Culture



Aubrey Gordon in the documentary film "Your Fat Friend" (NCR screenshot/YouTube/Jeanie Finlay)



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"Just say 'fat.' Not 'curvy' or 'chubby' or 'chunky' or 'fluffy' or 'more to love' or 'big guy' or 'full figured' or 'big boned' or 'queen sized' or 'husky' or 'obese' or 'overweight.' Just say 'fat.' "

Aubrey Gordon's career as a fat acceptance activist started in 2016 with an anonymous blog post. Originally titled "A Request from Your Fat Friend," she composed an open letter asking her friends to accept her experiences of anti-fat bias. A week later, 30,000 people had read it.

Since then, in both anonymous writings and public activism (two books and a podcast, "Maintenance Phase"), Gordon has continued demanding that American culture treat every body with respect, including the fat — because a world that discriminates based on jean size is not a just world.

Now, Gordon's activism has taken the shape of a documentary. "Your Fat Friend," a film by cinematographer Jeanie Finlay, began screening in the U.K. this January and is now showing in select cities in the U.S.

The film follows Gordon's career as she blossoms from anonymous blogger to celebrity activist. Gordon lands a book deal, is trolled by internet bullies (who dangerously release her name, address, résumé and social security number online, despite her anonymity), and chooses to reveal her identity to her readers.

We celebrate with Gordon when she gets personally thanked by Adele after addressing the inappropriate media coverage of the pop star's weight loss. And when Gordon hosts her first public reading of her debut book in Powell's bookstore in her hometown of Portland, Oregon, we beam with her at its success.

But it's not all about Gordon. The film demonstrates some of the injustices faced — and fought — by the community she represents.

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Take, for instance, how it's nearly impossible to locate comfortable public seating as a fat person. Or how an airline might suddenly cancel a fat person's ticket without offering a refund. Or how the skinny shamelessly dictate what fat people can or cannot eat, can or cannot wear, or where they can or cannot work. (Once a woman

in a grocery store removed a melon from Gordon's cart, telling her, "This has too much sugar for you, this isn't for you.") Or how a satisfying love life feels improbable, since fat persons are encouraged to settle for whoever they will take them (finding "the one," Gordon feels, is a luxury for the thin).

She's also open about her own eating disorder: Gordon is an atypical anorexic, meaning, "You have all the behaviors of an anorexic person, but you're fat," she explains bluntly before talking about her frustrations finding adequate treatment because of the overwhelming medical bias against fat people.

The story of Gordon's family and their generational challenges with weight and body acceptance centers the film narrative. Both parents confess to making mistakes in raising their daughter. Not having had healthy relationships with their own bodies, they exacerbated Aubrey's experience of her fat body, too.

Her father, Rusty, grew up with a military father who monitored his overweight son as he ate, a habit Rusty continued with his own daughter. Gordon's mother, Pam, committed herself — and her daughter — to every diet fad the '80s offered because, Pam admits, "I viewed her size as my responsibility." So Weight Watchers weigh-ins, calorie counting and diet pills marked Gordon's childhood from age 11 onward, the age when her parents decided her size had become unacceptable.

Yet dieting did not change Gordon's body — only her relationship to her body. She is not alone. Studies show that a majority of dieters regain more weight than they lost in the years after they go off their novel eating plan.

We watch as Gordon attempts a new way to relate to her own body: she seeks to embrace the body she has. This radical acceptance starts with honesty, saying out loud the uncomfortable truth about the shape and size and experience of inhabiting our unique forms.

She tells Finlay, "When I describe myself as fat, my favorite and least favorite reaction is people going, 'No, sweetie, you are not, don't say that about yourself.' And I say, 'Hey guys, have we met?' "



Aubrey Gordon shows a vintage religious diet book in the film "Your Fat Friend." (NCR screenshot/YouTube/Jeanie Finlay)

She explains, "I think they think I'm saying I'm lazy or stupid or unlovable [when I say 'fat']. But I don't feel any of those things. I just am fat. The end. Well, what are we going to do about it? Not much to do. Tried everything. Here we are."

The truth might sting, but only because American culture reveres a singular type of beauty, and "fat" is not it — even though 68% of women here wear size 14 pants or above. The truth is that nearly three-quarters of American women do not meet the idealized trends of feminine beauty. So, Gordon wonders, is hating our bodies working for us? Is this the best way to live?

As a devout Christian, I'd push her inquiry further: Does God hate our bodies as much as we do?

This time of year, in anticipation of swimsuit season, America diets. If we're religious, our going-without might take on a spiritual dimension.

Through our little deprivations, we might imagine we relate to Christ's passion. We might see ourselves in the apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:27, imagining we are developing discipline as we cut calories, crucifying the flesh as we exercise,

enslaving the body as we squeeze into shapewear. Or we emphasize our bodies as "temples of the Holy Spirit" — and self-flagellate when we defile God's temple by our lapses (1 Corinthians 6:19).

But these interpretations cheapen both the Scriptures and our Savior: Is losing or gaining a few inches off your waist the same as the crucifixion of Christ? What do we reveal about ourselves and our thoughts about Jesus when we compare our form in a swimsuit with the body that changed the fate of the cosmos?

Instead of plucking verses from their contexts to support America's obsessive compulsive culture of thinness, I suggest we adopt a more holistic theology.

> Each body — each of our fat, crooked, disabled, short, gangly, giant, painful, roly-poly bodies, the exact body you have right now — bears the *imago dei*. There are no exceptions.
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God calls all of creation "good" at the beginning of time, a pronouncement that includes the human body. King David writes that he was "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14), a reality that corresponds not only to David as a fetus but also to David the adult male — perhaps with a "dad bod."

Maybe we can consider the Lord's word to Samuel when the prophet is commissioned to choose a king: "Do not consider his appearance or his height. ... People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

And then there are the Bible's own words about Christ: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2).

The Bible does not denigrate the body, not once. ("The flesh" is a different matter, but is not merely synonymous with "the human form.") In fact, the Scriptures revere each body as a bearer of the divine image. Our job is not to perfect the human form but to say thank you for the miracle enacted so that we could "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Gordon's philosophy jibes with the Bible itself. She writes, "Try to learn to love the lush overgrowth of your body. Let it grow wild and untamed as a garden you loved as a child. Love it for the way it sustains you, keeps you warm, goes to such lengths not to let you get hurt."

What could be more Christian than embracing the body you actually have as a gift from God? Because each body — each of our fat, crooked, disabled, short, gangly, giant, painful, roly-poly bodies, the exact body you have right now — bears the *imago dei*. There are no exceptions.

So this swimsuit season, rather than counting calories, count the mercies of God. Celebrate the glimmers of heaven in the body you have. Let it grow and flourish, unhindered, celebrated, cherished, as God cherishes you. Through this body, God sustains you, keeps you warm and holds you safe. This body is and always has been a gift. Try to learn to say thank you every day. You are alive, and that's good enough.