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**FINDING GOD
THROUGH WEIGHT LOSS**

Welcome to Durham – Diet Capitol of the World. For thousands of people each year, Durham symbolizes a threshold; a gateway to a new and better life. They come with the hope in the possibility of obtaining a thim body and all that it grants. Of course, commercial programs such as Weight Watchers, Diet Center Jenny Graig, Physcians' Wieght Loss Center, and Nutrisystem, as well-known all across America. Every hospital in any medium-sized won has an in-house medical fast program such as Optifast and Meidfast, as well as behavior modification classes. In community centers and churches people gather together at Overwaters Anonymous, Foodaholics Anonymouse,

TOPS (Take Off Pounds Sensibly, and Positive Weighs meetings. Each day another best seller hits the bookstores to hail a faster and better way to take off those unwanted pounds. Talk shows hosts interview the rich and famous about their weight-loss regimens; even the show hosts themselves reveal their personal struggles with weight. Why, with all of this medical attention and available information on diet and weight control, would anyone leave home and venture forth to Durham, NC As one veteran dieter puts it "Every fat person on earth knows in the back of his mind that Durham exists. Mecca of the dieters. When all else fails go to Durham"(Blum 1992).

I arrived in Durham, August 15, 1985 on my quest for weight loss. I lost a hundred pounds and found a culture; a diet culture with its heroes and villains, work ethic, traditions and rituals, and religion. I started collecting dieting tales, and organized them into an M.A. thesis, then a book – Fat Like Us. With the book came speaking engagements, book tours, and meeting people from all over the world. Everywhere I went people would come up and witness to me about how their weight loss not only changed their bodies, but transformed their faith.

I now work as a researcher for the transplant center at Inova/Fairfax Hospital in Fairfax, VA. In order to qualify for organ transplant, patients must have a body mass index under 35. Many patients undergo gastric by-pass surgery to qualify for transplant. After weight loss, all of them speak of the profound

sense of peace and the presence of God that they feel to their core.

I still collect dieting tales – this time with patients enrolled in clinical investigational drug trials. First I ask the quantitative questions about height, weight, and vital signs, and then I ask them how they feel about weight and weight loss? I don't impose any other questions, but let responses emerge. All of the respondents' responses form a six staged framework. These stages form a religious structure of testimony and are comparable to Christian traditions of conversion. This is true of the first person I ever interviewed at the Rice House in Durham, NC in 1989, the people I interview in my office now.

“ I found God through weight loss.” Evangelical Protestantism requires that sinners acknowledge their sins and confess them publicly, ask God for forgiveness, and invite Jesus into their lives. Weight loss programs require participants to acknowledge their lives are out of control and must submit their will to a greater one – a higher power. That power can be God, a diet program, or a doctor's orders.

Stage One – This first stage is receiving the Call and is the crucial step because it is the foundation of the diet experience and remains the life-changing event in a dieter's life. Usually, the call is preceded by several events which alert the would-be dieter that weight is out of control. The buildup is accumulative, but

an incident or milestone occurs which provides the person with a sudden revelation that obesity is dominating every aspect of life. The Call can be likened to a crisis conversion. The Call is the crucial, transitional step that moves a person to separate from an everyday existence into an extraordinary one.

Stage Two – This stage is when a person begins the process of change and involves separating from the deep connection to food. People see food as divine, pleasurable, powerful, and mysterious. Before any change in eating behavior, each person I interviewed spoke of a Last Supper. This event is the last ritualistic fling with food before it becomes forbidden by a diet program, treatment, or doctor's orders.

Stage Three – This is the recognition stage where dieters find others like themselves at diet programs of Durham, in diet meetings across America, or in doctors' waiting rooms. At this state, people pair off into buddy systems and see themselves as new recruits and form alliances with other newbies or with long-term, successful dieters.

Stage Four – Reality – This is the hard stage when dieters are forced to cut all connections with negative eating behaviors, patterns, and people who would lead them astray. The reality is there is no life-long cure for obesity. This is the nadir of the dieting experience. At this point in the process, the euphoria

about the possibility of thinness erodes, and the potential for failure is evident.

Stage Five – Backsliding. This is the stage where the dieter commits sin, i.e. eats outside the parameters of so called healthy eating. This is the stage when the dieters feel the religion of weight loss most deeply and believes that weight loss has the power to heal spiritually as well as physically. The function of backsliding tales is to inform dieters of the tension between the passion for forbidden food and the consequences of letting appetite get out of control. Yet going off a diet is an unavoidable and necessary step. One must learn to accept with grace the human failing backsliding, and feel the peace of forgiving oneself.

Stage Six – Redemption. This is the final stage of the religious experience. The redemption stage is where the affirmation of diet adherence blooms. What seems absurd a few months earlier has happened. Thinness is attained. Yet the emergence of the person from the layers of flesh is not a cause for celebration, but one of personal acceptance, and a peace with God.

APPLICATIONS TO HEALTH CARE SETTINGS

Everyday there is another report about how the world is getting fatter, and obesity is now killing the young. We put the blame on the obese and view them as morally inferior. Why can't they eat less and exercise more? As if reason had anything to do with eating behaviors. The most successful weight loss programs are those who incorporate the structures of religious rituals. Doctors and other medical professionals who want their patients to lose weight could provide settings where the six stages of dieting conversion could occur. Instead of handing out exchange diets, calorie, exercise, and behavior logs with the admonishment to go and sin no more, professionals could:

Acknowledge that weight loss is tedious, hard, almost impossible, and has unintended consequences. Many will attempt it, most will fail, but the truly adherent will succeed. In my studies, most patients who succeeded in losing a large amount of weight, got divorced.

Pair new dieters with older, successful ones to model behavior. Have a buddy system. In Overeaters Anonymous, this is referred to as finding a sponsor.

Acknowledge God in the process. Talk about the power of food, forgiveness, redemption, and the peace that comes with overcoming obesity.

Help the newly thin to find peace in their new bodies, and learn how to negotiate the world in a thinner body. Losing weight is

transformative, and jarring. It takes time to come to terms with the new reality of thinness.