

The 30 Pound Club

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Dignity

Being overweight and obese in America certainly has health risks associated with it, but that's only part of the problem. If you were a fat kid like I was, you took a pretty good ribbing about it. I don't think it was as bad then as it may be today, given the stories of childhood taunting that have been in the news, but life wasn't easy for thin-skinned fat kids, that's for sure. You might have been the recipient of that type of insult yourself. It may even continue today. Some people, who think they mean well, just can't help themselves—they simply must tell obese people how overweight they are and don't they know they shouldn't eat that?

Before you get all high and mighty, stop and think. No matter how much you weigh, haven't you seen someone even bigger and thought, "Thank God that's not me!" I know I have. I kept my mouth shut and I hope you did as well, but it happens to all of us—and there's always someone bigger.

It's difficult to maintain an air of dignity when you don't think you look good. You wear clothes that are too big—not that it's easy to find clothing that fits. Put on a bathing suit? Not in this lifetime. You may even worry about sitting in a chair because you don't know if it will hold you or if it will be too tight to get out of or if it's so low you'll need help getting up.

At my heaviest, I was in a college first-aid class. In one exercise, I played the victim and three people had to lock arms underneath me and lift me. They couldn't. I can tell you that was a life-changing experience because I've never weighed that much again. Paula said she had the same feelings years ago when she had a serious arrhythmia and paramedics had to carry her down a narrow stairway from our second-floor apartment; even though she was well under 200 pounds, their struggle embarrassed her. You may have your story as well.

But the indignity doesn't necessarily end when we die. Last week, I urged you to watch *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*; if you missed the first episodes, you can watch them online at abc.go.com. The show is a fascinating insight into the challenge of changing the way people think about food, obesity, and disease.

In the fourth episode, Jamie tried to win over the host of the town's most popular radio show who has been his biggest adversary. Jamie took him to a local mortuary to show him the new sizes in caskets. That segment brought Paula to tears. People who might not have felt dignity in life due to their size couldn't have dignity in death either. Their family couldn't have a viewing unless a casket twice as wide was used. The sight of that grand-piano-size casket was like a slap in the face—it really brought home how obesity causes problems even when we're dead.

But that wasn't the end of it. Being a pallbearer is never easy, but it's almost impossible with the weight of these oversize caskets and their occupants. The funeral directors told Jamie and his guest the caskets won't fit in the hearse to get to the cemetery—they have to use a cargo van. Once there, the family must buy two burial plots just to bury their loved one. Cremation has its own set of problems. All these exceptions to common funeral practices heap additional pain and stress on already-grieving family members who simply want to honor their loved one in a dignified manner. While I think it's admirable that funeral directors have made such extensive efforts to accommodate people of all sizes, I also think that's not what you want for your family when you pass on.

It reminded me of a scene in the 1993 film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* (Spoiler alert—if you haven't seen this wonderful movie, rent it and skip to the next paragraph.) After the grown son of a 500-pound woman discovers she has died upstairs in her bedroom, he burns down the house rather than subject her body to the indignity of being removed by a crane.

Carrying extra weight is challenging for many reasons, but one is the way it weighs on our minds—no pun intended. What more important topics could we think about if we weren't thinking about what we look like and all the other weight-related issues? How differently would people perceive us? For example, how many people assume anyone overweight is stupid because they're obviously too dumb not to overeat? Yes, we should all be judged on our ability to perform and the content of our character. Now come back to the real world. We won't get the chance to make a contribution if people don't think we can handle it due to our size.

When this year is done and we're fitter and leaner, we can claim something that we might not have felt in a while: our dignity. That alone might be the motivation you need to keep on course.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

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