



"These stretch marks are not battle scars, they are love-letters."

Loving My Own Fat Skin

By Agnieszka Wolska

I am a Fat Mama. I mean that in the most affectionate, gentle, accepting, encouraging and loving way. It is no longer a derogatory expression in my life. I look and feel and experience my body as round, soft, squishy, rolling, undulating, fat. This body is also strong, resilient, nurturing and beautiful. Today, ten years into my mothering life, this body of mine is a treasure, a gift, a marvelous miracle to behold, exactly as it is. I did not arrive at this perspective easily or immediately.

When I learned of my first pregnancy in the spring of 2004, weight gain was hardly a concern. My pregnancy was such a source of excitement and joy in those first weeks! I was entering into the magical ranks of these amazing beings we call Mothers. My body was doing something so magnificent, nothing else mattered. Physically, I was in the best shape of my life, having worked hard to arrive at my "dream weight" through a very strict, naturopathic dietary and supplement regimen. It was the perfect time for my body to start building a baby!

My weight gain began in the first few weeks, ever so gradually. Completely and totally normal – except this was when I realized

that my relationship to my weight was not totally normal. As the pounds began to fill out my waistline – and there really were not that many of them in this first magical pregnancy – I noticed that I was not only mourning the loss of my "perfect body," I had also begun to feel like a failure.

I was failing at "maintaining a healthy weight," as per oh so many books, articles, messages from media everywhere. I was failing at eating all those salads – don't pregnant women just love salads? Are salads not the only thing pregnant women eat after they've filled up with pickles and ice cream? I was failing at eating at the "right" times, in the "right" quantities, of the "right" food



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groups. It was odd because I threw up a lot of what I did manage to eat – yet I still gained weight! Oh yes, that's right, the pregnancy, the baby, that . . .

No, I did not have an eating disorder by conventional medical definitions. But yes, I most certainly did, as it turned out, have a very messed up relationship with my eating, my weight and my body.

Despite knowing full well that my body was doing all the right things to grow a new human, there was a part of me that worried, fussed, and felt very out of control over my eating. I realized that I had never truly trusted my body to be able to tell me what I needed to eat. I had learned to use, almost exclusively, external measures to tell if I had eaten enough or too much.

When I was a young child, all too often someone outside of myself told me that I didn't eat enough. When I was a young woman, all too often someone outside of myself told me that I ate too much. These voices belonged to people who cared for me. They cared that I got enough to eat as a child and, as I grew into a young adult, they were concerned that I remain "attractive" as a woman and not become a reject in our society.

In a society where a woman's body has for centuries belonged to someone else, women do not get to choose – or, God forbid – allow our bodies to decide for themselves what size we might want to be.

During my pregnancy, with my body telling my loudly that I needed to eat more of this or that, those external pressures became profoundly oppressive. And it took me a while to realize that I had completely internalized them.

What is a hungry woman to do when she is eating "too much?"

Over and over again, I heard my own voice scold my pregnant body for eating "too much." I have heard this particular message before. And there I was, growing the next generation in my womb. Growing another person with nothing more than this very body, and I was consistently berating myself for needing more food.

See, babies change things. This is not a surprise to any mom. And pregnancy changes a woman's body. This, too, is not a surprise. Except that it is! Everything in my body felt, looked, seemed out of whack! My body really changed with pregnancy and it refused to pretend pregnancy and babies never happened after giving birth. The weight didn't just disappear. So I walked around for months after giving birth, baby tied to the sloppy front or hurt-tired-stained back . . . wondering, "What the hell am I doing wrong?" "I'm breastfeeding constantly!" "I'm pumping every two hours." "I'm only eating leftovers and spit up." "I'm sleeping less than four hours a night."

And it's just NOT coming off!

"What's wrong with me?" "I need to get to the gym." "I seriously can't stand the flab." "I'll never have sex again, not even with myself." "Oh my God, I could hide the baby back in all this skin, I'm so ashamed."

This is what gets me – I learned in my first and subsequent pregnancies that I regarded my body and my physical self in truly

hateful, cold, mean and nasty ways. I did not treasure, forgive, love and gently care for my body, even as I grew a baby.

I lost the pregnancy weight in a few months postpartum. I became pregnant a second time when my first baby girl was eight months. Several other difficult circumstances converged during this second pregnancy, including severe postpartum depression which required that I take medication. I started gaining a lot of weight very rapidly. The changes in my body were very dramatic this time, so much so that I hardly recognized myself. The shame I felt was intense. I hated myself for eating anything at all. Eating was a failure. It did not matter that, despite my difficult circumstances and depression, my body was growing a healthy baby again. I could not control my weight. In retrospect I am very sad to admit that my concern with weight was very central at this point. I was no longer a “little heavier.” I was huge. I was obese. I was ashamed.

At nearly 300 pounds, I felt worthless as a woman. My self-esteem tanked. In my head, I knew that I continued to be a beautiful woman, a brilliant courageous mama of two perfect baby girls, defined by so many precious attributes, accomplishments and gifts. But my weight seemed to overshadow everything else about me.

I had my third baby, a beautiful boy, when my girls were five and three years old. It was during this pregnancy that I crossed the 300 pound mark.

Babies definitely change things. I became a very different woman physically when I became a mother. My life changed with the birth of my babies. And my body truly no longer was the body I once had.

What is a woman to do, when her body is everything she has been taught to fear and hate? What is she to do in a society where her value is tied so intrinsically to her physical beauty, and beauty is defined by thinness?

Today my answer to this question is: radical self-acceptance and unconditional self-love.

I did not get there easily or smoothly or immediately, but at one point, I made a choice that has created freedom and brought healing into my life. I chose to love my body as it is, setting (or shoving) aside standards of beauty and acceptability that would

force me to hate myself until I am sufficiently shrunken and made into a more reasonable size.

I decided to love my whole entire fat self, now, today. At whatever weight I might be. Not just for my own sake but for the sake of my children. I decided to love my body with no conditions. The same way I love other people – not because they are perfect but simply because they are always lovable, no matter what.

This takes practice and effort. I would not disrespect my best friend for wrinkles or my partner for stretch marks – how can I claim to be a loving person and treat my body like it does not deserve love because of its size? It takes practice and effort – I stayed with my body and my experiences, refused to give into the push to compare and judge and alter. I stayed away from magazines, television and even mirrors at first. I disallowed any negative remarks to my own body, either from other “concerned” people or my own self.

I chose to love myself the way I love my girls and boy, no conditions to meet, no strings attached.

I love myself the way I want my children to love themselves.

There is just no way to have my daughters (and son) love their bodies, and my son (and daughters) appreciate and cherish all people, without doing the hard work of total joyful unconditional self-love and self-appreciation of my physical being, at whatever size, shape, ability, color, whatever-makes-me-human right here, right now.

Being in my body with kindness and loyalty today, fat and all, is so much easier and more joyful than it was when I was thinner. Looking after my needs is easier, pleasant, fun even. Exercise is exciting. Choosing awesome foods is a source of confidence. I don't weigh, measure or assess my size. It hardly matters. Joy, self-love, pleasure and health matter. I want to be strong and as gorgeous as ever. At whatever size or weight.

These stretch marks are not battle scars, they are love-letters. And this soft belly is the most comfortable nursing pillow your babe will ever know.

Go ahead – love, enjoy, celebrate, challenge and take really good care of the very body you have today. There is nothing more freeing and joyful. **B**



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