

Bears & Health

Bears, Women and Size: Size is a Political Issue, Part 1

In this last year I've become buddies with a person of size, as we bears and chubs are sometimes referred to. Lavelle Porter is also black and bisexual, a Gen X bear who has been active with the New York Bear Club and who is a graduate student at CUNY where he will be studying the work of one of his heros, Samuel Delany, the bearish writer of erotica and science fiction.

Like most bears, I've always had a sense of bigness as just as, well, big an attraction in the worlds of straight, bi and lesbian communities as it is for us gay bears and chubs. Same stuff, just different gender or sexual preference. Like in the worlds of leather and s-m, where the leather and s-m are the key determinants of your sex lifestyle, rather than gender or orientation. So when I would occasionally hear or read the question "Can women be bears?," I always kind of knew what they were talking about and knew intuitively that the answer is yes. But in the course of my buddyship with Lavelle, this information has gotten a lot more specific.

Lavelle's story is illustrative. He stumbled upon the bear world from having first socialized in the equivalent world of straight men and women of size. There, big women are called BBW (Big Beautiful Women) and there are numerous organizations, social clubs, newsletters, magazines and websites devoted them and their admirers. Is the world of BBW as flourishing as the bear world? Even more so, says Lavelle, but who also cautions that socializing around BBW can be as heterosexist as that of the straight mainstream. There is no outreach to gay and bisexual men.

So let's look at some of the web-

sites. www.largeencounters.com is for "big beautiful ladies and their gentleman admireres"; "Goddesses Parties: parties and events for BBW's and BHM's and admirers"; NOLOSE, the National Organization for Lesbians of Size: www.nolose.org; Dimensions online—resources and fun for BBW's and FA's, the online magazine of NAAFA, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, the website for which is www.naafa.org.

Many of these websites are just like the bear ones—they have galleries, personals, chat options, links, etc. Some, like the NOLOSE and NAAFA sites, are more political. The latter, in fact, has a lot of history and information about the issue of fat acceptance, some of which may seem to go too far—e.g., the calling for an end to all obesity surgery. For most of us, fat may be an issue at the level of emerging health concerns—a small price to pay, it often seems, for the considerable satisfactions of being a bear or a chub. But just as the health risks of being fat are often slow to emerge and insidious in how passively we can find ourselves rationalizing and otherwise adapting to them, so are some of the other consequences, such as social and workplace discrimination.

Not long ago, I was in the sauna at the Vanderbilt Y here in Manhattan. The clientele is a mix of straight and gay, but that wasn't the issue last week when this one older man who looked to be in his early 60's and who was trim began talking, as people so often do, about how he'd gained a few pounds over the holidays and felt terrible about it. Even though I was sitting right next

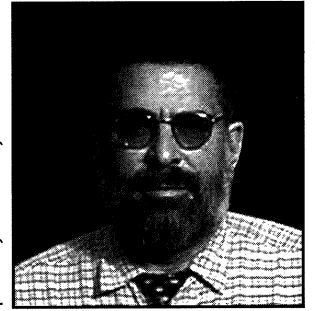


photo by Joel Bradley

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to him, he began loudly announcing to his captive audience that he'd once promised his wife that if his waist size ever got above 36, he'd commit suicide. It was now 36. Instead of quipping that I'd just learned that the measuring tape he used was off by an inch and that his actual waist size was 37, and then hold him to his word to put himself (and us) out of his misery, I got angry and cursed him out for being so insensitive. He was genuinely taken aback and apologetic, not just because I was bigger than he was but because he really hadn't even been aware that what he was saying might impact negatively on a heavyset person.

We bears and chubs may be resentful for taking up more than what is deemed to be our share of space. At too many other times, however, to those same measurers of space we loom small or invisible altogether.

In Part 2, we will look a little more closely at some of the discussions and position statements of NAAFA around issues of acceptance of and discrimination against persons of size.

Postscript: Several days later, who should I run into at the East Side Club (a mid-Manhattan gay sauna that attracts married men)—in hallways so narrow that there simply isn't enough space for a bear or a chub to pass each other without a minor turf war—but, you guessed it, Vanderbilt man!