

PJ Bahr

All of my childhood, I was "Patty." Well we all know what that rhymes with – "fatty." Psychologists tell us that children become what is spoken to them and over them. I grew to live up to the wretched nickname, "Fatty Patty." When I was an early teen, my stepdad would call me, "PJ" because my legal first name is "Patrice" and my last name was "Johnle." Years later, after God had worked His miraculous power in my life, I changed my name to PJ and even changed it on my notary seal! I was so happy to SHED that horrid nickname I had been tagged with as a child.

As I grew up, my weight vacillated and like many others, I went from diet plan to diet plan and diet pill to diet pill, eating incredible volumes of cabbage soup or hardboiled eggs and hot dogs, as well as consuming cans of Slim Fast, always treating the symptoms of my physical appearance and never dealing with the root of the issue – the mental and emotional aspect.

Having grown up with an alcoholic father and a verbally abusive big brother, I heard often that because of my obesity and appearance, I shouldn't even go out in public. That it was a disservice to the community for them to have to gaze on my appearance and that I would never amount to anything nor find a man to marry me based solely on my appearance.

My oldest brother was in Viet Nam and we would write back and forth frequently. He, of course, knew of my weight issue, and suggested in one of his letters that I write my name with an "i" at the end instead of a "y." I started then, spelling my name, "Patti" because to me it looked "thinner."

In my 20's, in the mid 80's, I was married to an alcoholic and had 2 small children. I had eaten my way to about 340# and was absolutely miserable beyond description.

The words I heard growing up echoed constantly in my mind and I became a recluse. My husband left our children and me for a young, vivacious 18-year-old girl he worked with. I lived across the street from my mother and she didn't drive, so I would drive her to the grocery store and she would go in and purchase my groceries for me. I didn't even want to meet the mailman at the door of my home.

My husband wasn't contributing financially to our household any longer at all, so I had to do anything I could to support our two little children and myself. The City where I lived posted a job for the "City Janitor" that required working only at night, and I applied and got that job. I thought I'd be "safe" at night when I didn't have to see people – or rather, have people see ME! Nightly I would load my 2 little kids in my old blue Plymouth Volare station wagon along with industrial cleaning equipment, vacuums, shampooers, chemicals, and we would clean the Library, City Hall, and the City Auditorium. This happened to be in Sturgis, SD, so you can imagine – or maybe you can't actually imagine – the filth and grime in the Sturgis City Auditorium during the world's largest motorcycle rally every August!! When I'd go to clean City Hall, occasionally the commissioners or council people would be departing a meeting as I was arriving and the glances and stares I got are vivid in my mind, still, after 30 years.

After daily pleadings, begging, crying, and more begging for my husband to return to us proved futile, the Lord began to maneuver me, first to a Christian counselor and then to a cousin who passionately loved Jesus and wanted to do anything to help me.

I continued counseling for that time as I walked through the horrors of a divorce. When I finally did muster the bravery to go shopping on my own at the grocery store, I would ALWAYS have people in line glance in my cart and then give me the visual "once over," and I could read their minds saying, "tsk tsk –how awful you are buying this or that when you look like

THAT!" or I would frequently have people ask if they could 'cut in line ahead of me' because maybe they had only one or two items to purchase. If I needed assistance locating something in a store, when I approached a clerk, I would be received with a response that told me I was bothersome and annoying. The daily rejection I lived with was literally indescribable.

Slowly, I began to study the Bible, lose weight and came out of my "shell."

I took a different job – but also a nights-only job, as a 9-1-1 operator for the local Police Department and Sheriff's Office. There I met a policeman whose wife was a bodybuilder. They would work out a few times a week at a free gym, and asked me to join them. I started going with them. One time they pulled up in my driveway and I said that I didn't feel like going that night and they said they were going to sit in the driveway until I came outside. About 20 minutes later I relented and got in their car. They were so incredibly motivating and kind to me. When I was sweating profusely at the gym, they would say, "Come on Patti, you can play another 5 minutes of basketball! One day you'll have the guys lined up on your front porch!" I thought they were absolutely insane but I'd play another 5 minutes.

After several months, I transferred to the 9-1-1 Center in nearby Rapid City where I met my current husband of 20+ years. We dated almost 3 years before I found the courage to tell him I had been terribly obese in recent years. I had to know I could really trust him to not reject me before I could share that with him. I didn't show him the one "before" picture of myself I had saved until we were married a couple of years later. I destroyed any pictures I could find of myself in my "wretched" state, so to this day, only have one photograph.

After Don and I had been married about 5 years my weight began creeping up again. Knowing my propensity to easily weigh over

300# I began to panic but knew I had had no success with diet programs “the world” offered. Prayerfully I sought the Lord on almost a moment-by-moment basis. The fear was debilitating me.

One Saturday my husband asked me to join him as he went on his occasional “gold prospecting” venture. (I’d rather have gotten a root canal!!) Desiring to be a “good wife,” I said okay, I would go but could I stop at the local Christian bookstore and buy a paperback book to take along in order to enjoy myself a little more. We stopped at the store and as I walked in, I prayed and asked the Lord to lead me to a book that would help me. Help me to deal with this issue of weight.

On a shelf of thin paperbacks, I found a book talking about giving Christ first place in your life. First place over anything else – including your appetite. I devoured every page of the book and on the back, found the website for First Place 4 Health.

Like an alcoholic who never says, “I’ve licked my drinking problem and it’s no longer a concern,” I never say, “I’ve gotten to my goal weight and now I can eat whatever I want, whenever I want.” It’s not only daily, but also moment-by-moment that I find I need to rely on the Lord to keep my focus in proper perspective.

There are so many marvelous ways the Lord has worked in my life since being involved with First Place 4 Health. One morning at church, the woman in charge of the bible study program asked me if I’d be willing to lead a study at the end of the summer. Never before had anyone asked me anything even remotely close to that. I had to turn around and see if she was actually talking to someone behind me! ME? No way. After I told her the name of a reputable, local mental examiner, I told her I would need to pray about it and she said she would pray for me too! That August our church offered the first FP4H Bible Study. After many frequent phone calls to my spiritual mentor, I set a start date. Twenty-four people

signed up.

On August 15th, our grandson, Andrew, born just a few weeks earlier, died of AIDS. I just knew it was the enemy attacking me because I had agreed to lead a dumb Bible study!!!! Why did I agree to do this? Why did I think First Place was a class that should be offered at our church? I was convinced those 24 people didn't need me and I certainly didn't need them!! My distorted thinking told me that had I not agreed to this study, Satan would have left me alone – and my grandson would be alive. The class was postponed a couple of weeks and on the first night of the class, one woman stood at the back of the room and said, "PJ, how lucky you are that God brought you to us!!" I thought, 'What kind of a nut is this?' I was stunned. She continued, "God obviously knew you were going to be walking through this deep valley, so He brought 24 people to you, in this class, to hold you up in loving prayer through this ark time!" I was even more stunned. Humbled. Awed. Grateful. What a beautiful gift she gave me that evening. God turned my darkness into light.

One class I offered at another church in our city, 65 people signed up! On the first "intro" night, one lady said to me, 'You mean this is a class on weight loss? Good grief! I thought it was just a regular Bible study! I don't want to do this! Sure I'm overweight, but my entire family is overweight and we're all big boned and this is just the way we are!' A couple weeks later, I was encouraging everyone to write in their prayer journals, at least once a day. Even one line a day thanking God for something that day or even just writing, "Dear Lord. I'm too busy." This same lady announced, in front of all the class, "No way! I am NOT going to do that! I am much too busy!! I'm a single mom and I work fulltime. There's no way I have time for that!" I gently encouraged her to just pray about it and give it a try. Several weeks later she told the class that there's no way she could ever live without her prayer journal. That it's always what kept her from overeating

in the evenings, because rather than snack on things, she would write in her prayer journal. Sometimes she'd write just a page or two and other times it might be seven or eight! This same woman, with FP4H, eventually went from a size 20 to a size 8.

There was another woman that came in on the first night, and learning it was a Bible study, groaned, rolled her eyes, and chose to sit outside the room in the hallway, (but within listening distance) while staring at the wall clock. Her attitude was less than pleasant that night and I never thought she'd stick with it. Well she did. At week three, I requested someone to volunteer to be the group "encourager" and send just a one-line email to each member each 3 days or so. Guess who volunteered for that task?

The studies I led were not limited to only women and a few men signed up, most with their wives. One man was terribly quiet, introverted and never said a peep, but would quietly complete his weekly tracker and Bible study. At the end of the session, I asked if anyone would be interested in leading a study themselves and he shyly said he thought he could handle it. He led a group with great success. Today he is very outgoing, open and thinner, and is quick to share that his physician discontinued his blood pressure medications!

Not only did I personally witness a miraculous transformation in my own life through FP4H, I also witnessed many, many miraculous transformations in the lives of others.

So many people say they joined to lose weight, but found themselves being more focused on growing in Christ and learning to give Him "first place," rather than losing weight, which is why, 14 years later, I'm still committed to FP4H on a daily basis. I need it. And I need each member that signs up. If others didn't participate, I would be alone on this path and I love that God brings others to link arms with us as we stumble along.

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