Why Do We Hate Ourselves?

A look at body image, self-esteem, and how society damages them both.

By Billie Ann Wolf

How many times a day do you decide to hate yourself? How many days go by that you can't stand the sight of your reflection in the mirror? Even though a lot of us don't actually voice this self-hatred, most of us have these negative thoughts far too often. Some of us hate our bodies. Some of us hate our hair. Some of us even hate our gender. This self-hate is only deepened by the images and expectations bombarding us in today's society. How can we possibly learn to love ourselves, so that we may love the rest of this amazing, beautiful world? I don't have the answers, but let me tell you my story. A story about a girl who's angst and hatred of her body has hindered her in love, life, and spirituality.

My name is Billie. I am a 30 year old wife and mother. I am on my second marriage and have three perfect children. Okay, some of you know that last part is a stretch. *cough* Winston *cough*. These are all things that describe me, but none of these are the first thing that comes to mind when I think about myself. No. These will always take a back seat to, "Hi my name is Billie and I'm the fat girl."

I have been overweight since I was 8 years old. I don't blame my parents, no matter how much my shrink may give me the opportunity, but I am fully aware that my adult obesity stems from the horrible eating habits and insecurities of my childhood. Before the age of 8, I was an active kid. I loved to play softball, race down the street with my friends, and I was even in gymnastics. Eventually though, I became yet another victim of Nintendo, fried foods, and, my Achilles Heel, sweets.

At the age of 7, I was hospitalized for stomach issues. After numerous medical tests, my pediatrician diagnosed me with "clinical depression and stress". I sat through my first therapy session at the age of 8. By the time I was in 4th grade, I was THE fat kid in class. Once I entered Junior High, I was officially obese. I was lucky to only have a few incidents with bullying, but regardless of how infrequent, they still left one hell of an impact on my self-esteem. I began taking anti-depressants at age 15, and eventually I convinced my parents that I no longer needed therapy. This was the catalyst for a

series of self-destructive behaviors. I started going to parties with college kids while my parents thought I was sleeping over at a friend's house. I experimented with drugs, alcohol, and sex. I was constantly fighting with my parents. My grades were slipping for the first time in my life, despite the fact that I had always been an honor student. My interest in "normal" teenage activities was replaced with a fascination in everything that my family wasn't…dark, mysterious, and unconventional. I was obsessed with new age spirituality, but constantly felt like I was disconnected with my own soul. I became the epitome of the weird goth kid, complete with fishnets, dog collars, and combat boots. I wanted to do everything in my power to be unattractive. Looking back, I can now see that this was an attempt to avoid being held up to the standards of "normal" people. I knew that I would never look like my gorgeous cheerleader friends. I knew I'd never get asked out by the cute boy that stood behind me in choir. I was Billie Ann Howard. ..The funny, weird, chubby girl. I was lucky to have lots of friends, but just like most teenage girls, I longed for someone to tell me that I was beautiful.

My depression became unbearable. I had frequent suicidal thoughts. I began cutting myself in unnoticeable places. I would carve words like "freak" "unworthy" and "whore" into my chubby midsection. I was a lost soul because I ate too much, and this, in turn, would only drive me to eat more. I would come home from school or drama practice and eat an entire box of Little Debbie snack cakes just to feel SOMETHING, but this faux euphoria quickly faded, and I was left feeling spiritually empty, not to mention nauseous.

Flash forward a few years, I graduated high school in the dead center of my class and opted to marry the first guy who told me that he loved me, instead of going to college. One week after our wedding, I found out I was pregnant. I was 18, living on my own with a new little life growing inside of me. I took myself off of my anti-depressants and began eating more. I used the excuse of pregnancy cravings to eat an entire large pizza plus appetizers in one sitting. When I had to be put on bed rest due to complications, the calories had nowhere to go. I gained over 100 lbs. in that pregnancy. When I delivered my first child, I was a 19 year old kid…who happened to weigh a heartbreaking 318 lbs.

I continued struggling with my morbid obesity through a few very rough years, which included the death of my father and a messy divorce…All the more reason to find happiness at the bottom of pint of ice cream, right? As a single mother, I began

slipping even further into my insecurities. Whenever my son was at his father's, I would binge drink and party constantly…Anything to make the pain go away for a night.

Years passed. I met an amazing man, added on a couple more kids; a couple dozen more pounds, and began living a life that I never thought possible. I had become a stay at home mother in the 'burbs. I had what so many other women wanted, yet I was still miserable. Trapped in the dark black abyss that was my mind, I could frequently be found in fetal position on the couch for hours every day.

After having a few panic attacks and mental breakdowns, I decided that I should start going to therapy again. This was the best decision I could have ever made for myself and my children. I was lucky enough to find a psychologist who really "got" me. I was immediately diagnosed with, not only clinical depression, but also Borderline Personality Disorder. He and I have done some really intense work on my psyche. With his help, and the help of anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications, I started to understand (and more importantly, LOVE) myself a little for the first in my life. I am still working through my issues with body image and self-esteem, but I can honestly say that I'm on the right track. Therapy also helped me get to the right mental space to look at myself pragmatically. I finally decided that all of the physical damage I had done to my body; the creaking knees, the aching back, the fatigue, had to be dealt with. This is how I started my journey towards bariatric surgery.

Let me take a minute to clear something up about weight loss surgery. It is NOT the easy way out. It's NOT for everyone. I struggle daily to choke down all my vitamins and protein that are essential for living. A lot of people ask me why I didn't just diet and exercise to lose the weight. I struggled for years over this decision, but dropping 200 pounds while dealing with mental health issues, raising three kids, keeping a marriage alive, and constantly aching in every bone in my body was not something I could tackle without some sort of tool. I just want to make it perfectly clear, that I did not have gastric bypass surgery so that I could look like everyone else. I had it so that I could LIVE.

That being said, I am now losing weight at an unimaginable rate.

I feel healthier than ever and I'm so much more confident, but I have such a long way to go. Everyone can see that I am changing physically, but what they can't see is

how I am reconnecting with my own soul. I joke that she was buried under those 70 lbs. that I've already dropped, but honestly, I think I just wouldn't let myself acknowledge that I even had a soul until now. I wasn't worthy. I was nothing. Well, screw that. I'm not done. I have come way too far to stop now. I want to get to know myself on a spiritual level.   I want to get to the point that I don't care about my appearance. I want to care about Billie, body, mind, and soul. The work I need to do is obviously physical, but it is even more so mental. I need to learn to love myself right now, in this moment, in this body. I am more than my body. I am more than my imperfections. We all are.

The following video is by one of my favorite artists and just so happens portray this topic and my story perfectly. No pun intended. There are a few intense scenes, but I believe that these raw moments are what make it so inspiring….

*** http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3GkSo3ujSY ***

So, that's my story. Everyone has one. In a society that demands beauty and perfection, we are all going to fall short. The focus of the media has been entirely too concentrated on inaccurate portrayals of men and women. Barbie and Ken bodies are unattainable, yet so many of us still strive to have a flawless body and the face of a model.

According to an article in The Huffington Post, "If Barbie were an actual woman, she would be 5'9" tall, have a 39" bust, an 18" waist, 33" hips and a size 3 shoe, she likely would not menstruate... she'd have to walk on all fours due to her proportions."

Yet, Barbie has been one of the most prevalent, female, childhood role models for generations. How are we supposed to love ourselves if we aspire to be something that is so out of reach?

The actual humans in today's media aren't much better. Most runway models meet the Body Mass Index physical criteria for Anorexia. In a world full of diversity, our televisions are still bombarded with images of stereotypical blue eyed, blonde, bombshells.

It's beyond unfair to subject ourselves to these standards. The little girl with a missing appendage has an uphill battle to ever see her true beauty when she watches Cinderella. The teenage girl with a big nose and small breasts will wonder if she will

ever be loved after staring at Kim Kardashian. The teenage boy who struggles with acne and a thin frame will have to fight to feel like he is equal to the Brad Pitts of the world. The aging husband and father of two may be overcome with feelings of inadequacy while watching Magic Mike with his wife.

There are so few role models for us to look up to now. Looks are of the upmost importance to succeed in life. Everything else comes second. There is so much pressure for people, young and old alike, to conform to standards in which we never got a say. Is it any wonder why so many of us struggle with eating and/or mental disorders? I doubt that anyone in this room could honestly say "Yeah, I don't know anyone who's depressed."

Is this what we want to instill in the next generation?

My personal struggle may be with obesity, but negative body image can stem from so many "imperfections". None of us are perfect. Some of us are tall. Some of us are short. Some of us are thin. Some of us are thick. Some have dark skin. Some have light. People have straight hair. People have curly hair. We have cellulite. We have pimples. We have age spots. We have body hair. Some of us are missing teeth. Some of us are missing hair. We have scars, skin tags, and stretch marks, but we also have the ability to feel sensual, sexy, and just downright special.

Within each of us is a longing for unconditional love. It is in our genetic makeup. We all want to be desired, so many of us want romance and admiration, yet we convince ourselves that we are unworthy. What if we could stop relying on others and give this gift to ourselves? I like Oscar Wilde's suggestion. He once said "To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance." It certainly sounds easy enough, doesn't it?

The issue of body image and self-esteem is something that is so dear to me. Now that I have children, I want to make sure that they know what unconditional love feels like. I want them to understand that their bodies are not their worth. I want my sons to feel confident, regardless if they don't look like The Avengers. I want my daughter to feel beautiful even if she ends up chubby like her mama.

We are so focused on what everyone else thinks about us, that we slowly learn to neglect ourselves. These are only our shells. They are not what define us. We are thinkers. We are dreamers. We are lovers. We are loved.

We walk this earth for such a short amount of time, why don't we pledge to focus on the things that matter? We can fight off the self-hate with our love for others. We can turn off the television when it's telling us that we aren't good enough and read a book to stimulate our mind instead. We can choose meditation over the latest issue of Cosmo or GQ . We can remove negative people from our lives and join a local like-minded community filled with people who want us to succeed instead.

I am not perfect and I don't want to be. I hope hearing my story will help someone realize that they have the ability to love themselves as well. To be honest, I was so worried about what people would think about me that I almost bailed on this entire sermon! I was concerned that it would either come off as "stupid" or "self-serving", but the process of writing this has been nothing less than cathartic and if I can help inspire one single person to love themselves, then all of my anxiety was worth it. Plus, there is always Xanax.

The bottom line is, I'm learning to love myself and I want it so badly for all of you.

With a new year upon us, we all have the opportunity to start fresh. Resolutions are what we call them, we all have made ours. The problem with New Year's Resolutions is they only happen once a year. We, every day, every moment, have the power to let go of the things in our lives that are weighing us down. So that's my resolution: the promise to myself, daily, to face what I see in the mirror every morning as it is. Beautiful, ugly, scared, anxious, threatened, vulnerable, brave, strong and all of the rest…and to love whatever I see looking back at me in that moment. Won't you join me?

Questions for Discussion:

1. How has negative body image affected your life? Do you verbally insult yourself? Do you think negative thoughts about your body? How does this affect your social, mental, and spiritual life? *Please do not feel pressured to answer unless you are comfortable.

2. The idea of beauty changes from culture to culture.What are some of the ways that we differ from the rest of the world and how did things get that way? How do you define "beauty"?

3. Do you believe that the mass media presents a distorted picture of what the human figure "should" look like? How can this be harmful to the general population?

4. What are some of that tactics and tools that you use to shield, or give context to your children about body image and self-esteem in today's society?

5. How does a negative self-image impact the people around us? What about a positive one?

6. "Loving yourself" sounds so easy. Why then does it seem so hard? How does everyone else do it? Please share with the room some of the affirmations of love and kindness you make to yourself?

7. Does how you're feeling about the world around you impact your body image and self-esteem? (Ex: If you're angry and in a rush and stuck in traffic do you notice a shift in how you feel about yourself or your life?) If so, how?