

“Taking Up Space”
Rev. Dr. Cynthia L. Landrum
October 24, 2021
9:30 and 11:15 AM

Call to Worship by the Rev. Dr. Cynthia L. Landrum

Today, as always, in our liberatory faith,
We welcome you. We welcome you whoever you are,
However you got here, Whatever the state of your body and mind and soul.
We come here today with our sorrows and our joys, with our aches and pains and our rushes of energy.
We come here today, tall and short, fat and thin, and all the inbetweens,
people of all races and genders and sexualities,
people of many cultures, and histories, classes, and abilities
We come here today in full embodiment, knowing we are holy, knowing we are beloved,
knowing that here we can find community.
Come, let us build together that diverse multicultural beloved community,
Come, let us seek justice and liberation together,
Come, let us worship.

Prayer or Meditation: “Goddess” by the Rev. Misha Sanders

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/goddess>

Reading: *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* (excerpt) by Aubrey Gordon

<https://www.uuabookstore.org/What-We-Dont-Talk-About-When-We-Talk-About-Fat-P19164.aspx>

Sermon: “Taking Up Space” by the Rev. Dr. Cynthia L. Landrum

The subtitle for this sermon was, “the sermon Cindy’s waited twenty years to give.” And you may have been wondering, why is it that I’ve never preached on fat liberation before? So I wanted to begin by answering that question today. There are two parts to the answer. The first is that when I started ministry, the advice to ministers who were part of marginalized groups was, don’t preach on your identity issue. You’ll be seen as a one-note minister, people will complain that that’s all you ever talk about. Instead, get somebody else to preach on it for you. Now, at some point the prevailing wisdom shifted on this, and the attitude became, so what if people react negatively, you should be free to preach about this and preach from your own experience.

The second reason is more complicated. Basically, I didn’t know I could. The overall culture wasn’t talking as much about anti-fat bias and treating fat discrimination like a justice issue. Weight discrimination was legal in 49 states. Fat jokes were prevalent, and anybody pushing back against those jokes was rare. And none of that has changed. Fat discrimination is still not talked about much in the larger culture, and fat jokes are still accepted, and weight

discrimination is still legal in 48 states.¹ (The only states where it isn't is my home state of Michigan, and Washington state.)

And what was true in the larger culture was true also in Unitarian Universalism. I very rarely heard of any ministers preaching on fat bias or weight discrimination.² The UUA had no programs, beyond a couple of questions and an optional piece within their “Beyond Categorical Thinking” program that addressed anti-fat bias. The UU World had never done an article about it. Searching for the word “fat” yielded only a couple of results to think pieces on the UUA website. The UUA General Assembly had never had a program on weight discrimination. We had passed zero actions of immediate witness or study-action issues or other resolutions about it at the General Assembly. The one statement of conscience that mentioned it was the ethical eating one, and it basically argued that fat was unethical in that document.³ So the message to me was loud and clear: we are not ready in Unitarian Universalism to embrace this as a social justice issue. And the couple of blog posts I wrote confirmed this for me in the responses I got.⁴ While I got many positive responses, I also got many that responded with health concern to justify fat shaming. I knew that if I was going to bring this to the forefront in the UUA it was going to take a lot of work and energy, and I was going to get a lot of push-back and resistance, even to the point where it might be career-damaging. And so I didn't.

Most of that is still true. But things have started to change in Unitarian Universalism in the last two years. Two years ago, the UU Minister's Association asked a group of fat ministers, including myself, if they should add “fat” as an identity category in our member profiles, and what term to use. I answered that if they were going to do this, they should be also doing the work of showing that the UUMA is accepting of people with this identity, which they hadn't done. So they started to take that seriously. They helped us create an identity and caucus group within the UUMA. And that's been amazing – for the first time, in the last two years, fat ministers are talking openly with each other about how this discrimination affects our ministry, and trying to get some recognition in the UUMA and UUA. And then last summer, I and two other fat ministers – the Rev. Julie Brock and the Rev. Molly Brewer – gave the first

¹ Areva Martin, “49 States Legally Allow Employers to Discriminate Based on Weight,” *Time Magazine*, 2017 August 16. <https://time.com/4883176/weight-discrimination-workplace-laws/>; and Margaret Burnham, “Obesity is a New Protected Class in Washington State,” *SHRM*, 2019 July 16. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/legal-and-compliance/state-and-local-updates/pages/obesity-is-a-new-protected-class-in-washington-state.aspx>

² Shoutout to the Rev. Kimi Riegel who was the first and only minister who as the first and only minister for over a decade who mentioned to me that they had preached on this.

³ The exact quote is, that we “aspire to buy, raise, and consume food for ourselves and our families that... promotes health, consuming food in quantities that do not lead to obesity.” “Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice: 2011 Statement of Conscience,” Unitarian Universalist Association, 2011. <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/ethical-eating-food-environmental-justice>

⁴ Cynthia Landrum, “The Big Issue,” *RevCyn*, 2013 June 07. <http://revcyn.blogspot.com/2013/06/the-big-issue.html>; and

Cynthia Landrum, “The Last Straw and the #Truth” *RevCyn*, 2013 June 12.

<http://revcyn.blogspot.com/2013/06/the-last-straw-and-truth.html>; and

Cynthia Landrum, “The Big Issue Simplified”, *RevCyn*, 2013 June 10.

<http://revcyn.blogspot.com/2013/06/the-big-issue-simplified.html>; and

Cynthia Landrum, “Stand Like a Fat Superhero,” *RevCyn*, 2014 May 22.

<http://revcyn.blogspot.com/2014/05/stand-like-fat-superhero.html>

ever General Assembly Workshop on the subject.⁵ That's led to the UUMA asking the three of us to run a workshop training in anti-discrimination for other ministers, which will be this week. And now the UUA's Skinner House Press has expressed interest in having some books on the subject, and the UUA's Worship Web curator has invited submissions to the Braver/Wiser blog at the UUA. Things are suddenly rolling quickly into having some recognition in this faith, and it's mostly in the last few months – basically since our GA workshop, and we started making a little noise. Mostly me and a few others, actually, if I can take some credit for this. I proposed a GA workshop. I wrote the UUA Worship Web curator and asked for some changes. I told the UUMA they needed to change. But I was able to do those steps because I had some friends with me for the first time, standing stronger and prouder than I was.

So it's only in the last two years that I knew that there were enough people in our association who understood this and would have my back, if I were to raise some noise, and there were to be a big push-back. And since that's the risk I faced, that's what I needed before I could speak up more loudly in our faith as a whole, and in the churches I served.

But I've gotten a little ahead of myself now, because I think it might be still an open question for many people whether this is a sort of "legitimate" discrimination, or whether it's just the case that there are unhealthy people doing unhealthy things, and they should have people pushing back against them for that behavior, and that's all well and good, in fact, because it's for our own good. And there are about eight sermons I could give to go through all the pieces of this. So there's a lot that I'm going to skip right over. First of all, a lot has been written about debunking the correlation that's been made between fat and health, or lack of it.⁶ What seems to be the case is that a lot of studies don't account for the harm done to our bodies by the cycle of dieting, and that dieting accounts for more of the unhealthiness than the fat does. I could spend a whole sermon going over that research and making that case to you, but I'm not going to. But I've included a resource list for further reading, if that question is of interest to you. Secondly, I could talk a lot about how dieting doesn't work. And the medical industry and diet industries know this – the vast overwhelming majority of diets will not produce a lasting change.⁷ They do not work. So advice that simplifies things down to calories in, calories out – that's pretty useless. Don't advise diets to people, by way of trying to fix them. The most of them won't work, and the cycle of dieting will do more harm to our bodies. Weight loss surgery is even worse, and increases mortality rates, not decreases. But again, I simply don't have the time to make that full case to you, nor am I, frankly, interested in it particularly. If this is something you want to argue about, go read some books on the subject, and write their authors. I have too much else to cover.

I am going to take for a baseline for this sermon that you're going to just have to agree that fat is not necessarily and always unhealthy, and that dieting is not a productive path to recommend for most people, and weight loss surgery is more damaging than helpful. We're going to start with those as baseline assumptions, because even if they're wrong, and this is

⁵ The video should eventually be available through the UUA. Meanwhile, it can be viewed at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jun6SHOLr04DgQhUk_DHqAbNH-su_z0/view?usp=sharing

⁶ See the list of resources for this at <https://tinyurl.com/fpcfathlib>. In particular, I recommend: Lindo Bacon, *Health At Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight*, BenBella Books, 2010.

⁷ A good starter article on this is Harriet Brown, "The Weight of the Evidence," *Slate*, 2015 March 24. <https://slate.com/technology/2015/03/diets-do-not-work-the-thin-evidence-that-losing-weight-makes-you-healthier.html>

important here – it’s irrelevant. Because unless you’re the fat person’s doctor, it is not your concern. And if you are worried for somebody, there are a lot of actually productive things you can do, and I want to get to those.

Let’s look at anti-fatness, instead of as issue of epidemic, like the so-called “obesity epidemic,” or of health at all, and think about where else anti-fatness may have come from. My first instinct was to think that anti-fatness might be rooted in classism. It’s definitely linked to classism, and highly related to it. Our negative stereotypes of fatness, such as laziness, slovenliness, these are things that are also negatively associated with lower classes quite frequently. So it was no surprise, as I started actually studying anti-fat bias to discover it’s deep connections to racism as well. In the book *Fearing the Black Body: the Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, author Sabrina Strings lays out a strong and detailed argument for the origin of fat-phobia in racism. She says, “two critical historical developments contributed to a fetish for svelteness and a phobia about fatness: the rise of the transatlantic slave trade and the spread of Protestantism. Racial scientific rhetoric about slavery linked fatness to ‘greedy’ Africans. And religious discourse suggested that overeating was ungodly.”⁸ She goes on to say, “In this way, the phobia about fatness and the preference for thinness have not, principally or historically, been about health. Instead, they have been one way the body has been used to craft and legitimate race, sex, and class hierarchies.”⁹

I find it logical that Strings connects the origin of anti-fat bias to Protestantism, because I think much of our attitude and reactions to health and lack of it are rooted not as much in science as in Protestantism. In America, at least, there’s a strong Puritanical streak that has us judge illnesses and physical conditions, decide whether the person with that condition is guilty or innocent, and then react accordingly to their suffering, or just their state of being, based on that guilt or innocence. It’s a very Calvinist sort of structure. In the Calvinist puritanical church, only the elect were destined for heaven, and this was pre-determined. And one had to prove to people, to both the church and to the community at large, that one was part of the elect, and then thus be considered to be part of the elect, to be saved. So our churches very membership was reserved for those who could prove their worthiness. And those that could not, were not members, were not saved, were not going to heaven.

I think our anti-fatness is rooted in this theology, and much of our relationship to health. We take situations that we consider to be unhealthy, and then we judge the guilt or the innocence of people who have that situation. And then we give societal support, research dollars, and generally our sympathy and understanding to the innocent. We’re outraged about bias against people for things that we think are out of their control -- immutable characteristics - - but for those things that are within our control, we will judge. So our sympathies are with the people with breast cancer, which is an innocent cancer, much more than with people with lung cancer, which is a guilty cancer, at least some of the time, that we judge people to have brought on themselves, through the sin of smoking. And we could dissect that, and show how addiction to nicotine is something that corporate forces have engineered to a perfection, but we don’t. For me, a classic example of this is the AIDS epidemic, where our funding dollars and governmental research and attention was desperately sought after and fought for while the gay community was dying, but once we had Ryan White, a child, with AIDS, the cultural narrative

⁸ Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, NYU Press, 2019. P.6.

⁹ Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, NYU Press, 2019. P.6.

around AIDS, AIDS research and AIDS funding started to change.¹⁰ Very similarly our attitudes towards LGBT prejudice shifted in this country as we made the argument that being gay was immutable -- people are born this way we said -- and by arguing birth, rather than choice, we gave people the status of the elect, of the predestined -- that it is holy and good.

Fat, we argue, is about people's sin -- the sin of gluttony. But we don't put it in sin words, those of us who are not used to such language. We put it in choice words, and healthy choices is the new language, but it's the same age-old question: we have to judge the situation, and decide if you are in the elect and destined for heaven. So fat people are judged to have caused this, chosen this -- the choices of calories in, not genetics, or family environment, or metabolism issues or any of the myriad of other reasons that are not about choice. And once we've made this decision, that it's a choice, we can withhold support, and we can live with the fact that things are unequal and unfair for fat people, and we can support discrimination against them, from withholding healthcare to charging more for goods and services, because they made decisions, so are at fault.

The first part of breaking this down could be to do as we did with the gay community, and what many have done between breaking down the assumptions and myths about fatness, and break down that assumption that this is about choice.

But, again, I do not want to invest myself in the time it would take to cover that research, ***because I think this is flat-out bad theology***. I thought it with the LGBT movement, too. If you do choose your sexuality or your gender: that is fine. You are still whole and holy, loved and beloved, child of the universe, child of God. Your choice is fine with me. And if you are sick, I still care. And if you are discriminated against, I will still fight for you.

This is what I want for fat people. I want us to stop looking at discrimination, and saying, but this is something that's unhealthy, and they need to make better choices, and start looking at discrimination and saying, ***"My God, from the bottom of my heart, and the depths of my faith, I see this discrimination and I know that this is wrong."***

Our first principle is Unitarian Universalism is the covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. And I know I keep saying that the principles are not a creed. But they are principles. They are guiding principles for how we govern our church, and how we act for justice as congregations. And with that in mind, I believe the principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person calls on us as a congregation to affirm and promote just that. And there are ways we can do that.

But first I want to talk to you a little about what fat discrimination looks like. And we justify this in our society in every way. We set a standard size for airline seats, and say this size, this size that everyone is uncomfortable in, and some people can't fit in, this is a size we're going to restrict you to, and those who can't fit, we're not going to make a situation that works for you. We're not going to make a certain number of seats larger, or even all seats larger. We're just going to make you buy two. All airlines except one, that's the policy. Or clothing stores. We're going to restrict you to only shopping in a few stores, one or two that will carry your size in brick and mortar stores, and we're going to charge you more. For this

¹⁰ "During the 1980s, AIDS was largely stigmatized as an illness impacting the gay community, because it was first diagnosed among gay men. In the USA, that perception shifted with the media focus placed on Ryan and other prominent straight HIV-infected people such as Magic Johnson, Arthur Ashe and the Ray brothers, although these cases were often framed as 'innocent' against gay men who were seen as 'guilty' subjects." from "Ryan White," Wikipedia, accessed 2021 October 26.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryan_White

preaching robe I'm wearing, I paid an extra \$80 over what smaller sizes -- all of them -- pay¹¹. And while yes, I complained, I did it without really blinking an eye, because I was happy this company would even make a robe in my size. Restaurants. I could go on about your fixed booths and your chairs with arms on your patios. But there's a much bigger fish to fry, and that's healthcare. Because the truly unhealthy thing for fat people is the combination of lack of healthcare, and then avoiding going to the doctor because of the fat bias in the medical industry that amounts to every diagnosis being boiled down to the cause being you're fat, the problem being you're fat, and the cure being, don't be fat. And that on top of the fact that we know oppression leads to negative health outcomes, shaming is not good for mental illness, and ***the number one thing any of us can do if we're worried about the health of fat people is to advocate for justice for them.***

So let's return to where I started, because usually when I do a sermon on a social justice issue, as I build up to a call to action, I'm going to tell you the positive stances the UUA has taken on this issue, the resolutions the General Assembly has voted on this issue, the suggestions that UU curricula and social justice programs make on how to advocate on this issue, and go from there. And as I said at the start, ***we have zero of that.*** What we have is the list of suggestions I made for that first-ever General Assembly workshop this past summer¹² -- I didn't print those up for today, but I can get them to you -- and the advice of authors, such as the ones from our reading today. So if we want to do something it requires us to be the first here -- to be the first congregation with a fat liberation task force, the first congregation out there fighting actively in our communities for fat justice, the first congregation to propose something to our denomination's General Assembly, the first congregation to proclaim themselves to be the equivalent of our welcoming congregation or green sanctuary congregation for fat people. ***That's a big ask.*** That's I guess the third reason why it took me twenty years to ask it. But I know that here I can ask that, and I know you can hear the call. It may take time and it may not always be easy, but I know you're with me on this path of calling for justice.

¹¹ The company is Sacred Stitches/WomenSpirit, if you were wondering.

<https://sacredstitches.com/contact>

¹² Available at <https://tinyurl.com/fpcfathlib>.