

In my work on eating disorders, I come with multiple perspectives. I run a nonprofit that trains young people to do eating disorder prevention work in their own schools. I am a psychotherapist who works mainly with eating disorders in my practice. Those are my professional roles.

But those are not the places I'm speaking from today.

Today, I'm speaking from my personal experience.

My earliest memory of hating my body was one particular Thanksgiving at my grandmother's house. I was in the fifth grade, and after dinner I was looking out of the big picture window and thinking about the carving knife that I had become enchanted with. It was the first time we had an electric one. How effortless it was – just turn it on, and watch how the buzzing blade easily sliced off pieces of the turkey. I looked down at my stomach, gathered it up into my young hands, and said "I wish I could cut this off the way we cut the turkey."

Looking back, I realize what a perfect moment that might have been for an intervention. If I'd had an adult in my life who could have heard me, sat down and helped me gently unpack the feelings about myself I wasn't even aware of, it might have changed the trajectory of my life. Instead, my aunts, mother and grandmother who were sitting around me looked at each other and chuckled saying "Me too! Wouldn't that be great!?" and "I'd like to do that to my upper arms!" The conversation continued, with each person imagining how much better her life would be without certain pieces of herself. Both my sister and I were listening.

My sister and I were both "overweight" kids, in a family (and culture) obsessed with dieting and being thin. We were teased and dealt with that in different ways. I turned *to* food, Kelley turned *away* from it.

Kelley started down the path of an eating disorder when she was 12. It started, as it often does, with a diet. And with weight loss that gets complimented. Kelley's illness crossed the diagnostic categories often, but for most of her life, she suffered from anorexia, purging type. Over the course of her illness, she was in and out of treatment centers and hospitals, and was extremely ambivalent about recovery. Often, she would sign herself out of a treatment center and take a cab home. She was terrified that recovery would equal being fat again. While genetic and biological underpinnings for eating disorders are clear, I would also point out here that the terror of being fat is also a direct result of the ways we culturally privilege thinness and discriminate against fatness. This is something that simply has to change.

After struggling for 25 years, her battle ended and she lost her life in March of 2005.

My sister was sick for so long that we felt we had already lost her years before she actually died. When she died I felt compassion for her. I was relieved that she no longer had to struggle and suffer.

Three months before she died, she wrote me a letter saying: “I cannot even begin to recall all of the damage that I have put my body through. I have been in more hospital emergency rooms than at home on my own. Dr. McConnell says my body is about ready to shut down. I am not ready to die – I want to live so badly. I feel so terrified that I have taken things too far. How much longer can my body stand this? What if I have pushed things too far? Why didn’t I listen to the many doctors, nurses, psychologists and my family who all have tried so hard to help wake me up? Instead, I just got all wrapped up in my special little eating disorder world, and I pushed everyone else out of my way. All I cared about was being the skinniest, smallest girl in the world.”

The Hospice nurse said she was humming “Annie’s song” as she crossed over into death. The eating disorder blunted her life and her physical capacity was so diminished that she was in a wheelchair, and was too weak to travel or do many things. Some of her ashes were sprinkled in the Caribbean ocean, so she would at least have the chance to experience part of the world she didn’t get the chance to see.

Immediately after her service, a funeral where a 38-year-old woman who was our daughter, granddaughter, niece, and sister died from anorexia, we went directly across the street to lunch. We sat down; my grandmother opened the menu and said, “I wonder how many calories are in cashew chicken”.

Really the only thing remarkable about that is the context, because we all know these comments happen all the time. This is not to place blame on my family, of course that’s not the case. But it does highlight the ways in which the conversations we have, the language we use, can support an eating disordered way of thinking if we’re not careful. It also points to the ways that what we call “disordered” in one instance, is encouraged in others. In other words, calorie counting is seen as part of the illness in someone with an eating disorder, but prescribed and applauded for someone who is “overweight”. It also underscores the way that people are misinformed about eating disorders. More information for families, doctors, coaches, and teachers would have a necessary impact. This is one of the important aspects of the FREED Act.

When I was in the 6th grade, I wanted *other* people’s bodies. I wanted the kind of body that was tall, with narrow hips. The kind where, when you put on a pair of jeans, you could see your belly button. Of course, what I really wanted was all the stuff I believed that having that body would give me: confidence, popularity, safety, and ease.

But my body was the exact opposite of that. I was short-waisted, with wide hips. I remember the day I realized that regardless of how much weight I could lose, I would never have the kind of body I thought I wanted. It came down to two choices:

continue to try to make my body be something it could never be, or take care of the body I had.

I'd like to say it was an easy choice but the choice between self-hatred and self-love is not always an easy one to make. It took me quite awhile to choose love.

It started out for me with binge-eating disorder. I had played around with dieting but it was when I moved away to college that things unraveled. I was a music performance major, with a promising potential career as a professional musician. But I also had extreme performance anxiety, which was a real problem for me. To deal with the stress, I used food. I would walk up and down the main college street and stop in *every single restaurant* there was for food. When I was 20, my weight reached its highest point and I was miserable. I knew I needed help. I went to the counseling center, rode the elevator up to the floor, watched the doors open in front of me....watched the doors close in front of me and took it right back down. I just couldn't do it. The words of so many people came drifting back to me: *You need to lose weight. You could be so pretty, if only you lost weight.* I didn't want to live my life being unhappy with my body, so I decided to get serious about being on a diet.

Instead of being more excited about the promise of a career, I was now more excited about the promise that every diet brings and a renewed sense of hope and determination. Just making the decision brings relief, as I imagined how much better I was going to feel, how much better my life would be, from a smaller size.

You all know what happens next, it mirrors my sister's experience. I lost weight. I got complimented. I wanted to keep going. My body didn't. I got desperate. The slide into bulimia wasn't planned, but it was easy. The details aren't important to name, or useful. What does feel important to name is the way my *life* got smaller. Food and my weight were all I could think about. Mostly, I cared more about my weight than I did my dreams. The eating disorder was taking away my dreams. I saw it happening, and wasn't ok with me.

I bottomed out quickly, and was lucky to have a therapist who knew that she wasn't trained enough in working with eating disorders to best serve me and recommended an inpatient treatment program. Because the things I was doing at that point were life-threatening, I was put in a hospital until room opened up at the treatment center. In 1987, I went to the intensive treatment program for bulimia at the University of Cincinnati and stayed for a month. Quite simply, it saved my life. But it also gave me an experience of working with therapists who were all shapes and sizes. I thought that I needed to be thin to be powerful, successful, and beautiful. But my therapist there was **not** thin, **and** she was powerful, successful and beautiful. The old paradigm shattered in my head, and then I got angry. Angry about the ways I was told that my body was not acceptable. Got angry about all the lost time and lost energy I had misdirected. Got angry about the fact that my sister died without me getting the chance to know who she would have been. And when I thought about all

the women and men on the planet whose dreams and passions get subverted and pushed aside in the pursuit of thinness, my life direction changed.

That was 25 years ago. Since then, I stopped letting someone else decide what body I should live in. I have become a therapist, started a nonprofit, and engaged in activism and advocacy on many levels. Mostly, I work to create a world where one body size is not privileged over any other. And I've learned how to harness the power of my anger. For me, anger was a very important tool in my recovery. Anger is empowering, it's motivating, it declares a boundary, it communicates "hey, something not good is going on here", or "something needs to stop." And believe me, something DOES need to stop. Eating disorders need to stop. Assumptions made about people based on their body size need to stop. Body hatred, in all its forms, need to stop.

Author and teacher Angeles Arrien asks us to pay attention to what has heart and meaning. What has heart and meaning is not reaching a number on the scale or getting into a certain size. What has heart and meaning is making the daily decisions that lead me towards living in partnership with my body. What has heart and meaning is the freedom that allows me to enjoy both the crunchy sugar snap peas from the Farmer's Market and the creamy pumpkin cheesecake when it is in season. What has heart and meaning is taking care of my body, *this body*, which allows me to be on the planet. What has heart and meaning is learning to recognize and pay attention to the signals my body gives me: the rumble deep in my belly that tells me I'm hungry, the rush of blood to my face that tells me I'm angry, the way my head tilts to the right and down that tells me I'm insecure, the way, as my second cousin says, it feels like fireworks in my heart when I am happy.

We know what happens when someone don't get the treatment they need. People live less-than-full lives. People die. Dreams vanish. I can unequivocally say that I know that full recovery is possible, and I want to remind us what can happen when people DO get the treatment they need. I am only one example. This room has many amazing people in it, whose contribution to the world is profound. Imagine what it would be like for everyone to have the ability to pursue what has heart and meaning for them. Imagine all the creativity, vibrancy, passion, intuition, and action that can get poured back into the world. We need this. We need more people with fireworks in their hearts. We NEED the FREED Act to pass.