moving connection to your source, the fruits of the spirit: kindness, gentleness, grace, love, joy, and gratitude.

It's this connection that we're all really seeking, the connection that manifests as those delicious, wonderful fruits. This connection is what gives meaning, purpose, and passion to our lives. This connection enables us to connect with each other, to soften those hard places of ourselves, and open our hearts wide to our fellow human beings and the lessons we learn in making ourselves vulnerable.

When we're disconnected from ourselves, our spirits, we are empty vessels that can never be filled. You may think your butt is the problem, but no; the real problem lies deeper. You may lose the weight or the wrinkles, but wherever you go, there you are: you're still stuck with yourself. If you can't love and accept yourself in all your facets, and in all of your being, you will never have peace. You will always have a void that needs filling.

Loving Your Body Into Change

So if you are, indeed, wanting to gain better health or beauty, I say: go for it. But go for it in a way that gives you what you're really seeking: love and acceptance. So love, love, love, love, love and accept your body now, as it is. Love your wrinkles, your fat rolls, your stretch marks, your thunder thighs, and your spotty skin. Find something positive about it and be grateful.

I love my stretch marks. I know that sounds off the wall, but I do. They are tangible reminders of some of my happiest memories: the euphoria of holding my newborn babies in my arms. Other body parts have been harder for me to love, like my broad shoulders. But then I remembered who gave me my shoulders: my father. I love my father. So I poured all those feelings of love and gratitude and acceptance that I feel for my father and directed them to my shoulders.

What about you? How can you love those aspects of yourself that aren't perfect, or

that you think need changing?

When you approach change from a place of love and acceptance, then you have accomplished one of the greatest challenges in attracting what you want: the ability to let go. If you can let go of your attachment to looking a certain way, and can feel good about your body in many different incarnations, then you have a much greater chance of obtaining the essence of what you want: feeling good in your physical skin. That, my dears, is what we're all really after, in the first place. Find that, and you will have won your body war, because what's on the outside will be secondary to what's in.



Step 21: Know Your True Value

“Beyond any reasonable doubt, we each share the ancient name of God in our bodies in the most intimate way imaginable. Each fiber of muscle, each crystal of bone, the tears that we shed — all are God.”

-Gregg Braden

Here is the dilemma of the day: Every woman wants to feel beautiful, pretty and attractive. This is a natural human desire, as we also crave love, abundance, and joy. Yet, our desire for beauty can also cause us pain and suffering. If we think that our body has to look a certain way to be beautiful, then whenever our body doesn't match this internal image---when we've gained a few, or more than a few, pounds; when our skin develops wrinkles, age spots, and sagging; when we're unkempt and dowdy in our sweats or old ratty clothes---we feel dissonant, lacking, and anxious, because our external package doesn't match these internal criteria. When this happens, we don't feel beautiful, and this pain morphs into an insatiable restlessness. It's this restlessness that drives us into the arms of the newest diet book, plastic surgeon, the shopping mall, and even self help books, a self-improvement program, or a spiritual guru.

What we're looking for is “the answer;” we're so hopeful that we'll finally find the thing that will put us back together again. All of these things, shopping, dieting, seeking---and many others---temporarily quell this restlessness. They ease our anxiety and discomfort with the present moment, where we are so desperate to change what is, where we are, and what we look like, that we will grasp at anything to ease these uncomfortable feelings.

The problem is that the restlessness that temporarily abated? It returns. The new outfit that made us feel so pretty, or “skinny?” One day it doesn't work anymore. It gets a stain or pills; we look in the mirror and we change our minds: our skinny jeans make our butt look big, not small. The diet stops working. Or it does work, and we find that losing those extra 10 pounds doesn't make us feel any better. So we need to lose 10 more. And ten more. And ten more. We may even achieve outward success---we get the facelift---but its mood lift is temporary. What happens when you get what you want and you find out that it doesn't bring you the happiness and the peace that you sought?

So then what do we do? We add onto the list, thinking that the problem is that we need to do more---our eyebrows need shaping; we need to lift weights in addition to the cardio; and what about a new haircut? not realizing that our method is what's at fault, and not the extent of its application.

My friends, what we're really doing is painting a burning house. We are fighting reality. We are trying to control something that can't be controlled, and our impotence drives us mad. Our bodies are burning. They do not last. They will change and morph and age and someday die. That is true for you, and for me, and for everyone.

But it is also true that we are not our bodies. Our over identification with our bodies is what causes us this tremendous pain in the first place. We are spiritual beings. Our true nature is our immortal spirit, and that does not die. If we can shift our consciousness, and see ourselves---and others---for who they really are, then the body steps by the wayside, and you will be delighted and amazed at how little you think about your body at all.

I know this sounds contradictory. After all, one of the first steps I advise, (and one of the first things that I did when I was trying to change how I felt about my body), is to make the effort to get dressed. If you're feeling badly about your body or your self-image, taking the time to assemble a flattering outfit, take a shower, and groom your hair and face can make all of the difference. It's a perk that can boost your spirits into a higher place, where you feel better about yourself. I believe this is a valuable trick, and one that has its place.

But, in my experience, there comes a time and place where you have to be comfortable with whom you are, without the external trappings, without having to be any different than you are in that moment. You have to come to a point of acceptance about what your physical body can, and can't do. (Yes, it can look beautiful. But no, this can't make up for feelings of unworthiness.) You have to come to a point of acceptance about what a new eye shadow or even a nose job can and can't do. What it can do is give you a temporary boost. What it can't do is offer permanent peace.

It can't offer permanent peace because, as Eckhart Tolle writes, "the end and the means are intertwined." The end result---peace about our appearance, our bodies, and ourselves---can't wait until the end: when you've achieved your goal weight; when you've toned your tummy; when you've erased the wrinkles. It has to be a part of the process. This means feeling good about yourself and your appearance no matter what you see in the mirror.

How do you do this? You do this by releasing your attachment to looking a certain way.

This is all new territory for me. For most of my life, I disliked, hated, and didn't accept my body. I wanted it to be different. I felt ashamed for its urges and its desires. I was embarrassed by its sexuality and its humanity. I was uncomfortable being beautiful, being ugly, and being anything in between.

But these days, much of the time, what I notice is a complete absence of my thoughts of my body it all. I just don't think about it. I am remarkably comfortable being frump Mom; most days I am more concerned with writing, going for a run, or connecting with my children than taking the 30 minutes to shower, style my hair, and put on makeup. This is not to say that I don't enjoy getting ready when I take the time to do so. Last Friday night, I put on some jewelry, a pretty outfit, and groomed myself for a benefit dinner. I enjoyed feeling feminine and pretty.

The difference is that I was unattached to it. The next day, I wore my sweats and tackled household chores all day. I didn't feel pretty, but I didn't feel badly about this because I didn't need to feel pretty. I'm thinking of what Lao Tzu wrote, in The Tao of Peace, how "Great trouble comes from not knowing what is enough. Great conflict arises from wanting too much. When we know when enough is enough, there will always be enough."

Knowing when enough is enough is knowing that you are okay and lovable and perfectly acceptable and, yes, beautiful, whether you have zits on your face or wrinkles or gray hair or whether you rival a supermodel. Knowing when enough is enough is feeling good about yourself no matter what version of "you" you see in the mirror. Knowing when enough is enough is being able to sit with yourself, in this present moment, without having to run away from the restlessness that would have you believe that you aren't okay, just as you are.



Final Thoughts, & a Final Step: Pass it On

*“Dare to reach out your hand into the darkness,
to pull another hand into the light.”*

-Norman B. Rice

As you heal your body image, its effects will reverberate throughout your life. You will be a changed woman. You will be free and clear: free to accept yourself, and others, without condition. You will be a beacon, illuminating the path for women who will follow in your footsteps. You will be a woman of peace.

While I encourage you to make loving your body and self-care integral parts of your life, I'm not telling you to stop there. We are constantly growing, evolving, and expanding. As you move from body bashing to body acceptance, let the world know. Share your knowledge with other women. Educate your daughters and nieces. Proclaim your victory. Pass it on.

And then, give back.

Most spiritual traditions encourage their members to tithe: to give away a portion of their abundance (money, talents, and time) to spiritual causes and those in need. It's a powerful practice. Giving without any expectation creates feelings of gratitude, abundance, and joy. Tithing connects you to your higher self, by serving as a reminder that all that you have, ultimately, comes from God. It also aligns you with your higher purpose: sending a check to a cause that speaks to your deepest self creates integrity, because it's matching your behavior to your beliefs.

Abundance comes in many forms. Health is one. Joy, another. Freedom. Deep and complete acceptance of oneself: that is richness, indeed. As you come to a place of peace about your body, food, and your self-worth, I encourage you to tithe your abundance by helping other women do the same. As you give back and help others, it creates a ripple effect: Have you heard of Malcolm Gladwell's book [The Tipping Point?](#) He describes a point in time where an idea gathers enough momentum that its effects change on a massive level. What happens when we reach the tipping point, when enough women love their bodies to effect a transformation? We change the world. When enough women love and accept themselves, and don't believe they have

to be “fixed” to be okay, then little girls and young teens will be raised in an atmosphere where they will be able to love and accept themselves. Women who love and accept themselves will glory in their bodies as they age; not fret and worry and pick at their bodies for changing.

But giving to others benefits the giver, as well as the receiver. As you encourage women on their quest, it gives you strength to continue on your own journey. You will have days when those old familiar fat feelings will creep into your consciousness. We all do. Helping another is a powerful antidote to a hyper focus on one’s own body. I’ve seen this manifest in my own life: as I write and encourage others, I benefit, as well.

So how do you give back? How do you tithe something intangible, like self-love or body acceptance?

Here are some suggestions:

-Are you one of those women who knows how to look good? Are you a makeup pro? Do you have knowledge about colors and clothing, and how to flatter your body type? Offer to help another woman find her style.

-Clean out your closet, jewelry box and make-up drawer. That lipstick you bought and never wore? Maybe it would look smashing on a girlfriend. Release clothes and accessories that don’t fit or flatter you: donate them to a thrift store, a woman’s shelter, Dress for Success, or to a woman whom they do flatter. Pare down your wardrobe to what you actually wear, to what you adore, and to what looks good on you, even it means winnowing your closet down to a few choices. I did this with my clothes one summer, and it was one of the best things I’ve ever done. Although my summer wardrobe was spare, getting dressed was a breeze: everything in my closet coordinated together, and, and more importantly, I had something to wear everyday that I really liked.

-As you give yourself new clothes, beauty treatments, and other pampering, treat the women in your life, as well. I love giving my girlfriends and family gift certificates to a favorite clothing store, or a pedicure at a spa for a present.

-Compliment other women. I make it a habit to compliment at least one woman a day. Women, at their worst, can be competitive and cruel: we view other women as a threat to our self-esteem. But we can all be beautiful, successful, and smashing. There’s enough to go around. Your beauty doesn’t detract from another

woman's, and her beauty doesn't detract from yours. One of the easiest ways to tame feelings of envy is to short-circuit them. That woman who has the killer body at the gym? Compliment her on it. Your neighbor who has a wardrobe that could rival a socialite's? Praise her for it. Your sister-in-law who always manages to look pulled together, even with small children in tow? Ask her how she does it. Make the woman who has it all your friend, not your enemy.

- When a woman criticizes her body, or is disdainful towards her appearance, boost her spirits. Remind her of what you love about her. Show her how you see her through your eyes. We are so much harder on ourselves than other people are. When a friend is unable to love and accept herself, show her love and acceptance in your treatment of her. Hold the gap for her until she is able to cross the bridge on her own.
- Share your story with the next generation. I find opportunities---teachable moments---to talk about my body with my daughters. For example, if I'm looking at a magazine, and my daughters comment on a picture of an airbrushed woman, I'll point out how the woman is made to look different than she really is. At the same time, I let them witness the relish I take in my body: the thrill of getting made-up for a night out, the joy of new clothes, the satisfaction of a hard, sweaty run. One of the easiest ways to teach children is by thinking out loud. When I go clothes shopping, and a pair of pants are snug, I say, "These feel tight. I think I need a bigger size." Or, when I'm feeling lightheaded in the afternoon, I'll say, "I'm feeling irritable. I think I'm hungry, so I'm going to get myself a snack." Thinking out loud shows my girls how I take care of myself, so that they learn how to take care of themselves, too. I don't stop at my daughters, either. When I overheard a darling twelve year old girl bemoaning how "fat" she was at a store, I took the opportunity to tell her how beautiful she was.
- Follow your bliss. As you create opportunities for joy, you become a light for other women, inspiring them to do the same. We all need role models. I have many: I think of a friend who manages to indulge her love for travel and adventure while caring for three young children; another mom who makes time for two and three hour bike rides, a balm to her spirit; another friend whose love of fashion led her to open a shoe boutique that lets other women find their inner fashionista. What makes you happy? Where's your bliss? I know that in my own life, there is an intangible connection between creating joy and feeling good about my body: they usually go together. When I'm feeling deprived, my body is usually the scapegoat, and the one to take the beating.
- The next time a group of girlfriends begins a body bashing session, change the

subject. Dare to be different; dare to stand up for a new way of being. Dare to admit your love for your body, and watch jaws drop. Then watch as women beg for answers.

-Support women in their quest for freedom. When I receive newsletters from my favorite charities, organizations like CARE and Women for Women International, I forget about my issues, my neuroses, and myself. There's nothing like a desire to help others in need that severs thoughts about a few extra pounds.

Those are my ideas. I'm sure you have your own. I'll end with a few inspiring quotes, ones that I hope encourage you to share what you have learned with others, as your gift to the world:

“The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under
whose shade you do not expect to sit.”

-Nelson Henderson

“No man stands so straight as when he stoops to help a boy.”

-Knights of Pythagoras

“The greatest good you can do for another is not just
to share your riches but to reveal to him his own.”

-Benjamin Disraeli