

"Turning the mirror inward..." by Patricia `

The realization that I am just one of millions of Americans challenged with being overweight does not intimidate me. In fact, it motivates me! You see, just one month ago, I shed the label of being "obese" by having exceeded a total weight loss of 163 lbs. following successful weight-loss surgery in January 2005. At 344 lbs. propelling me through life, I am now compelled by my life and enjoying every minute of this journey.

Like so many of you, I have spent my lifetime struggling in a physical package that competed with my life goals and dreams. As an overweight child, I enjoyed playing sports, including softball and volleyball, but had to work twice as hard to gain the physical endurance to play well and compete with the other kids. I was always picked last because what the other kids saw was the chubby girl not the hard-working, competitive athlete. The pain of being socially excluded always loomed and ultimately was insulated by the layers of fat that I began to accumulate. This vicious cycle propelled me into adulthood and presented even bigger challenges.

As I entered college, weighing in at 220 lbs, I was determined to become a registered nurse. I knew the childhood experience of having lost my father to heart disease when I was eight years old played into this decision along with a strong desire to help people since I seemingly couldn't help myself out of the depths of my own weight issues. As I reflect upon this now, I realize that I was merely deflecting my own failure in managing my weight into the positive of helping others with their own health challenges. The mirror is a powerful thing. I chose at that moment to turn it outward and stop looking inward.

My successful nursing career is colored with the many lives that I have been fortunate to touch and hopefully, made an impact on. As a critical care nurse, I was often faced with patients experiencing traumatic health issues and was extremely gratified to be able to help them in whatever way their circumstances dictated. I excelled in my bedside career and for the first time in my life, I wasn't first looked at as the "fat person" but rather as a "nurse". This new label felt good.

It wasn't long, though, before my desire to help others took me down a path of health and wellness. After having had such gratifying experiences working directly with patients, I soon realized that I needed to impact lives on a broader scale. I sought out professional opportunities that allowed me to create and deliver programs that would



help people manage their chronic diseases such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease, while living healthier. It was at this time that I realized my weight was taking me down the road to being one of my own patients.

As I turned 39 years old, I was struck by how my weight was impacting normal, everyday activities. Having given up playing softball and volleyball years earlier because of the physical demands, things like riding my bike, walking through an airport and climbing a flight of stairs had now become a challenge. The realization that I was approaching the age at which my father's heart disease had taken his life, I knew that I had to take a more permanent step to control my weight beyond the numerous dieting attempts I had made over the years. The question became, was I ready to turn the mirror around and take a hard look at myself?

I can't point to one specific moment where I became ready to look at myself and actually do something significant about my obesity. For several years, I was aware of the advances being made in the area of weight loss surgery but never considered this an option for me as it seemed so drastic. For two years, I spent numerous appointments with my primary care physician discussing my weight and trying different solutions. Discussions about the efficacy and safety of weight loss surgery always ended with my physician feeling that this was not a solution for me. For some reason, though, the more I researched, the more I began to believe that this was exactly what I needed to pursue. In the fall of 2004, having garnered support from family and friends, I went into my physician's office armed with all of my research and validation for why this was the solution for me. Fortuitously, my physician had just completed a week-long training program in how to care for patients following weight-loss surgery. Her newly gained knowledge, coupled with my research, led us to agreement that I should proceed with having the procedure.

For those of you who have had the procedure or are actively pursuing it, you know how the next chapter of my story reads. Insurance qualification, a multitude of pre-surgical testing and preparation, post-surgical recovery and the astounding weight loss are now merely steps on the road to where I am today. There have been many lessons learned along this road but I want to share one of the most important ones here with you. Weight-loss surgery is less about anatomically changing one's digestive system and more about making life-long, sustainable, lifestyle changes. Please reread that last sentence. If you are not committed to making the lifestyle changes to support the new you, being successful long-term will forever be a challenge. Not a day goes by now where I don't pay attention to what I put in my mouth, and why, as well as making sure my activity level supports the needs of my new body. I am now compelled by my new label of "overweight" and rise to the challenge of looking in the mirror each and every day and realizing that I have the power to be successful.

As I look in the mirror, I finally see the physical me that reflects what's always been inside.