A Personal Narrative

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From Body Hatred to Body Celebration

 I remember not too long ago stumbling upon a Dove advertisement in which women were asked to describe themselves to a sketch artist who they had never met. A second woman, having spent only fifteen minutes with the first woman then described her to the same sketch artist. To the women’s surprise the portrait of themselves that the second woman described was much more beautiful and accurate than the portrait that was drawn based on the woman’s description of herself. This sad but true reality of a world filled with men and women who do not see the beauty within themselves, forced me to reflect on a time in my life when body image was at the forefront of not only my mind but my four close friends as well. During my freshman year of college, a time for exploration and self-reflection, when people are maturing and getting to know others, I watched as one of my best friends waged war on her body.

 As I think back now to my life before college, I realize that the issues concerning weight and body image were something I never thought about and was never a problem for my close friends or myself. I ran year round for my high school cross-country and track teams and was able to eat whatever I wanted. Reflecting on this now, years later, I realize how lucky I was to be able to navigate my way through the challenges and hardships of high school without having to worry about the way my body looked. It did however make the transition into a college environment where people from many different walks of life formed this new college community, difficult and shocking as I encountered situations I had never been exposed to.

 In true girl fashion my core group of best friends formed during week one orientation and we have been inseparable ever since. We were all freshmen on the cross-country team and got close really quickly sharing our pasts and secrets like we had been friends for years. The bond we formed during those first few weeks and continue to strengthen even today made it that much harder to see one of us struggle with their body. Even though we were always together it took us almost an entire semester to realize one of our best friends was not healthy. My friend had an eating disorder and struggled with her body image everyday. Bulimia had consumed her life and eventually started consuming my life and the rest of my friend’s lives as well.

 We learned later that our friend had been struggling with bulimia since her junior year of high school and was able to hide it from her friends and family. Her secret came out towards the end of the fall semester shortly after our running season had ended. Because we were all so close and spent all of our free time together it became apparent that once she was not on a regimented running schedule everyday, her exercise and eating habits changed dramatically. The signs were all there, but none of us wanted to confront her, afraid we would be falsely accusing her of doing something she wasn’t. We noticed she started going to the gym for hours at a time without eating anything all day and then would come to dinner and eat large quantities of food. When she was eating she was happy, going up for seconds and thirds and didn’t seem to care what anyone thought. Although this was not normal for her to eat one huge meal after working out for hours we did not say anything.

 When we finally realized that she had a serious problem and my friends pointed out little things they had noticed her doing that all pointed to bulimia, I slowly realized they were right. Never having been exposed to something like this I did not know what I was supposed to be looking for. Two of my friends had been in similar situations with their friends in high school and knew the warning signs. I started noticing little things that to anyone who was not looking for clues she was in trouble, would have missed or ignored. We noticed the time she spent at the gym kept increasing and she would switch from elliptical to treadmill for hours with only a piece of fruit in her stomach or nothing at all. That happy look she had when she was eating for the first time all day immediately disappeared when she was done and she quietly disappeared to the bathroom without telling anyone she was going. She would come back to the table with a glass of water or seltzer, her hair looking disheveled and her eyes tired.

 The worst feeling was knowing she was going through this alone and felt she had no one to turn to, not even us, her best friends. We decided that instead of confronting her about it the best approach would be to let her be the one to tell us. Although this was risky and there was a good chance she might not ever feel comfortable telling us, we knew confronting her about her problem would make it seem like we were all against her and judging her for the choices she was making. Whether this was the right way to handle this or not, it was the path we chose. We could not however, sit idly by watching her get worse and worse. We would drop subtle hints that we knew like asking her why she was in the gym so long and often times someone would go to the bathroom with her after dinner in hopes that she might not make herself sick.

 The spring semester of my freshman year of college was one of the hardest times of my life as I sat by watching my friend continue down this path of destruction. Our hopes had been that over winter break she would get better and that what we had seen at the end of the fall semester had been a phase. Little did we know that bulimia had been part of her life for years and unless we did something to help her, she would continue destroying her body. We decided after the first few weeks of the semester that something had to be done and we had to talk to her. It was just the five of us one morning at brunch when she casually started talking about her body and how she thought she was fat. I remember we all glanced up at each other knowing this was the moment we had been waiting for.

 The exact words we said to get her talking have since escaped my memory but what she revealed to us that morning as we all huddled together at our table I will never forget. She hated her body and thought she was fat. No matter how much she worked out and how little she ate, to her, her body was disgusting. I had never seen someone so broken, so fixated on her body image and all of her minor flaws, as she was that day. She was relieved that we knew and thankful we were there to help her but she couldn’t even bring herself to name what she was doing, bulimia. She was ashamed and humiliated but also truly believed that this was the only way to make herself feel better and to achieve the body she desired.

 We all hoped that because the air had been cleared and we now knew her secret she would let us help her get better. She felt more open about talking about her body issues but refused any suggestions or help we tried to give her. With her bulimia and constant talk about her hatred towards her body it began to affect the rest of us. We could not make it through a single dinner without talking about calories and what types of foods were best to eat and why and how much we had been going to the gym and exercising that week. She was always the one forcing these subjects but the rest of us soon joined in, continuing to make her think that it was normal to constantly be thinking about food and your body.

 Not having been exposed to anything like this before, the reality that someone, who was skinny and muscular and very pretty, could hate themselves and their body was a hard concept for me to handle. I began to obsess over my own body, concerned that I was not as skinny as I should be and that if I skipped a day of running I should be worried about what I will be able to eat that night, not having burned any calories that day. I knew these were ridiculous thoughts and that she was obsessing over her body because she was sick, but being exposed to such body hatred everyday takes a toll on how you view your own body. I remember talking to my friends about how her obsession was rubbing off on me and that at times it was easy for me to see why she did the things she was doing.

 The summer between my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college, I noticed that since I was not running as much and pushing my body to extreme limits on the track, I started gaining weight. Looking back at pictures from high school I realize now that I had been in top athletic shape. I was training every day for one of the best cross country and track programs in the state of New Jersey and without even trying or thinking about food and the exercise I was doing, ended up with a sculpted and lean body. Those pictures also remind me that the girl I was looking at was nothing more than a girl. I had awkward hipbones that stuck out of my body and my legs were almost the size of my arms. Although I was strong and eating like a pro-football player, I did not have the curves and feminine body that I started to develop over that summer before college.

 That transition summer was tough as I went from training everyday to forcing myself out the door to run. It would have been fine if I wasn’t running as much but I continued to eat the same way I had in high school. That was the summer when I really started seeing the correlation between what I ate and my waistline, yet it didn’t bother me. I started filling in all of the awkward places of my body, especially around my hips. Even though I knew I was gaining weight it didn’t affect me. I cut back a little on what I was eating and issues about body image was still not a problem nor did it cross my mind very often. During my spring semester however, because of my friend’s illness, it was all I could think about.

 I remember sitting in my dorm room looking back on pictures from high school one night, the same ones I just recently looked at where I saw an awkward girl in the midst of her athletic glory days, and saw an entirely different person than I do now because of the way my friend’s issues were affecting me. At that time, sitting in my room, I envied the girl with the jutting hipbones who was strong and muscular and could eat whatever she wanted without a care in the world. I wanted to look like her again but I knew in the back of my mind that although I was healthy then, I could not look like that now and be healthy. My body was changing as I was getting older and I had to learn to accept that. It was not easy. I was constantly around someone who had a negative view of her body and no matter how skinny she got she would still view herself as fat. There were countless times when I would feel sick after dinner because I ate too much or tried to put on an old pair of jeans that I had outgrown and thought about how easy it would be just to go in the bathroom and rid myself of all my insecurities. I knew I might feel relieved and better about myself for a few minutes after but shame, I knew, would have followed, knowing I was headed down the same path of self destruction I was watching my friend go down. This was enough for me to shake the thought out of my mind every time.

 I was not the only one in our group affected. One of my other best friends was also consumed by the negative body image and self-hatred that ruled our lives everyday because of our friend struggling with bulimia. She however, strayed down a path worse than mine. The two of them would sneak laxatives and diet pills when we went to CVS and thought that taking the pills would help them lose weight, something they both thought they desperately needed to do. When the rest of us realized what they were doing we put an end to it immediately and knew we had to stop our friend, who we were slowly losing too, from slipping further into the hole bulimia had created. We told her that she needed to stop feeding into the ideas our other friend was drilling into our minds and that she needed to be strong. It did not take much convincing to make her realize what she was doing was ridiculous and my friend suffering with the eating disorder had no idea we confronted her about them. Our hopes were that if the pills simply disappeared and there was no one on her side to buy them with, she would stop taking them.

 Every single one of us struggled with our bodies that spring. It was impossible for us not to being around a person so negative towards her own body, as we were still continuing to learn about ourselves as well. We all became obsessed with our appearances and would have to get the approval of everyone else in our group before we could do something as simple as go to dinner. Our outfits had to be perfect and put together; we were all each other’s toughest critics. It would take us forever to convince each other that we looked good and that our outfits made us look slim, concealing all of our insecurities. My friend with the eating disorder was always the toughest to convince.

Luckily for us, we realized by the end of freshman year that we should not be persuaded by the lies my friend repeatedly told herself. We all knew we were skinny and healthy and that our bodies, although they were changing, were fine. Everyday we tried to get her to see herself the way everyone else did and to understand that she was beautiful and should love her body instead of hate it. She never listened.

 I look back on this year of my life and see the growth I have made. My friend so easily persuaded me into thinking I was ugly and fat because of this powerful disease controlling her own thoughts. Now, as a sophomore in college, I have learned to not let my friend’s negative view of her body affect the way I view my own body. I can see that my body is slowly changing into its intended womanly form and I have lost a lot of my awkward girlishness. I am aware of the weight I have gained and the curves that have filled in the hollow coves of my body. Despite all of these changes I know that I am still skinny and in good shape. Being able to accept my body and not let other people’s negative views of their body affect the way I view myself has been life changing. I am so much more confident now in who I am and tend to care less what other people have to say about my body. I am not perfect and still a college student trying to navigate my way into adulthood while facing many ups and downs along the way. I still have moments of insecurity but remind myself to think of how far I have come and to not look back.

For the most part, we all have such better attitudes towards our bodies. Over this past year we have matured a lot and gained much needed independence from each other while still remaining really close friends. We no longer need approval of our outfits and can enjoy dinner without the constant worry of calories and if we have worked out that day or not. The time we spend together now is less stressful and we have all learned to accept our bodies the way they are.

Although my friend still struggles with bulimia and refuses to let people help, she has gotten a little better. She no longer excessively works out or makes herself sick as often and told our cross-country coach at the beginning of the season about her bulimia. This was the first adult she had told and my friends and I were grateful to have an adult on our side to help us through the year. He tried the best he could, suggesting she keep track of what foods she was eating as a way to make sure she was eating enough healthy foods to help her running. He was not asking her to count calories but to simply write down the foods she was consuming. Instead of helping this had the opposite effect and she began to not eat anything, afraid to have our coach see the unhealthy foods she was eating. He stopped the journaling and tried countless other methods to help her. My friends and I met with our coach many times trying to come up with a solution to her dangerous problem but nothing was working.

After the season ended our coach was not around the campus as much and we were again left to help her on our own. Luckily, this time we were all stronger and not willing to give in to any of the lies she told herself about her body. Although she does not make herself sick as often, she is still not healthy. She can go all day without eating and then have moments of binge eating, especially late at night after she has starved herself all day. Despite our constant plea with her to tell her parents and get the help she knows will make her better, she refuses. Now that she is no longer going to such extreme measures as she was last year, she convinces herself that she is healthy, justifying why she does not want anyone else to know.

Having gone through these past two years watching one of my best friends struggle with her body image has been a challenge. I have become so much more aware of others struggling with similar issues and realize how common it is, especially in college. Although it is easy to dismiss warning signs and give up when the person refuses to get help we cannot abandon them. I imagine if I was in my friend’s shoes, how easy it could have been for me to follow her down the same path, and hope that my friends would be there for me the same way we try every day to be there for her. Loving your body, despite its flaws, is a struggle and for some it seems impossible. I am thankful for the transformation I have made and the choice to love my body instead of hate it. My only hope is that one day my friend can join me.