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Cover Page Footnote

Lisa Pia Spinazola, having just graduated with her PhD, is currently a visiting instructor in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida. This paper was first conceived in an Autoethnography PhD Seminar a few years ago. Thank you to Dr. Carolyn Ellis for helping me give it shape and find the story and much appreciation to Colin Whitworth for the careful editing and invaluable feedback and recommendations making it ready for publication.

Mirror, mirror, on the wall: Reflections of a fat girl

Lisa P. Spinazola
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This paper shows a day in the life of a woman who sees herself as fat. Her reflection in the mirror is a site of conflict and strife. While she feels accomplished and confident as a teacher, mother and friend, she lacks confidence about her body, which presents a dialectical tension in her sense of self. She writes as a way to understand this dialectic and how she might learn to live a healthier, happier life where she finds balance and is not flagellating herself about her weight. She explores the role food and exercise play in her existence and contemplates how she got to this place while focusing on events from her childhood, examining parental obsession with diet, and incorporating the impact of cultural influences.

Keywords: body image, family influence, health, diet, exercise, autoethnography

8:00 am – Peaches and (curdled) cream

Beep. Beep. Beep. I'm plucked from sleep by my cell phone alarm clock. After freeing myself from the tangle of pillows and sheets that hold me in their snuggled embrace, I walk the hallway between the bedroom and bathroom toward a full-length mirror. Through hazy light and morning eyes, I watch a voluptuous, Rubenesque figure saunter toward me. Her peachy, fleshy hues move gracefully, almost catlike, as she advances. She draws near and comes into focus, her round hips swaying and full breasts bouncing. I hit the light switch, flaring up the interrogation lamp and turn the looking glass into a magnifying mirror, obliterating the once lovely vision.

The image in the mirror is suddenly fat and white and pasty. I turn sideways, surveying the bulges and rolls. I tug on my stomach and hips. *How did all this look so charming moments ago?* Under the harsh lights, I lean in to inspect my face, its wrinkles and age spots, the three chins that peek and retreat when I open and close my mouth. My perky and full breasts, like soldiers at attention, are the last body parts to reflect my once youthful vitality. Tiring of the assault, I turn the dials on the tub and unleash a waterfall from the spout. I step in and yank the small metal protrusion to awaken the showerhead.

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The hot, stinging water bursts from each tiny nozzle. As it strikes my tired, sleepy, morning skin, I revel in the fleeting sensation of those first delectable tingles, sheer delight, ecstasy. I wash quickly but stand there a few moments longer allowing the water to stroke and envelop me. I exit the shower and dry myself off with a towel, stiff and absorbent, scouring the moisture from my skin. I look in the mirror again, not to survey or assail, but to finish my morning routine of brushing teeth, fixing hair, and applying make-up.

* * *

This is how most of my days begin. With a day in my life as the frame, I use autoethnography to explore inner thoughts, behaviors, conversations, and activity surrounding body image and eating habits. Body image is defined as an intricate, multi-dimensional construct that includes beliefs, feelings, and behaviors with regard to the body (Cash, 2012). My weight is and has always been a concern as I move through space, place, and time. As far back as I can remember, my parents obsessed about health and dieting and it seemed *my* body was *their* focus. Their long-ago obsessions still influence me today. I am in a perpetual state of wanting to be healthier, striving to be thinner, and trying to measure up to a rarely-attained ideal version of myself. If I am not dieting, I have plans to begin a diet, or am devising strategies to eat healthier.

Using narrative and autoethnography, methods of inquiry that stress the value of personal stories as a means of knowing, I seek to write my way to understanding who I am, past choices, and future options. Autoethnography is both the process and product of writing about significant moments to analyze lived experiences and better understand and illustrate features of cultural experiences (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Using evocative and engaging writing, I draw readers into each vignette, showing and telling what it's like to be me, to feel what I'm feeling, understand how I ended up where I am, and figure out how to move forward (Ellis, 2004). I write to understand intersections of culture, gender, family, and media and their influences on how I perceive the image of my body reflected back to me in mirrors, how this "seeing" impacts my feelings of self-worth, and my struggle to find self-acceptance.

I am a single, fifty-year-old, straight, white woman who's had two kids, a hysterectomy, and been in several car accidents. On top of that, I am pursuing a doctoral degree while working over thirty hours a week and volunteering at The Salvation Army. Can I make room for changes that will help me look and feel healthier, stronger, and attractive? Shame gnaws at me as I recognize one of my goals is to feel more beautiful, accepted, lovable. What's up with that? Old, familiar tapes play in my head. I am haunted by my mother's words from fifteen years ago.

Fat = Ugly = Single

She arrives a few minutes early for our lunch plans. Cringing, she says, “I really wish you’d lose some weight...so you could find somebody to love.”

As those words leave her mouth, my throat closes up and blocks the familiar cry threatening to escape. Through silent tears and strained vocal chords, I surprise myself when I manage to say, “You’re my mom. Of all people, you should be the one telling me how wonderful I am and how anybody would be lucky to have me.” She flinches and walks away.

This memory bubbles up like bile and I realize why I believe my weight is preventing me from finding love, from being in relationship.

I am a “cultural creation” (Denzin, 2001, p. 62) whose ideas of the world and my place in it, whose sense of self, and being made to feel that my body takes up more space than it should began the moment I was born. My parents set the stage for a lifelong battle with body image issues. And today, culture and media play starring roles in how I see and judge myself against unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards rampant in advertisements, television, and movies (Wolf, 1991). Gender norms also influence the ways I view and value my body. Women’s bodies are presented as not only our source of power but also as “always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline, and remodelling (consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness” (Gill, 2007, p. 255). To be considered feminine, a woman’s body must be slender and move in restricted and measured ways, meaning my size, shape, and motility determine how successful I am at performing woman (Bartky, 1990). How well my body functions is viewed as less important than how successful I am at disciplining my body, controlling my weight, and managing the amount of space I take up as I move through the world (Franzoi, 1995; Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009).

What are the chances that being overweight really is preventing me from being in relationship? Survey results regarding online dating among straight singles highlighted in the HBO documentary, *When Strangers Click* (2011), indicate most women fear meeting men who could turn out to be serial killers while most men fear meeting women who might turn out to be fat. My voluptuous Rubenesque body, once fodder for artists’ visions and men’s dreams, is a prospective date’s worst nightmare. My inability to achieve the idealized thin body renders me hopeless when I think about returning to the dating scene.

8:30 am – A cup for the road

Naked and damp from the shower, I head to the kitchen and take my time spooning fragrant coffee grinds into the filter, enjoying the rich dark aroma. I

hover a second longer with the canister open and inhale again. As the coffee brews, I linger, and then pour the steamy, sweet-smelling liquid into a retro-teal thermos from Ikea. I drop in one scoop of sugar but no cream. I “quit” cream over four years ago. *That’s one thing I’ve got going for me.* I tenuously take a few sips of the scalding concoction before screwing on the vibrant red top, then place the thermos by my purse, and head off to get dressed.

8:50 am – Super-sized

Two thirds of my closet is filled with clothes that I cannot wear. I know exactly where to look for the things that fit, the stretchy larges or the less forgiving extra-larges. My standard outfit these days is a pair of black jeans with a fitted knit top. I pick a pair of underwear that do not cinch too tightly at the hips; there’s nothing worse than a double dose of muffin top. I pull my jeans up and button. I survey my reflected image. Too much boob. I adjust then am held captive by the mirror as it conjures a thirty-five year old memory of feeling mislead, shattered.

Mirror, mirror

The summer of my sixteenth birthday was spent lounging pool-side in Toronto with my Canadian cousins. After two months of faithful sun-worship, my normally dirty-blonde hair looked bleached-blonde. Always in a one-piece, my midsection remained a translucent white while my exposed skin turned a deep, golden-brown. I felt like a new person when that summer ended and was ready to head home. I loved travelling and getting dressed up for the occasion.

I sort through my outfits and settle on my favorite lemon-yellow ruffled sundress. I twirl in front of the mirror, admiring how the bright color against my deep tan makes my eyes seem even bluer. I feel beautiful and grown up.

I find my seat on the plane and pull my dress taut so it does not get wrinkled while I sit. We land, I gather my things, and wait to exit. It feels like forever. When it’s my turn, I burst out of the hallway and into the terminal.

My dad stands apart from the throng waiting to greet loved ones. I smile and run to him. As I get close, his jaw clenches and lips tighten; he hisses, “You are a fat pig.” Without a smile or hug, he turns and walks toward baggage claim.

God, did anybody hear? I want to disappear, melt into the cracks in the floor, or be swallowed up by the crowd that is following. I self-consciously tug at my dress and lag behind. How had I been tricked into thinking I was beautiful?

Through new tears, I realize the mirror and I have been at war for a long time.

9:00 am – Get it to-go

I open the pantry to nuts, fruit bars, and cheese-filled crackers. Nothing looks satisfying. I decide instead to grab a McDonald's egg, cheese, and bacon bagel (hold the breakfast sauce) on the way to teach. I check the calorie content, 510. Not bad, but not even an hour on the treadmill could burn off that meal. I flash back to my most recent attempt to begin an exercise routine.

Weight gaining

The building looms before me, intimidating, bustling with people who look like they belong. It feels like I am walking up courtroom steps toward judgment day. Nearing the top, I inhale sharply, fling open the glass door, and am swathed in a flurry of cool air tinged with the aroma of sweat and rubber.

The lights are bright. Maybe they seem brighter because they are reflected from every surface – chrome, mirror, and sweaty sheen; everything, even the people glisten and glow. Pulsing music fills my ears, punctuated by the clanging of barbells as they drop from calloused and blistered hands. Some of the men remind me of peacocks as they posture and strut in front of the mirrors, showing off their muscles like fancy feathers.

Just ahead, I see the treadmills.

I race past the mirrors, eyes forward.

Wait.

Are these treadmills?

There are three different kinds nestled between elliptical machines, stair-climbers, and stationary bikes. I walk up to one and gingerly step onto the belt. There's an actual television imbedded in this machine along with headphone plugs, an iPhone jack, and a USB port. Is it going to do the walking for me as well? Fat chance.

Time passes quickly as I get caught up in mind chatter and people watching. Hmmm, nice work I think admiring the flashing display. In 52 minutes, I have burned 265 calories by walking 2.2 miles.

On a roll, I venture to the gym three or four times a week, exercising for a minimum of forty-five minutes. I watch what I eat, restricting my calories to around 1300 per day. After three full weeks of this strict regime, I cannot wait to jump on the scale and see the results.

Are you fucking kidding me? I step off and then back on.

This can't be right! Not only have I not lost weight. I gained a half pound. With that, I lost all motivation to continue.

10:30 am – Cooking up plans

On my way to teach Interpersonal Communication, one of my best friends sends a text...

Lunch Friday at noon?

Yes! It's about that time! We meet up every four to six weeks. Our usual spot is J. Alexander's. We share laughter, conversation, and our favorite foods—a huge salad topped with fried chicken tenders, their “not your average” macaroni and cheese, shoestring fries, and an orzo pasta salad. Reminding myself of how infrequently we meet and that I'm not currently on a diet appeases the guilt threatening to consume me about my impending overindulgence.

After arriving in class, I take attendance. “Mark? Joyce? Beth? John?” Their eyes meet mine, “Here, here, here...” Each student is unique—tall, short, thin, full-figured, athletic, posh, unkempt and casual, professionally coiffed face and hair, hijabs, hats, and clean-shaven bald heads. Most seem confident and nonchalant. All shapes and sizes are wearing skin-tight or skin-baring clothes; I admire their bravery and defiance.

I emerge from behind the podium and walk to the front of the room. Imagining how I might appear to my students, I find myself sucking in my stomach and touching my waistline, as if it somehow helps me take up less space. When we begin our discussion, I relax and forget about my stomach. Diving into the task at hand seems to be a tactic or strategy in which I've become adept. The shift in focus helps numb the shame I feel about my body. Our discussion wraps up, I dismiss my students, and text my friend back.

Yes, Friday at noon is perfect. Can't wait!

I type our lunch into my Google schedule. Tonight, I have dinner plans with Pammy, a dear friend from my days at community college. We're meeting at Grillsmith. I now have two evenings marked out for dinner, another night for drinks, and lunch on Friday. *I will not be getting my act together anytime soon.* I shrug, smile, and close my calendar. *Maybe next week.*

* * *

Eating does not just happen in the mouth. It is a complicated product of interactions between the mind, brain, and body (Karasu, 2012). I do not eat to fulfill emotional or social voids as most of the research on weight problems might indicate (Hernandez-Hons & Woolley, 2012). For me, food is both nutrition *and* enjoyment and is central to social interaction, connection, and celebration in my life. Monthly breakfasts with sisters, impromptu meet-ups with peers, catch-up lunches with lifelong friends, and holiday meals shared with family enhance my life in immeasurable ways. I find I don't want to worry about, restrict, or deny myself food especially when those meals are shared with good friends and loved ones.

12:30 pm – Lunch peppered with gender norms

After teaching, I head to a standing doctor appointment. A few months ago, I was rear-ended while stopped in rush hour traffic. My car was totaled and I had to be removed by the emergency crew. No bones were broken and thankfully no open wounds, but I had a brain bleed and my body was sprained and bruised. Because of this accident, I now squeeze doctor visits, neurological check-ups, MRI's, and counselling sessions into my already busy days. I hit the Taco Bell drive-thru and order a burrito supreme. "Black beans instead of refried, please." *Great. Fast food meal number two of the day.* I manage to choke it down before getting to my next stop.

I park the car, walk through the doors, and am greeted by an overwhelmed receptionist caught between a phone call and someone checking out. She motions for me to go through to the hydrotherapy area. I sit and press the "up" arrow to increase the force of warm water pummeling me through the back of a Lazy-boy style reclining chair. I am flanked by two posters about health and the dangers of obesity. Each features a woman, one Black and one white, caricatures of women on scales—a before, overweight version and an after, slimmer version. I look around but do not see any weight-loss posters geared toward men.

Fifteen minutes later, I am ushered into a small room. I study my image in the full-length mirror on the back of the closed door. I'm probably the size of or maybe even bigger than the fat female caricatures I just saw. I sigh and take a seat on the crunchy paper atop the examination table. There's a poster in this room too. It shows the body's musculature systems and clearly represents a biological male displaying what appears to be a penis. The message I leave with today: men and women both get into accidents needing rehabilitation, but men are made of muscles, and women have to control their weight.

6:00 pm – Dinner served with a side of traumatic memories

I get to Grillsmith early. "Table for two, please." I order water with lemon and a glass of house pinot noir for \$4.00, happy hour prices. I don't order soda. I never order soda. *That's another thing I have on my side.* I kick off my shoes and sit cross-legged on the wide, deep, faux leather bench and take a deep breath.

A petite whirlwind of a woman enters and makes a beeline for me, not giving me the chance to stand. We embrace. She orders a glass of bubbly from our server who mysteriously appears on cue just as Pammy settles on her side of the booth. We agree to figure out food before we dive into conversation. I decide against the bruschetta, remembering I got indigestion last time. I also avoid the eggrolls, *too greasy.* My choices are not made because of caloric content but by the way the food feels in my mouth as I eat or the way I feel physically after eating.

I scan the menu, and settle on the Gorgonzola wedge salad with a six ounce sirloin. I am looking forward to the cool crunch of iceberg lettuce that is drizzled with tangy gorgonzola dressing. There's something seductive about the contrast of gorgonzola's creamy texture against its sharp flavor. As if that isn't enough, it comes topped with perfectly-cooked bacon crumbles. Pammy orders the Jack Daniels Salmon served with veggies and rice. I like the salmon here but the veggies are steamed into colorless, mushy versions of their former selves. Limp vegetables remind me of torturous dinners on a childhood battlefield.

Forced Feedings

My plate was piled with steamed, once-yellow squash and an unidentifiable gray meat. I cannot remember those meals having any flavor only the way they felt inside my mouth. Choking down chunks of overcooked meat was like trying to swallow mulch and the slimy squash teased my gag reflex. I sometimes lost control and vomited, resulting in a beating. I was held hostage at the dinner table, and not released until my plate was empty. Some nights, I fell asleep in place and was forced to finish the next morning.

While simultaneously ridiculing me for my weight, my parents required me to clean every morsel off my plate. I had no choices in what or how much I was served. Food was bland. Meals felt like punishment. As I write these words, I realize my problem—no, that's not right—my motivation for the food choices I make are affected by these childhood hauntings. My desire to indulge in distinct textures and flavors are rejections of the way I was raised.

* * *

I've never thought about my gazing practices. How do I look at or see Pammy, other friends, my sisters, my students? "To look is an act of choice" (Berger, 1972, p. 8) and when we look, we see others in relation to ourselves. When I think about how I see others, I recognize two modes of looking. I sometimes look to measure another's size against my own body evaluating if I am bigger or smaller than the body I'm seeing. Other times, I gauge body shapes and sizes in relation to the ideal body. If they measure up to the ideal body, I find myself thinking how lucky they are. If they don't measure up, I'm checking out the way they dress. I find myself giving silent kudos to those who flaunt their imperfect bodies seemingly without a care and refrain from judging those who seem to be hiding parts of themselves. I recognize myself in both categories.

8:30 pm – Feasting my eyes

I burst through my apartment door, keys jingling and arms full, exhausted in a sweet, filled-up, satisfied way. I've had a busy day. My nightclothes are

on the bed where I flung them this morning. I change and head back to the living room. My plans to write are tossed aside as I hit the power button on my television and plop into a chair. I queue up the next episode of *Law & Order: SVU*. I might not binge-eat very often, but binge-watching television, that's another story. I feast my eyes, ravenously gobbling up episode after episode.

I hit pause and head to the kitchen for water. The weight of the day in my bones and muscles makes me move more slowly than when my day began. I imagine what I look like and how I'd perform this overweight, aching body in front of a potential lover. Would I hide the limp caused by tightness in my calves and right hip? Would I suck in my gut as move toward the kitchen? I laugh out loud. *I would definitely have on different nightclothes.* After pouring my water, I grab four, bite-sized pieces of Dove chocolate from my stash in the fridge. I settle into my chair and alternate between the salted caramel morsels and the dark chocolate almond bites. They melt, swirl, and coat my mouth.

11:00 pm – Bedtime

As the second episode of *Law & Order* wraps up, I wash down the comfort and warmth with a few gulps of water and head toward the bathroom to prepare for bed. I scrub away remnants of all I have eaten from my tongue and teeth and gums. I wash off any traces of make-up that remain and pull my blonde, curly locks into a puffy ponytail atop my head. I have no energy left to evaluate or judge my image before I turn from the mirror, click off the lights, and head to my room.

I fluff my pillows, all six of them, stacking two for my back, and climb in. Turning slightly to one side, I place one pillow between my knees and pull in another to hug, which helps with lingering back pain from my accidents. The other pillows occupy space in my bed like a sprawled out lover might. I pull up my sheets and drift off to sleep.

* * *

Weight has always been a consideration for me and my five foot two inch frame, especially when measured by the scale (Hodges, 2015). At age fourteen, I weighed 112 pounds. By fifteen, I weighed 116 pounds. When I returned from my first year spent in Canada (after turning sixteen), I weighed 136 pounds. By the time my parents sent me back after a summer spent drinking diet shakes, I weighed 118 pounds. I was able to maintain that weight through age twenty. At twenty-two and with the prodding of a new husband, I dropped to 102, eventually leveling out to 108. When I gave birth to my son, I weighed 150. I was able to lose most of that, leveling off at 118. Five years and many hardships later, I gave birth to my daughter, weighing in at 199. After that, I never got below 152. I spent a few years at 158. By thirty-five, I had found a new non-pregnant high, 172. Three years ago, I tipped the scales at 180. I am fifty now and have managed to bring it down to 175.

I am struck by the realization these statistics are so easily plucked from the recesses of my mind. The awareness of my fluctuating weight over time and the correlation to salient moments in my life borders on obsessive and seems tragic. What unknown damage was done because of forced weigh-ins? What might I have accomplished if weight had not consumed me?

The camera subtracts ten pounds

After spending years feeling fat and being called names by my own parents, I managed to lose a ton of weight. I was in my early twenties and wearing a size two before I finally felt acceptable and close to beautiful. I remember going through an old photo album with my mom and coming across a picture of a young girl. She was familiar but not recognizable. I pulled the picture from the album and read the scribble on the back, "Lisa, 5th grade, 1975." This little girl was a ghost, a shadow of me. She was thin, knobby-kneed, and gaunt.

"Is this really me?"

"Yes," my mom answers, putting the photo back in its place.

My eyes fill with tears. How had this little creature ever imagined she was fat and ugly? I want to scream. What had my parents done to me? Instead of home being a place to be built up before having to face the cruelty of the world, my home was unsafe; a place where I was torn down, and where I learned my appearance determines my value. The harsh world validated what I was learning at home—fat girls are ugly and unworthy of love and compassion.

Growing up, my mother measured me with her fingers—skin and bone calipers—reaching out and squeezing my cheeks, inner thighs, and belly. Unlike Tillmann's (1996) mother who pinched her own stomach with lips pursed, my mother reached out, poking me, grimacing as she did. I am aware I measure myself in the very same ways, examining, prodding, grimacing, and judging. Maor (2012) finds daughters first learn they are "fat" through interactions with their mothers. My fat identity was initiated through mother-daughter exchanges and solidified as my father measured me with words: fat pig, slob, and lazy. His disgust was palpable and dripped like venom from his tongue.

Words are another way bodies are measured. Obese, fat, chunky, large, extra-large, big-boned, voluptuous, round, plump, healthy—all used to define, assign, or shame. Individuals are blamed for their inability to eat less and exercise more and are thought of as lazy and lacking self-control (Smith, 2012). Believing that criticism and denigration are powerful ways to prompt changes in others (Puhl & Heuer, 2010), my father was diligent in his attempts to elicit weight loss in me. Liquid diets, early morning jogs, and summers spent on tennis courts accompanied his volleys of insults. Instead of eliciting a desire to lose weight, his ridicule induced anxiety and

chronic stress (Puhl & Heuer, 2010) creating within me the impulse to seek out forbidden treats. Food became comfort and solace as well as a site for guilt and shame.

* * *

Body image is relational (Hodges, 2015). I feel my worst, most self-conscious, and fattest when I am around my mother. She has made it clear—she feels disdain for anyone who is overweight. Several years ago, I forbade her from discussing my (or my children’s) weight. Instead, she talks about gains and losses of others and her self-satisfied thoughts on the matter. My father has softened and no longer admonishes. Maybe it’s because he has his own struggles with weight. My mother is tiny, weighing less than she ever has. She brags about having gained just fourteen pounds while pregnant with me. *She starved me in the womb and I’ve been making up for it ever since.*

I imagine the way I appear to others and how they evaluate my looks, my fat, my body (Cooley, 2010). It’s hard to gauge what’s real since the image I see in the mirror shifts and changes, day to day, even moment to moment, in the same ways funhouse mirrors distort what we see. At times, I feel trapped by the mirror, able to see only imperfect, deficient, objectified versions of me (Riva, Gaudio, & Dakanalis, 2014). Other times, I see beauty and poise. *Does body dysmorphia go both ways?* How can one moment, a second glance, make all the difference?

* * *

I was not raised in the US and spent my first ten years in the Bahamas and two in Costa Rica before moving to Tampa, Florida. Having lived a sheltered existence, I had no access to television, magazines, or social life other than school until I was thirteen years old. Any sense of self that developed during my childhood was mainly a result of interactions with my parents. The overarching cultural narratives I was exposed to were not direct influences and instead taken in like second-hand smoke filtered through the experiences of my mother and father. I do not remember either of them using the word “fat” in relation to me...just that I was subjected to continual disapproval and felt I was an object to be tamed and controlled.

The critical voice in me is familiar as it mimics the ways my parents treated me when I was a child. Echoes of their taunts and humiliations continue to influence the ways I see, respond to, and treat myself. My parents’ relentless verbal assaults about my weight, palpable disgust at the sight of me (my body), and absolute control over my diet when I was young made it impossible to feel self-assured and be satisfied or pleased with my body. Cheng and Mallinckrodt (2009) find those with “secure adult attachments and memories of each parent having been warm, emotionally expressive, and accepting” (pg. 372) are more able to resist internalizing media images. *I didn’t stand a chance.*

Researchers use attachment theory to explain differences in internalization. When caregivers are responsive to children's emotional needs, the kids grow into adults less likely to rely on outward validation as they see themselves as valuable, important, and deserving of protection and care (Bowlby, 1973, 1980, 1988). Body image or self-image is molded through relationships with significant others (Kearney-Cooke, 2002). Parental responsiveness and secure attachment help curb eating disorders and are precursors to feeling confident and secure with one's body image (Cash, Theriault, & Annis, 2004). It seems like common sense as I read these words. I had no one to look to for validation, comfort, and support.

I feel torn. Just like my image seems distorted in mirrors, my desires and goals shift moment to moment, day to day, and are constantly in flux. A battle rages within me. There's a push and pull, making it difficult to discern if I want to lose weight to feel acceptable to others or to feel healthy for myself. I want to be healthy but will not succumb to harmful ideals and norms. Through writing, I recognize I have resisted losing weight in the past because I did not want to validate my parents' warped values. Refusing to lose has been an act of rebellion against them.

But, I am no longer at my parents' mercy. Why have I taken up their tactics and weapons to continue the assault? How do I change my thought patterns and find my way to loving and accepting who I am? Washton and Boundy (1990) say we cannot go back and change how we were treated in the past but we can find ways to mitigate how the past influences current thoughts and feelings. It starts with recognizing that today is in my control. Maybe I can begin to practice mindfulness by paying attention to the present moment and accepting who I am as opposed to worrying about what I am not (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). I can work on becoming nurturing, compassionate, supportive, forgiving, and become a "good parent" to the wounded, hurt "inner child" trapped inside (Washton & Boundy, 1990). *Easier said than done.*

When I focus solely on the way I look—my weight, the rolls and bulges, the cinching of my pants and bra—insecurity and shame burn a hole in my chest. But, if I take the time to think about all I've accomplished, pride and self-worth emerge. Maybe that's the key—recognize the lens through which I am peering and which self is doing the looking, knowing both impact the ways I see myself. While it's hard to escape the pressures of an idealized body, acceptance might be possible through continued reflection and focusing on the way the body functions and moves versus the way my body looks (Liechty, 2012).

In order to change my focus from how I look to how I move, maybe I need to actually "move." Exercise makes the heart stronger, improves balance, promotes brain growth, improves memory and cognitive skills, enhances mood, and reduces fat (Chan, Yan, & Payne, 2013). These are great reasons to initiate and stick to a fitness routine. Instead of obsessing about what goes into my mouth, I can concentrate on incorporating regular

activity and becoming stronger. I must find some activity I'm motivated to start, stick to, and follow through.

I rack my brain. I don't want another expensive clothes hanger or barely-used gym membership. I search online for ideas. A personal trampoline sounds interesting—low-impact, inexpensive, and fun. There are tons of options; with springs or bungees, oval, circular or hexagon shaped; geared toward kids or adults. I read through reviews and pick one. Add to cart. Check out. Make a plan to start next Monday!

I'll need a compelling reason to get moving five or six times a week. I know there are television series and programs that I can't wait to get back to watching. What if I attach my exercise routine to a show? Can I refrain from watching unless I'm on the trampoline? It's worth a try. I go through my list of prospects on Netflix and settle on *Breaking Bad*. I've never seen it but heard it is binge-worthy.

After the trampoline arrives, I measure my waist and hips so I have another way to gauge my progress other than the scale. I start jumping and watching. As Mr. White and Jesse Pinkman cook up their formula for meth, I work on my recipe for success. I jog, dance, and bounce my way through the first two seasons at the rate of one episode a day. I've perfected blocking out body aches and pains as I move about an average day but incorporating exercise forces me to focus on the way my body is feeling. What I am noticing is that the pain from exercise is different, different from the pain of injury. I must not conflate the two.

At the four week mark, I've lost two pounds and two inches. It might not seem like much, but clothes fit better and my bras don't pinch. As Walt descends into madness and his life spirals out of control, I begin to gain some control over my life. I keep at it and three months later I've worked up to an episode and a half, about seventy minutes of panting and sweating. It's been awhile since I've weighed in. It just now strikes me—I have not felt the need.

7:00 am – A new day

Beep. Beep. Beep. I am already up and brewing coffee when my alarm goes off. A few minutes earlier, I leaped out of bed, eager to know if Brock was poisoned, if Ted survives his "trip and fall," and if Walt and Jesse are able to work things out. Coffee in hand, I head back to my room, strip off pajamas, and put on workout gear. I start episode one of season five, climb onto the trampoline, and begin jumping. Pausing occasionally, I take deep gulps of my coffee. As I press play for the next episode, I realize I only have ten episodes left. I need to find another captivating show. I do not want to lose this new rhythm I've found.

An hour later, I've logged almost seven thousand steps on my Fitbit. I hit stop on Netflix and step off the trampoline, strip down and head to the bathroom. I stop in front of the mirror and take a long look. I've not changed much physically, but my eyes are kinder than they've been in a

long time. The punishing voices are barely audible. I see more than a face and body. If I look long enough, I see strength, determination, intelligence, and resilience. I see me.

~ Epilogue ~

Writing has given me the space to tell about my struggle with my weight and body image in story form, allowing me to get more comfortable with the details, and leaving room to build new stories within which I can live (Ellis, 2004). By focusing on one day, reliving memories as they emerge, and acknowledging my inner conversations, I gain new insights. The dialectical struggles trapped in my head have concrete beginnings. There are tangible, real reasons for my muddled and distorted perception of self.

Food, a childhood source of trauma and guilt, is currently tied to celebration, connection, and relationships for me; no wonder I have trouble regulating or limiting my choices. Through this project, I find one entry point for addressing body image issues and increasing self-confidence is through exercise. I have found a pleasurable, sustainable way to incorporate exercise into my life—a trampoline. The challenge is to keep at it, find new shows to watch as I jump and bounce my way to feeling stronger, healthier, and maybe even a little beautiful.

One of the big takeaways for me from writing through this project is that I have a heightened awareness of how much I enjoy living and appreciate my life. I savor every moment, even the painful ones. I treat not just my mouth but my whole body to a wide array of textures, flavors, sensations, and aromas. Another realization occurs to me: I may be blindsided by an occasional painful memory, but I do not let it affect me for more than a few seconds. Before I began writing, I imagined I was plagued more deeply and regularly by poor self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. These moments of self-doubt are fleeting and move out of my consciousness just as quickly as they enter. I believe this is a way of practicing mindfulness—acknowledging, accepting, and then letting go (Kabat-Zinn, 2009).

I've invited you into my thoughts, given you a glimpse behind the curtain, and shared my fears and hopes as I story my way to a better understanding of who I am and how I came to be. I do not write to advise as I am still working to free myself from old family narratives and lifelong cultural scripts that hold me hostage. Instead, I write in an effort to draw you into my experiences, giving you a chance to identify with, question, or try on my life (Ellis, 2004). Maybe you battle similar demons or perhaps you've conquered some of the things I still struggle to figure out. I hope I've helped you feel a little less alone in the world. I am by no means healed and whole. I still have a long way to go; but, I am on my way.

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