

## Women, Dieting and the Search for Perfection

The whole question of dieting or not dieting is inseparable from us, women, because of our ambivalent relationship with our body--we love it and we hate it. In essence, mind has been exiled from body. I have known heavy women who face their unhealthy weight problem by eating more; I have seen women who are by all standards slender and beautiful agonize over the slightest thickening of midriff and thighs. For most women, our waists are never small enough, our bellies never flat enough and dieting seems to be the golden route to a kind of cultural icon of perfection.

We worry excessively about every ounce we gain or we give in uncontrollably to eating binges. This hunger or denial of hunger is the reason for the dramatic increase in obesity in North America and also the reason for yet another weight loss book on the market. As Jennifer Workman states so emphatically in "Stop Your Cravings", "Why are we the most diet-crazed country in the world and yet also the most overweight, and apparently the most frustrated by our failure (xiv)?"

It is obvious that diets recommending food deprivation do not work. Weight issues involve more than food issues. Weight issue is a body acceptance issue and our obsession with weight is a symptom of our inability to honor the body, to give the body its due as a living, individual being. The authors of three books on the market explore this issue of body acceptance and provide suggestions on how women can re-think their relationships with their bodies.

In their book, "It's Not About Food," authors Carol Emery Normandi and Laurelee Roark, founders of Beyond Hunger Inc, state that women in our culture " have an enormous pressure on them to be perfect"(6) and it is this pressure that is creating eating disorders, addictive behavior, depression and even death in women. Our hunger is not for food, but for internal guidance--"having the right to choose what we feel is right for ourselves and learning to hear the voice within that knows what we need"(16). Listening to this internal guidance means being comfortable with who are, even if it means accepting a body that is ten pounds more than what we think it should be.

This re-focusing on the internal and spiritual basis of hunger and food addiction certainly sheds new light on the meaning of "dieting." A diet traditionally carries the meaning of food deprivation for the purpose of shedding excess weight. Unfortunately as well, the word also carries the connotation of starvation and hunger. In this sense, a diet is only a temporary, band-aid solution to the problem of obesity. To arrive at long term success, we have to look at the diet not as a temporary measure, but as a lifelong revision in attitude and lifestyle, which is only possible when we can get to the root of our ambivalence about our bodies.

Such is the case in "Love Hunger" authored by a group of expert physicians. In one case delineated in the book, a patient recognizes that her relationship with food comes from an unresolved conflict with her parents. When patient Barbara comes to realize that her issue with food is about her relationship with her parents--an authoritarian father and an overly-dependent mother, she begins the journey towards change and resolution. As a child, Barbara functioned like a "scapegoat spouse" (29) to both her parents. Her problem, rooted in family dysfunction which created a vacuum in her heart, is typical of many overeaters: "people with heart hunger will stuff their stomachs"(30).

The same suggestion that we look beyond the prescriptive diet to the person's total body consciousness can be seen in "Addiction to Perfection," in which Marion Woodman examines how the eating problems of the modern woman are rooted in an addiction that deprives her of being able to love herself for what she is. The problem that confronts a woman addicted to perfection is that she cannot accept herself for being human. The body in this instance is often sacrificed to the idealism of the mind. Only through bodywork and soulwork can she redeem her center--when her body is not pitted against her mind but can coexist as one unit: "I am body and mind. I may be tossed about like a sailboat in a cyclone, but through thick and thin I am able to hold my standpoint here at the center because I now have eyes to see and ears to hear" and "life can happen; life can pour through me."(75)

The solution suggested by these authors comes from re-defining the parameters of perfection. What is a perfect woman? A perfect body? Perfect--by whose standards and definition? We need to understand perfection not in terms of standards dictated by cultural media, but by our own internal guidance. This means that a woman is perfect when she is empowered enough to choose the avenue by which she defines herself. That's when dieting or not dieting becomes an irrelevant issue because she has worked out the dynamics of healthy body and purposeful living for herself.

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### About the Author

A runner for 27 years, retired schoolteacher and writer, Mary is helping people reclaim their bodies through nutrition, exercise, positive vision and creative engagement. You can visit her at <http://www.GreatBodyat50.com> or learn how she lost her weight at <http://www.greatbodyproteinpower.com>