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## The Changing Shape of Womanhood

Jennifer is attractive, successful, and well liked. She is a Super Mom, Super Employee, Super Wife, Super Daughter, Super Sister, Super Aunt, Super Niece, Super Cousin, Super Volunteer, Super Neighbor, and Super Friend. People are awed by her; she always looks perfect, pretty, stylish, and thin—like she has it all. But inside, this forty-something Superwoman is exhausted, depressed, and running on empty.

Jennifer and her husband, Bill, have a preteen daughter and teen son. Bill is deeply involved in his work and is a high-profile volunteer in their community. He isn't very available with his time or emotions, so Jennifer manages most details of family life, including the schedules for Bill, their marriage, their kids, her parents, and Bill's parents.

Her parents and in-laws are getting older and starting to have health problems. They all rely on Jennifer's aid. She wants to help them more but feels guilty if she can't be there for them. In fact, Jennifer feels besieged while trying to hold the home front together in the complex, accelerating rush of twenty-first-century family life, while also working outside the home. Despite the burdens, Jennifer projects a cheerful attitude, seeming to easily juggle the families' needs and manage her career.

Jennifer doesn't know how to stop doing everything for fear that her world will fly apart and she'll let down the people she loves.

While she knows it's impossible, Jennifer keeps trying to be perfect and rarely asks for help. She tends to be a control junkie, attempting to micromanage the minutiae of her life and her family's life because she feels so little command over the larger forces affecting her world and her family.

Jennifer's body is also complex, and its rhythms and shape change as she moves through adulthood. Despite this, she has been led to believe (by her upbringing, the culture, and the media) that she can—and should—control her body's shape, weight, appearance, and aging.

So when she feels overrun by life's requirements and uncertainties, Jennifer fights determinedly to make her body obey her commands. This helps her feel more in control than she does when facing the overwhelming demands of her overall situation, the ambiguity she feels about her life, and the daily comments she gets from other people about her body.

Years ago Jennifer learned to assess her self-worth on the bathroom scale and to translate her negative emotions into what body image educator Sandy Friedman calls "the language of fat." That's why Jennifer has been dieting and struggling with body image issues since she was a teenager, and adult stresses regularly rekindle those struggles. Jennifer kept her problem well hidden, and no one seemed to notice.

Because she had difficulty getting pregnant, Jennifer underwent fertility treatments that made her gain weight. Her pregnancies brought even more concern about weight, and she dieted severely after each birth. Jennifer feels that postpartum crash diets were essential to keep Bill interested in her. Jennifer would rather change her body than explore the mistrust simmering just below the surface of her marriage. She finds it scary to ask why she is afraid that Bill would leave her if she wasn't physically attractive enough.

Her postpartum diet goal was for her to return to her original weight, but she overshot each target, becoming thinner after each pregnancy than she was before it. She likes how people frequently compliment her on her appearance and emphatically praise her weight loss. But while her OB/GYN never addressed it, she still worries about how and why her periods became wildly irregular after her second postpartum diet. Now that she's entering menopause, Jennifer feels even less control over her body and everything else in her life. Afraid that she will gain weight during menopause,

she restricts her food intake more strictly and combines periodic vomiting with hours of intense daily exercise to fight the pounds.

Now Jennifer's facade is beginning to crack. The weight is coming off, but she isn't getting the same boost to her self-esteem that dieting used to deliver. Instead of feeling more satisfied, Jennifer feels more anxious. She's always been very close to her kids but now feels left out of their adolescent lives. Her son, Jerry, is less communicative, and she deeply misses their former closeness. Her daughter, Mandy, reminds Jennifer of herself at age twelve: rigid, competitive, and always pushing herself. The familiar way Mandy criticizes her body and obsesses about dieting frightens Jennifer. She is afraid Mandy will replicate Jennifer's own decades of struggle with her body image.

Watching Mandy, Jennifer decides she can't leave this painful legacy to her daughter. Jennifer admits to herself that she has some kind of problem but is ashamed that it has lingered so long into adulthood. Convinced that being obsessed about body image is a teenager's problem, she thinks she should be over it. But finally Jennifer gathers the courage to bring her concerns to her gynecologist at her next checkup.

Before she can even mention her concerns, however, the nurse enthusiastically compliments Jennifer on her appearance and asks how she was able to keep all that weight off and look so good. The doctor is just as flattering when he enters the exam room. Feeling misunderstood and confused, she never asks him for help or tells him the truth about her fluctuating periods and the dangerous ways she manages her weight. Jennifer goes home frightened, ashamed, hopeless, and uncertain about what to do. From what people tell her, she looks better and better on the outside, but she feels worse and worse inside her pretty little body.

## The Shape of Womanhood

For Jennifer and many other women, maintaining their body image becomes the answer to all angst and seems to provide concrete answers to abstract questions such as, How am I faring as a person? The answer to that and other major life questions may be elusive, but a woman *can* measure pounds, calories, hours of exercise, and clothing size to judge her performance as a woman today.

Like Jennifer, some adult women slip over the edge into eating disorders and severe body image despair—problems normally identified primarily with adolescent girls. Adult women and adolescents with these problems do share some characteristics, like using body obsession to cope with developmental challenges and identity development. They share the tendency to translate difficult feelings into the language of fat and play out their distress on the canvas of the body. Likewise, younger and older women live together in a culture rife with body myths that are toxic for women's body image and self-image.

However, there are significant differences between the two populations. Grown women don't believe that they should have such "teenage" problems and feel that they should know better. They tend to be more embarrassed and ashamed about body disturbances, feeling that these disturbances are less legitimate and not a worthwhile reason to seek help. Adult women have more serious everyday responsibilities than girls, and consequently, they have more people to disappoint if they fail. For all these reasons, it feels much harder to make the commitment to take the time to address eating and body image disorders.

Jennifer's story probably comes as no surprise to you. She is not unique. Millions of adult women in the United States struggle with being obsessed about their weight and dissatisfied with their body image.

Extensive studies reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and data from the 2000 U.S. census indicate that forty-three million adult women in the United States are dieting to lose weight at any given time—and that another twenty-six million are dieting to maintain their weight. Most of this dieting is of the "yo-yo" variety, where the "lost" weight is regained, often with additional pounds, triggering yet more rounds of dieting. The yo-yo label aptly describes the ways women's lives and sense of well-being spin up and down with the success or failure of their diets.

Women today have inherited a multigenerational fixation with weight. For more than two generations, U.S. women have been preoccupied with weight. A 1983 *Glamour* magazine survey of 33,000 readers showed that 75 percent thought they were overweight, while only 25 percent of them actually were overweight. In other words, *half* of the survey respondents had severely distorted images of their own bodies. Meanwhile, 42 percent of readers said losing weight was the

thing that would make them the happiest—twice the percentage of those who chose being successful at work or dating a man they admired.

Twenty years older now, this generation of women is still saddled with a distorted body image and body dissatisfaction. Unfortunately, the passage of time isn't helping aging women feel more at peace with their bodies—or making things better for younger women following them into adulthood. The legacy of being overconcerned about body image and weight is passed down from one generation to the next and is reinforced for women of all ages by the body myths of our youth- and appearance-oriented culture.

## The Body Myth

These figures illustrate how many North American women have come to live under the terms of a widely accepted Body Myth: that our self-worth (and our worth to others) is (and ought to be) based on how we look, what we weigh, and what we eat. We look for life's meaning and the answer to life's challenges in the shape of our bodies.

Myths are not inherently bad things (think tooth fairy!). They are stories that help us make sense of our lives and of the meaning of life itself. Myths grow from, and are bound to, the culture of the family and/or the culture of the larger society. Because they are so rooted in culture, myths tend to reinforce our perceptions of reality, rather than to question those perceptions. That's why traveling to another country so often produces culture shock—the anxiety and disorientation of not knowing how to communicate, or what is “normal” or appropriate, and where we fit in. Multicultural psychologist Dr. Carmen Guanipa writes that culture shock produces feelings of discontent, impatience, anger, sadness, and incompetence.

If myths help us make sense of life and hold off feelings of anxiety, small wonder that they are so important to us! But just because myths are not inherently bad, that doesn't make every myth good for us. For women, the Body Myth is deeply embedded in our culture and our psyches. It reinforces a false reality that says: changing my body equals changing my life.

In the Body Myth “reality,” the desire to change our shape overwhelms the desire to *be in* shape—in other words, looks trump health.

Paradoxically, being on a diet is seen as intrinsically healthy and good—something to be admired and imitated. However, the most common diets (of the yo-yo variety) undermine, rather than promote, proper nutrition and well-being. They increase the risks for cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, eating disorders, and some cancers. (More on how and why this is true in chapter 2.)

Most of us have not heard about those risks. Or if we have, the Body Myth kept that information from sinking in enough to let us feel okay about giving up dieting to lose weight. Many of us have huge blind spots when it comes to the causes and consequences of a woman's obsession with her body image because we look at women in Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig programs as being dedicated and committed. They are the good women, doing something positive about their problems, well-being, and sense of self.

However, research finds that up to half of women using commercial weight-loss clinics have significant symptoms of depression—a sign that they may obsess about body image in a futile attempt to feed or soothe much deeper hungers. They may be using the clinics to change how their bodies look rather than making peace with the inevitable, natural, sometimes painful changes of aging—and the rapid evolution of women's roles.

## Living as Immigrants

Our lives—and the ongoing importance in our lives of how our bodies appear—are substantially different from how our mothers lived at our age. The new opportunities open to us, and the new expectations given us, are considerably wider than those of previous generations. The meanings of *success* and *good enough* are light-years beyond our foremothers' definitions.

I think of it as analogous to being an immigrant to a new world. Most mature women started their journey through adolescence expecting to arrive in a world of womanhood very much like the one their mothers inhabited. But today's world has radically different expectations for women than our foremothers' world had for them.

In a sense, we are suffering culture shock. The "Superwoman" script that Jennifer is trying to follow is relatively foreign to her mother and mother-in-law. The stories (or myths) that we use to attempt to make sense of our lives today are markedly different from

the ones our mothers and/or grandmothers used—especially when we consider what those stories told each generation about cultural and family expectations for women’s roles and women’s bodies.

In the span of a generation, the modern world’s idea of womanhood has changed radically. As a result, our foremothers often can’t guide us through this new territory, and the road maps they supply are faint, if they exist at all. Since they didn’t immigrate to this changed world, they weren’t able to fully prepare us for our life as women.

Like newly arrived immigrants, many of us aren’t prepared for this new culture’s mores and can’t quite grasp its requirements and demands. We are pioneers with few role models or directions for navigating this novel culture of womanhood, with its new stressors, opportunities, freedoms, and advantages. Ours is a transformed world that is unfamiliar to us, since such a culture never existed before.

Although many of the physical surroundings of this new world may look the same, we have moved into virgin, often unfamiliar territory. Like geographical culture shock, this transition is emotionally trying and confusing. Among other challenges, we experience cognitive dissonance between what our female ancestors expected of themselves (and what we grew up expecting to expect of *ourselves*) and what modern culture expects of women.

Feeling uprooted from the world of our foremothers, we crave familiarity and security. In response, many of us grab for the mythical chimera of our culture’s narrow standards of beauty as the way to acculturate ourselves and organize our lives. Rather than unlocking all the potential in this new land of opportunity, as successful immigrants do, we cleave to the Body Myth and measure our success by how strictly we manage our bodies and restrict our eating.

## Keeping Herself Up

As we grow up, we form our identity, at least in part, by defining ourselves in opposition to someone or something else. Since young girls identify strongly with their mothers, we must differentiate ourselves from Mom to become separate (eventually adult) people. For women born after 1950, this differentiation often centers on the body because the ways our mothers looked and aged are not good enough for the mores of the Body Myth.

We don't dare "let ourselves go," as so many in our mothers' generation did. We cannot abide salt-and-pepper hair or other signs that the aging process is taking its natural course. We are today's women and are supposed to be in control of everything. We feel like a failure if we detect Mom when we look in the mirror.

As our mothers aged, they still cared about appearance and often criticized a woman for not "keeping herself up." But such criticism was likely to be aimed at a contemporary with questionable taste in makeup or a color-blind fashion sense. When it came to body shape, the parameters were pretty broad.

Today we criticize an adult woman because she no longer has the body of a sixteen- or twenty-year-old; any weight gain, no matter how natural it is for the adult female body, is considered wrong. We scrutinize any gray hair, any wrinkle, any sign of natural aging—in others and in ourselves.

Our mothers did not have as many medical technologies at their disposal to help manage their bodies. Today, keeping ourselves up is more of a full-time job than ever before. While our mothers wore girdles and makeup, we undergo cosmetic surgery, experiment with the latest diets and weight-loss products, and hire trainers to sculpt our physique. We have manicures, pedicures, false nails and eye-lashes. We wax hair off our eyebrows, legs, and bikini line and go tanning, or we use chemicals to get the bronzed look. Collectively, U.S. women spend as much on cosmetics every five days as George W. Bush raised to become president in 2000.

Another huge but seldom discussed difference between the generations is how much more visible modern women's bodies are in public. Most of us are more active in careers and public life than our mothers were or ever dreamed of being. Therefore, we are exposing our bodies to new kinds (and frequency) of scrutiny. Meanwhile, sexualized images of female bodies saturate everyday media, fueling the Body Myth and distorting our idea of the ideal female form. We don't have the body image sanctuaries our mothers did; today's women are always on display, endlessly criticized for transgressing that ever-shifting fine line between being too sexy or not sexy enough.

While the fashion world urges us to display more flesh, we are simultaneously pressured to hide and control many of our body's natural processes. We are expected to camouflage or chemically alter signs of PMS, menstrual periods, or menopause. Mothers who breast-feed in public still elicit disapproving glances or outright scorn, while



breast-revealing bustier fashions and pornographic advertising are celebrated. Navigating among these mixed messages is a challenge.

We have immigrated to an appearance-obsessed culture, where it is considered normal to work out our insecurities in and on our body image—how we think we look. We struggle to live up to (and make sense of) bizarre cultural norms like: “what you see is what you get,” “you are how you look,” or “you can never be too rich or too thin.”

## The Shape of History

Let’s be clear: the body is an essential part of anyone’s identity, because we literally wouldn’t be alive without it. For millennia, humans have pondered the relationship between mind and body, flesh and spirit, psychology and physiology, or body and soul. One of the very few areas approaching consensus across the history of spiritual, philosophical, medical, psychological, and religious thought is this: the body is not the sole source of our identity and purpose.

Western tradition often conceptualizes the body as being in opposition to (and baser than) the spirit, which leads to an either/or way of seeing things. But the most enduring philosophies posit that body and spirit work in concert, influencing each other to move toward either growth or regression. For example, Judeo-Christian tradition calls the body a “temple,” which we should keep open and clean to help our souls flourish, and thus be helpful to others. St. Francis of Assisi uses a similar metaphor in his famous prayer that asks God to “make me an instrument of Your peace.” It is helpful to think of the body metaphorically as a vessel or tool that holds, nourishes, and conveys our essence (or whatever other spiritual metaphor best helps us understand the spark of life).

The body gives us the means to think, speak, touch, feel, listen, taste, smell, and sense both ourselves and what is around us. It enables us to express our self and shape our relationships with our self and those we love. We are in the body when we reflect on life’s ongoing difficulties and joys, and when we grow in response to them.

But *we are not our bodies*. You are not your body. Your body is only the vehicle; it is not the journey or the destination.

Even in the most woman-friendly culture we could imagine, the body—and our relationship with it—would be only *a part* of how we experience and respond to life’s transitions. Unfortunately, our

culture is not so woman friendly. Its distorted view of female bodies and body image becomes central to (rather than merely one part of) how we react to life. This off-kilter perspective presents our bodies as the principal (and sometimes only) canvas on which we paint our future. But if we follow that warped thinking, we paint ourselves into a corner instead.

## The Shape of Adulthood

Remember the intense concern you felt about how you looked when you were a teenager? It seemed that popularity was rigidly meted out based on who was cutest and had the coolest clothes. This competition for acceptance fed on and intensified the insecurity of adolescence, a time of major transition from a childhood identity to an adult one.

Identity is central to a person's sense of self. Our identity integrates the different parts of ourselves (for example: daughter, sister, student, friend, mother, childless, single, girlfriend, volunteer, employee, Iranian Sunni, Irish Catholic, or Russian Jew) into a cohesive whole. Ideally, a self-perception feels firm and stable.

But identity is multidimensional and continues to develop throughout life. For example, you may be single, then married, and then divorced. This fluid, lifelong process builds identity on a foundation constructed from:

- family dynamics
- early experiences
- ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural background
- emotional and mental capacities
- temperament and personality
- physical attributes
- body image (especially for Western women)

Adolescence and childhood are *not* the only times in our lives when our identity is developing. Adulthood is also filled with change, some dramatic, some subtle, and others mundane. A modern woman's development isn't anywhere close to being over when she becomes a legal adult at age twenty-one. A woman traveling through adulthood deals with ongoing developmental issues—an

aging body, motherhood, mortality, being an empty nester, and more—which can be just as tough (or tougher) than the challenges she faced in adolescence.

However, many adult transitions lack the rituals that mark signal moments of childhood (our first steps or first day of school) and adolescence (our first bra or first period). There are few grown-up equivalents of confirmation ceremonies, proms, or graduation parties, which help us remember, recognize, and celebrate the transitions between one phase of life and the next.

It may seem odd to think that adults have developmental issues. But while adolescence requires that we synthesize our childhood self with the new demands of puberty and future adulthood, adult development also requires synthesis of past and emerging identities. Even from the earliest years of adulthood, we move from one role to the next: student, career woman, wife, homemaker, full-time mother, volunteer, and possibly student or career woman again—frequently juggling multiple roles at the same time. We experience regular transitions: first full-time job, first time living on our own, serious relationships with significant others, marriage, and leaving the people and places of our youth. Our roles in relation to our parents may change from being the child to becoming a mutual friend, and then shifting to caretaker as we parent our aging parents. Adulthood also brings significant bodily transitions like pregnancy and menopause.

Each one of these transitions can be as intensely challenging as the difficult transition from junior high to high school. At our adult crossroads, we may feel unsure of ourselves because old beliefs and assumptions are being severely tested or rendered obsolete. We may choose any number of paths, reorganizing how we think, see the world, and live in relationships. These transitions can affect our personality and bring major shifts in social roles—what our family, the community, and the culture expect from us.

Indeed, we pass through many developmental changes while we take on more adult responsibility. Managing jobs, family, money, community, and other obligations leaves little time to pay attention to what is happening inside us, let alone to reflect on the impact of all these events and transitions.

Nevertheless, the impact remains. Essential questions stir inside as we move further away from our youth and closer to old age and, ultimately, death. In her book *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*,

Gail Sheehy describes the sensation of moving through the midpoint of our lives: "Deep down a change begins to register in those gut-level perceptions of safety and danger, time and no-time, aliveness and stagnation, self and others."

A sense of "deadline" springs from our ticking biological clock. If we are childless, we may feel a growing urgency to get pregnant. If we are already mothers, we may sense that a career path is closing down. If we juggle both home and career, the "what-about-me?" clock may sound its alarm. Because family nurturing still falls primarily to women, men are less likely to feel the same sort of crisis. Thus, our deadline concerns may put us out of sync with our partners, a problem in its own right.

Adult transitions do share one quality with childhood transitions: they don't usually happen with a flash or a snap of the fingers. It usually takes time to move from one developmental stage to another. Storyteller Lise Lunge-Larsen calls this threshold when you pass between phases of life "liminal" time. She says that fairy tales in most cultures view these in-between times as periods of simultaneous risk, opportunity, stress, and growth—openings for new, sometimes magical powers and insights to enter characters' lives, no matter what their age.

Fairy tales are stories that reflect important realities: for example, the reality that developmental transitions are times of potential, whether satisfying or upsetting. Such major changes in our relationships, how we think, or our place in the world are likely to turn our own world a bit topsy-turvy, just as they do for a fairy-tale protagonist. A new perspective may be valuable, but we sometimes lack the internal mechanisms or social support to easily meet these new challenges. When our sense of personal identity is shaken up, it places us at risk for anxiety, depression, and other unsettling feelings. Pile these challenges atop our experience of always having to recalibrate ourselves to the values of modern culture, with its evolving expectations for women, and it's no wonder women struggle to keep a cohesive sense of self.

Through it all, our search for identity persists and affects our relationships with ourselves and with our loved ones. But that process is clouded by the Body Myth. So, like Jennifer, we often use our body image as a way to play out our adult developmental anxieties and search for identity.

## Shaping Adult Development

The misconception that only teens have problems stemming from body image and eating disorders leaves adult sufferers overlooked by family, friends, and health care professionals. While a young anorexic draws ready attention and sympathy, eating disorders and body image despair are still heartbreaking and dangerous at any age.

Naomi, a New York public relations executive, is no teenager. She was forty-five when she began addictively using laxatives and compulsively dieting to control her weight. Soon, things spun out of control. Naomi had full-blown bulimia and carried just over a hundred pounds on her five-foot-nine-inch frame. She told the *New York Times*, "My whole life was shaped by this. I didn't want to take trips with people or visit my in-laws because they had only one bathroom. I couldn't control my husband's drinking, and I didn't feel as though I could control anything."

Naomi was looking for a way to control the profound challenges and changes facing her. Desperate to gain a hold on some part of her life, she turned to controlling her weight. Bingeing and purging became a pernicious, self-soothing strategy.

Eventually Naomi began to realize the risks of what she was doing. She became desperate to avoid a heart attack or other life-threatening illness. But it took six scary years of suffering before she finally sought therapy. She began to see how the natural stresses and losses of midlife conspired with our culture's notions of "beauty" to plummet her into the deadly cycle of eating disorders.

During life transitions a woman can often feel that her life is out of control. When everything feels ambiguous and looks uncertain, we seek something tangible to latch onto. We instinctively grasp for things that seem either stable or within our realm of control. The Body Myth tells us that our bodies will fit the bill.

We use our bodies to answer the difficult questions of womanhood like:

- What is feminine?
- What is adult?
- What kind of woman am I?
- Am I good enough?
- Who am I as a female in this culture and in this body?

- Am I living up to the standard I'm supposed to?
- What example of womanliness am I setting for my children?

Because our world is fast paced and driven by performance and image, we have few opportunities to explore such open-ended questions. Our liminal paths aren't always clear, the answers not always obvious, and the solutions not easy to grasp. But a woman's body is obvious and concrete. We know our body is here, no matter what else happens. And so, baffled or frustrated by life's hazy transitions, we often seize upon our body as the obvious and concrete thing to shape, force to behave, manipulate, and figure out. In a sense, we use (or misuse) our body's outside shape as a way to process or silence the feelings, doubts, indecision, and insecurity that adult development stirs within us.

Meanwhile, our culture consistently supports beliefs that value women for their bodies, and it sells the fairy tale that women can and should be in complete command of their bodies. So it is not unusual for us to judge the shape we're in by how well we "control" our bodies, especially when everything else (including, sometimes, our bodies themselves) feel out of control. We may feel uncertain about being up to life's tasks, but we believe that we can feel or look like we have control if we can just achieve the "right" body or appearance. That belief is mistaken.



### *Step Back Exercise*

Do this alone, with a friend or in a small group of women you trust. Take time to talk about your feelings and insights afterward.

Stand comfortably, preferably without shoes so you can feel the ground or floor, with enough space around you so that you can move backward and forward several feet. Close your eyes and relax. Take one step back and imagine that you are stepping into your mother's body. Take a few minutes to get used to being in her body and mind.

Take another step backward and step into the body of your mother's mother. Again take time to get used to being in your grandmother's life and in her body. As your grandmother, ask yourself these questions:

What are my major concerns or worries in life?

What are my primary sources of satisfaction? Of comfort?

What is my position in my society: what are its limitations, opportunities, privileges, responsibilities?

How do I feel about my body? How important is it to my sense of self?

What are my worries about my health? About my body?

What pressures do I feel to prove myself?

Do I feel I must be Superwoman to survive or succeed?

What do I feel I must be to survive or succeed?

Take a few minutes to absorb these insights and then step forward to being your mother. Ask yourself the same questions. Again take some time to absorb this experience, then step forward to being yourself and ask the same questions once more.

What are the common threads in these experiences? What are the differences? How did concerns about body or beauty evolve throughout these generations? What do you feel about this experience? In what ways do you feel connected to the past? In what ways do you feel alone, disconnected, like an emotional and cultural immigrant? What surprised you as you traversed these bodies and generations?

Talk about your feelings and insights with friends. Take some time to write these perceptions down in a journal so you can reflect on them over time.

