

# 3

## “Oh God, Why Am I So Unattractive?”

### Understanding the Body as Spiritual Temple, Not Grotesque Obstacle

*Current weight: not telling. Number of Vosges chocolate units consumed while writing this chapter: 6 (v. yummy). Number of calories consumed in approximately 5 minutes: thousands (but do not count as necessary for inspiration). Number of protein units in each chocolate: 1 (excellent as am practically keeping to Atkins-like diet if not counting the sugar).*

### Jailtime and Liquid Chocolate as Alternative Dieting Methods

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Like many of her female contemporaries (dare I say most, myself included), Bridget is weight-obsessed. She relentlessly counts every calorie, measures her thighs, and attempts to sweat off alcohol units and Cadbury Milktray in desperate excursions to the gym. She is convinced she would be more lovable, successful, fashionable, and sexy if she could just conform her body to a size that would allow her to fit into jeans meant for a twelve-year-old girl or, better yet, something

by Marc Jacobs recently seen traveling down the runway. Thinking about Bridget in terms of body and beauty can't help but evoke images from the movie. Some of my favorites include the following: Bridget in a bunny outfit at the Tarts-and-Vicars party (which turns out to be short on Tarts and Vicars); Bridget pulling on gigantic, grandma underwear for a date with boss Daniel; Bridget running through the snow-covered London streets in a jacket and panties to find Mark Darcy. Overall with regard to Bridget's battle with her body, at the end of her first diary we learn she has lost a total of seventy-two pounds (excellent!), but then we are told that over the entire year she actually gained seventy-four (oh well—can't have everything). Bridget simply does not have the luxury of living in a Victorian-attired society in manner of Elizabeth Bennett, whose bottom remained largely hidden in flattering, empire-waist gowns that instead enhanced an ample bosom.

One of the most memorable scenes in Bridget's diaries (regarding the ever-fluctuating state of her arse) is when she makes it down to 119 pounds (hurrah!), shimmies herself into a sexy black dress, and proudly and slimly arrives at the party of her friend Jude. Bridget is ready to show off her new-and-improved bodily state yet is quickly met with a series of dismaying questions upon her arrival. "God, are you all right?" asks Jude immediately, when she sees Bridget at the door. After Bridget explains she has lost seven pounds, Jude, while staring at Bridget's "deflated cleavage," comments that "Maybe you've lost it a bit quickly off your . . . face" (which we know is code for "You've lost it all in your boobs"). Over the re-

maining evening, Bridget is told that she looks, among other things, drawn, tired, and flat, and she even receives a concerned, post-party phone call from Tom claiming that she looked better before. Thus Bridget's "historic and joyous day" turns into a realization that after "eighteen years of struggle, sacrifice, and endeavor," her "life's work has been a total mistake" (especially since intentions were to slim thighs not boobs). And, alas, Ms. Jones didn't learn from her prior experience, since after landing herself in a Bangkok prison (on a Thai vacation with Shazzer, no less), she rationalizes a potentially tragic jail experience into an excellent pound-losing, thigh-reducing affair.

Similar to Bridget's positive rationalization of her stint in a Thai prison, I will confess here to uttering my own secret, joyous "hurrahs!" in response to a rather unfortunate fall I had not long ago. I was left with both jaw and mouth injured in such a way that I could only consume liquids (mainly large vats of liquid chocolate) and very tiny chopped-up pieces of sashimi for approximately three months. But rather than grieve this unfortunate situation, I instead saw it as an opportunity for bodily purification in manner of self-disciplined slimming regimen! I watched (v. silently) as pounds disappeared while I sipped my miracle, exercise-free, anti-Atkins diet of chocolate soup and started fitting myself into fashionably sexy low-rider jeans, like Britney Spears (at least from waist down). A complete inability to smile or move my lips was a minor inconvenience, as it enhanced my self-image as a supermodel-like figure walking down a catwalk in a sexy pout. And, of course, at the pinnacle of my waif-like bodily state, I received

many Jude- and Tom-like comments from friends registering their concern at how “thin I had become since the accident.” Translation: “Wow, you look horrible, and your face is hollow in addition to being immobilized by injury” (life’s work all a waste).

## Bodily Obsession: Transformative or Tragic?

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After acquiring an array of knowledge regarding the beauty myth, à la Naomi Wolf, and the problematic influence of magazines like *Vogue* and *Elle* on a woman’s body image, my warning bells are set to go off at the weight-induced obsessions of Bridget and my own tendency to rationalize negative situations as slimming opportunities. The beauty myth advises us that Bridget-style calorie counting, despair over poundage gain, as well as the understanding of weight loss as our life’s work, is tragic in nature. Like many women today, we grow up well aware of how cultural expectations, religious institutions, and the fashion industry (almost always orchestrated by the male species) shape our mind-set regarding our bodies, beauty, and what we wear. I know enough to cringe at cultural trends like *Rolling Stone*’s recent parade of mostly naked female pop stars on its covers, most memorably (I think, anyway) the October 2, 2003, issue with Britney baring it all from the waist up, pressed against a wall (v. porno). But I am also honest enough to get the humor in Bridget’s journaling about her weight, since though I know when to cringe, I also know the realities regarding our bodies with which most of us still struggle (and when seen through Bridget are really

quite funny, which is liberating in and of itself). No matter what we read about women's body and beauty images, it's difficult to shake our desire to fulfill them (though not necessarily in manner of naked appearance on magazine cover), and Bridget's obsessive calorie counting makes us laugh because so many of us obsess as much as she does.

On the topic of body image, in addition to Bridget's well-chronicled, detailed struggles with weight, thigh circumference, and daily calorie intake, Cannie Shapiro, from Jennifer Weiner's *Good in Bed*, is also a kindred spirit. And a complex one. When her ex-boyfriend very publicly announces that he considers her a "larger woman," Cannie retains a sense of humor about her body, but she is unable to maintain Bridget's optimism in her struggles with weight. Cannie endeavors to take off the pounds. Although she can laugh about her situation, the damage that being overweight causes to her self-image and self-esteem is clear and painful to experience as a reader. While Bridget keeps us laughing in a way that helps us look at our own bodily struggles with great humor, Cannie elicits both laughter and tears as we empathize with her own ups and downs, triumphs and frustrations, seeing how body image can weigh us down in an emotionally scarring way.



*Why are we, like Bridget and Cannie, always trying to climb out of our own skins? . . . Will we ever learn to fully love the bodies that we are? And what does it mean on a spiritual level if we cannot?*

There is no doubt that Bridget's and Cannie's inner struggles with their bodies, though unique in their own way, are central issues (and potentially obstacles) in their march toward Inner Poise. This also makes the body one of the best places to explore their characters as contemporary goddess figures; it's difficult for a woman to tell her story without reference to her experience of the body. Chick heroines' obsessions with their bodies have been decried by many in the media as sad and tragic, especially if we consider them an accurate representation of our bodily self-image. Well, we fans of Bridget know that part of why we love her is that we *do* relate and she lightens us up on the subject. Simply calling her and others sad and tragic on this particular issue misses the significance of their struggles for our purpose here.

As we think about spirituality, we need to consider the roles that body image and beauty play for us, in terms of our spiritual identity and how we think about the divine. The fact that Bridget and Cannie so honestly and humorously confess what so many of us think not only endears them to us but helps us ask some important questions. Why are we, like Bridget and Cannie, always trying to climb out of our own skins? Why are we never satisfied with what we are born with, even if we come into the world looking like the goddess-figure her boss Daniel is shagging behind Bridget's back? What is it about our willingness to endure plucking, shaving, painting, and fasting—all in the name of fashion and our drive to be beautiful and thin? Can we find the divine somewhere lurking among all of this primping and obsessing? Will we ever learn to fully love the bodies that we are? And what does it mean on a spiritual level if we cannot?

## We Are But Mere Vessels (endlessly hungry ones, it seems)

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Women's concerns about calories, bra size, fashion sense, and thigh circumference go far deeper in history than our current exposure to wafer-thin models in magazines and, in fact, can be found rooted in religious history (bet you never thought you'd read "bra size" and "religious history" in the same sentence, but there they are). As women, we have the misfortune of inheriting a history where our bodies have traditionally and literally been seen as the property of men. In addition, a woman's capacity for reproduction (the biology-is-destiny idea) has historically determined her spiritual value (or her being devalued) in Western religion. In Christianity and Judaism, following Eve's apple-eating antics, both Adam and Eve learned to be ashamed of bodily nakedness, and Eve's punishment was to become the vessel to Adam's children, in utter pain and by command of God. Though a woman's body as a vessel for children *is* esteemed in religion, a woman's bodily capacity for childbearing has led to her association with death, since giving birth is also coupled with God's ejection of humanity from paradise and our loss of immortality (v. bizarre and unfortunate).

The traditional male-female spiritual hierarchy is as follows: women's bodies are regarded as passive in bodily development, sex, and reproduction. We can *see* a woman's body change in her development of curves, as if her body announces itself to the world. These changes *happen* to her in full view of everyone, whereas a man's bodily changes,

lucky for him, remain hidden. (In other words, boobs just grow whether we like it or not.) In sex, the man is the “active” party, and the woman (supposedly) lies passively while the man “plants his seed.” Then following sex we “get” pregnant, and our bodies are tied down for upwards of a couple of years if breastfeeding, emphasizing our weak bodily state. The Catholic Church goes so far as to forbid women to take precautions against getting pregnant, since they have to remain subject to “natural biological reproductive processes,” as prescribed by God through scripture. This ultra-positive (am being sarcastic) view of women’s bodies, of course, was written into existence by all the men in charge of things in history (including the medieval philosopher-theologian Thomas Aquinas, who is famous for some shockingly negative commentary about women as “misbegotten males” that has unfortunately influenced Christian understanding over the centuries).

All of the above have had a tremendous impact, not only on women’s body images today but also in how we understand (or disassociate from) our bodies in relation to our spiritual identity and whether or not we are able to imagine the female body as divine. While for millennia we have been tied up with baby-making, men have not only gone out and ruled the world, laying the foundations for society and culture, but they have restricted images of God to masculine language, the male body, and male ideals of absolute power and perfection. Men see themselves as the *active* sex: the participants in public life, the keepers of the earth, the planters of the seed (both earthly and otherwise). Most important with regard to spirituality, men are quicker to purify their souls be-



cause they are *less* tied to earthly, bodily functions. They do not menstruate, give birth, or lactate for that matter, freeing them up to focus on intellectual or divine matters. The goal of the well-lived religious life has usually involved *triumph* over the body, and for thousands of years men have seen themselves as having bodies more adept at this battle. As a result, men have also traditionally regarded themselves as more spiritual or better suited to represent God (v. convenient as they've held all the power to determine these things), while concluding that women are more earthy in their bodily capacities and thus not worthy enough for this honor. Under patriarchy, this has led *both men and women* to support the notion that the male body and masculine language are most fitting to represent the divine, leading to what feminist theologian Sandra Schneiders describes as "a paralysis of the religious imagination" in how we talk about and picture the divine.

If we are to begin imagining the female body, be that the body of a Bridget Jones, a Cannie Shapiro, or ourselves as the body of a contemporary goddess, then we are going to have to do some chucking in the God-image department. Together with Bridget, and by drawing from some of the many women today who are re-imagining the divine, we can work toward letting go of this traditional God-image (v. cathartic in manner of enjoying martini as way of releasing stress post-workday). In order for us to find the goddess in Bridget and, ultimately, the goddess in ourselves, we need to think of the divine in terms of *becoming* (not only being), of *desiring* (not empty of desire), of *evolving*, as we, too, evolve as persons throughout the journeys of our lives. This will take

an act of daring imagination on our part (as urged by Dr. Schneiders), not to mention possibly offending the male monopoly on how we are *supposed* to think and talk about God.

## Breaking Up with God Is Hard to Do (but v. therapeutic)

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### Step Number One: Think of Him and Then Try to Forget Him

The first thing we need to do as we try and locate the Girlie Feminine Divine is wipe away that image of Father God as old-man-wizard-Gandalf-in-the-sky. I am guessing here that if I asked you to picture God in your heads, something like this kind of image immediately pops up. (Personally, now having seen *Lord of the Rings*, this is how I picture the God I grew up with: old man, long white beard, very tall, sitting on cloud—however, not galloping on horse). This Man-God usually comes with the following qualities: all-powerful, omniscient, forgiving-yet-punishing, distant, and, ultimately, *immutable*. (Or, as I like to call Him, *stagnant*. Totally inhuman. Far away. *Boring*.) OK, so get ready to chuck this Man (at least for now).

### Step Number Two: Use Male-Designed Tradition for Womanly Liberating Purposes

While we are traditionally taught to personify Allah, YHWH, and the Trinitarian God of Christianity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) as Male in manner of Gandalf, these traditions also teach

that our personification of God is *always* metaphorical. In other words, using the human to image God can never capture God fully. This is because, while humans are fallible, imperfect, immortal creatures, God is unchanging and perfect and totally transcends (exists apart from) the world. (Isn't it funny, though, how in our religious upbringing, somehow the metaphorical part of the whole "Father God" thing was conveniently left out, leaving us to think that God is *really* a man? Hmmm.) On the one hand we learn to divorce spirituality from the human body:

God is ethereal, disembodied, a force around us, rather than something that we can touch, as the human body could never accurately represent the divine. (All v. unfortunate if you're hoping that the spiritual life and touching Mr. Darcy have something in com-

mon.) But at the same time we also learn to associate the *male body* as the most appropriate image to represent God (so perhaps touching Mr. Darcy is much like touching God, Himself, which I suppose is an improvement).

Yet viewing God as transcendent in nature has also become a blessing in disguise within certain circles of women. For many feminist theologians, both Christian and Jewish, the emphasis on historical images of God as *always* metaphorical has led them to ask, "If our language and images of God are



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*truly* metaphorical, then why not personify God as a woman?" (Hurrah! V. sneaky, these women.) Scholar Rita Gross claims that the feminine personification of YHWH in the Jewish tradition is actually a *mitzvah*, or obligation, for the Jewish people. Doing so reunites the feminine aspects of the divine that have *always* been a part of Judaism but hidden behind the masculine God that is consistently, publicly celebrated. Other scholars have imaged God as Mother, as birth-giver to creation, as Wisdom-Sophia, as caregiver to humanity, and even going so far as to imagine Jesus in feminine terms within Christianity.

### Step Number Three: Take Things Even Further (which is why we are at step three)

Building on the idea that all language and images about God are metaphorical—the metaphor being used to introduce a woman's body and feminine language as a legitimate way to imagine the divine—has been quite transformative for many women (scholars at least). But much of this work still supports an idea of God that is unchangeable, perfect, and transcendent—a faraway divine that conforms to the patriarchal ideas that have dominated for thousands of years. If we are going to re-imagine the divine in women like Bridget, who is definitely not operating outside this world, then using feminine language and images to think about the divine hovering (in manner of hover-craft) somewhere far away isn't going to suffice. Lucky for us, there are lots of other women scholars of religion (Carol Christ, Grace Jantzen, and Dorothee Soelle, to name three) who have argued that what we

need is a god or goddess who *changes*, who needs, who relates to us—a vulnerable divine, *not* a god who is distant, unfeeling, and disembodied. As humanity is vulnerable, evolving, loving, and needing to receive love as embodied creatures, so we need to imagine a divine who encompasses these experiences and evolves with us. Seeking a feminine-divine-in-process has led Carol Christ, for example, to write urgently and prolifically that women *need* a goddess—one that helps us love our bodies *as* divine, seeing our bodily processes, changes, struggles, and pleasures as representative of the goddess in all of us.

#### Step Number Four: Let Go of Him!

If we are going to look at bodies like those of Cannie and Bridget (and our own) as appropriate models for the divine, then we have to let go of this perfected-God image that we've inherited. These women are not perfect, and neither are we. Letting go of God as "out there," up in the sky, all-knowing, and unchanging is difficult in many respects, because the psychology of this image for many of us is powerful and deep. Most of us automatically think of absolute knowledge and perfection when we hear the word *god* or talk of the divine. But as we pursue Inner Poise, our capacity to see (or not see) the divine expressed in the female body, regardless of its shape, size, appearance (and choice of shoes), depends on our ability to *get past* this past (and unburdening ourselves of this image will make us feel lighter in manner of miracle weight-loss yet without having to change eating habits which is v.v.g.).

## A Goddess Who Counts Calories, Plucks Her Eyebrows, and Paints Her Toenails

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In the movie version of *Bridget Jones's Diary* we literally see Bridget go from dowdy-and-down to desirable-and-daring, unafraid to show her full-bodied self in all of its glory (and poundage). She is certainly not a vision of tragedy or sadness but instead alive with humor and self-awareness. We see the same transformation happen in *Cannie Shapiro* when, after she slims herself down to the point where people regard her as skinny, she realizes that in a skinny body she no longer feels like herself. What's *healthy* on a spiritual level about these women's journeys in relation to their bodies, despite their ups and downs, is that we can't separate our images of Bridget and Cannie from their bodies. Nor should we try (or perhaps they would become ghosts?). With regard to Bridget in particular, whether it is through relentless calorie counting, exclaiming "hurrah!" joyously when she loses a pound or two, or accidentally revealing her backside to all of London, Bridget's sense of self is inextricably tied to her experience of being embodied as a woman. The body, for Bridget, is alternately a source of pain and joy, an object of beauty and despair—something she wishes in one moment to hide and at another to reveal in a glorious, mind-boggling shag. Without our bodies to help us, we would be lost in our endeavors to imagine the divine, and it is about time for us to see women's bodies as worthy of representing the divine (in all our beauty, style, and, alternately, frustration).

Inner Poise is not about achieving "perfection," whatever that means (perhaps should ask male for appropriate definition?). Nor does it require us to relinquish our calorie counting or the desire to achieve a particular standard of beauty. Seeing ourselves as goddesses need not require us to stop shaving our legs, changing our look, or engaging in our morning beauty regimens in order to perpetuate the idea that seeing the divine in ourselves means we must *already* be perfect (and because as we all know that shaving legs is rather essential for optimum short-skirt wearing). There is no *one* ideal for all women's bodies nor *one* definition of what it means to be beautiful. All women are different; no woman is perfect, and, inevitably, how we envision what our bodies could be and should be will change over the course of our lifetime. We have different skin colors, body shapes, fashion senses, and relationships to our bodies. Some of us are more comfortable with a more naturalistic style of body and beauty, and some of us take joy in plucking, primping, and stylizing our looks for hours at a time. A woman is no less a goddess if she counts her calories, paints her toenails, and dresses in a way that celebrates her curves than someone who does not. Thus creating a *single* divine image, already formed, already perfected for us to aspire to ceases to make sense in the face of our diversity.

The spiritual life is often about self-transformation, about being reborn again and again; for women, the body can be a source of transformation and rebirth on many levels. We transform the body through exercise and reinvent our appearance with what we wear from one day to the next. Becoming

a Goddess of Inner Poise involves our capacity to imagine ourselves as different, as transformed, as reborn, as beautiful—and as vulnerable and imperfect as well. A Goddess of Inner Poise can be emotional about her body, despairing when she does not live up to her expectations but also exclaiming in utter joy and self-praise (in manner of praising our Inner Divine) when she triumphs. As women, we care about our bodies, care about beauty, and often use fashion to express who we are in the moment, transforming ourselves from one image to another by putting on an outfit, much as if we are putting on a new self. Like our heroine Bridget, the key to Inner Poise is to take the plunge into self-reflection to figure out how we experience our own bodies. It involves remaining good-humored and aware of our struggles, hoping to *eventually* love our bodies as they are (mostly) but also celebrating our capacity, like Bridget, to reincarnate ourselves through our bodies and relish the Girlie Feminine Divine in all of us.