

Fattitude

by Jay Connolly

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator describes Gatsby's smile with these words: "It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it. . . . It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey." I'd like to say that in the two months since I returned to work here, I have often received that smile from students and staff alike. That's what sets Shawnigan apart. Your kindness has made me feel accepted, and acceptance is an issue I am sensitive to, because I have experience in feeling unacceptable. One way or another, many of you will be familiar with such feelings.

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A few years ago I weighed in the neighborhood of 400 pounds. That's a big neighborhood. Over time, I've lost 135 of that. That's like a grade 9 boy. It's like 13 supermodels.

Fat people are jolly, according to one popular stereotype, and while our culture has learned—publicly, at least—not to dishonor people for their gender, for the colour of their skin, for their sexuality or their religion, a fat person often feels like a punch line waiting to happen. For years, I mocked myself to remove from others the opportunity to snicker. (Snickering is an ugly sound. *Snck-snck-snck*. It's arrogance squelched in the throat.) *Snck-snck-snck*. If you've been on the receiving end of that sound, then you understand the fat person's daily predicament.

Some people believe that corrective cruelty is a public service. They'll cut you down in front of their friends, and if you object to the insults, they'll say, "Whhhhaaaaat??? We're kidding! But come on—*seriously*—you need to lose some weight . . . for your own good." Many years ago, in the staff room of this school, I knelt on a chair and leaned out the window to call after a student. A colleague passed behind me. "Thank God for clothes," he said to his pals.

I like a good joke, so I laughed with the others.

But one of the things I want to tell to you today is this: feelings of shame—which we often experience when people refuse to accept us *as we are*—help no one. If you're in the business of dispensing shame, stop it.

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I think obesity helped me understand racial prejudice, which is fundamentally a distrust of difference. Distaste is a disturbing thing to see in the eyes of a stranger. People of colour, of course, should feel proud of their heritage and their countries of origin. When you're fat, people think your nation of origin is Tim Horton's. And they know you're a patriot. Most people think you should *do* something about your weight. Some will even stare at you as though you should do something *right now*. But being fat, like being mean, is complicated.

One year, when I was at my fattest, I had a part in the school play. I wore a black tuxedo and a red silk scarf. I thought I looked good. A tuxedo makes for stylish armor, and I believed people saw the suit, not the shape inside it. We played our first show to an audience

of middle school kids. During the intermission, a small group of boys slouched by while I standing outside the back door of the theatre. The kids had decided to ditch the show for the mall. One of them caught sight of me and said, “Hey, it’s the fat guy from the play. Hey, *fat* guy!” This was followed by a burst of snickers from the others and a chorus of “Hey, *fat* guy . . . *fat* guy . . .”

That kind of thing rarely makes you want to diet. If you’re an anxiety eater, as I am, it makes you want to get wasted on Big Macs. And it makes you wary of people who treat physical imperfections like character flaws.

But you learn resilience, too. I needed to fly to Edmonton one winter for a book I was working on. A friend told me I might not fit in a regular airplane seat. I didn’t want to pay \$800 to fly first class, so I phoned the airline and talked to a pleasant young woman about the problem.

We fumbled back and forth across the telephone line and tried to determine whether I’d fit into one of their seats.

She said, “Well, um . . . how big are we talking here?”

And I said, “Well, you know . . . *big*.”

We couldn’t figure it out over the phone, so I shelled out \$500 for side-by-side seats.

When I boarded the plane, I discovered I would’ve been okay with just one ticket—sort of—as long as I leaned into the aisle. It was an awesome feeling to fit the furniture.

I was enjoying my chair and enjoying not having anyone beside me when I saw another fat man three rows back. I looked at him, and he looked at me—and then he said what everyone on the plane was thinking: “Hey! Good thing they didn’t put us together! *ba-hahahahhaa!*”

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I’m often asked by my teaching colleagues and former students what it feels like to lose so much weight.

“Great,” I always say. “Just great . . . like the *Incredible Journey*. Like a Christmas present hidden at the bottom of a big, big box. Like the Reversible Hulk.”

The truth is, I don’t feel much different at all. I gained weight a pound at a time. I didn’t wake up fat one day. I didn’t get zapped by the fat fairy. I learned to walk with it day-by-day, the same way we learn to carry any accumulating burden. And I *lost* it a pound at a time, too, so the relief came slowly—and mostly it’s not physical relief anyway. Now that I’ve lost weight, I don’t feel like a feather tossed on the breeze. I don’t feel like a dancer. Mostly, I just don’t feel embarrassed all the time.

When you’re truly fat, you watch others closely and you realize that people are all fat in their own way. Fat’s just something you want to get rid of, like the feeling you get when you know you’ve been cruel. But physical fat is only *one* of the scars we wear. There are darker kinds of obesity.

If you condemn people because they excel at something, for example, then maybe you need to lose some envy.

If you single people out for the colour of their skin, or their religion, or their sexual identity, then you need to lose your fear.

If you’re a bully, then you need to lose your cowardice.

And if you look down at others—if you scoff or sneer or snicker or stare, or otherwise remind people of their weaknesses...if you’re the kind of person who makes fat people *feel* fat—then you’ve got your own kind of ugly to lose.

Years ago, after I made remarks similar to these in chapel, I received an email from a girl who went through a hard time with her skin. Eventually, she endured Accutane treatments to poison the acne from her system. Now, on the outside, she's beautiful again. "I didn't have to do it," she said of the treatment, which in her case involved high dosages, "but I got tired of people looking at me like they didn't know where to look. Now that my skin is normal, I get a strange feeling. I'll be talking to someone who's known both my faces, and I'll sense the change between us. There's a warmth in them that I never felt before. Then it hits me: they *approve* of me now, as if I'm finally okay. And then I realize how messed up that is. I was *always* okay."

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Before I finish, I'd like to tell you about the brighter side of being fat. Sometimes, when you're different, you see tremendous kindness in others. Go back to those lines about Gatsby's smile: "It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey." Those words describe more than expression; they describe an approach to life.

Years ago, I was asked to cover a socials 8 class when one of the socialists was away. The students were a bit wild, so I threatened them with an after-school detention. I said, "You wanna come back here for tutorial?"

Just as I was giving them my darkest stare, my chair collapsed. I'm sure the rivets were stretched beforehand, but the grade 8s didn't care. For them, sight gags don't get any better than a fat man collapsing through the steel tubes and molded plastic of an institutional chair. It might have been the funniest thing they'd ever seen. They laughed *hard*. One of them fell off *his* chair. I let the class go early.

But then there was a moment of grace. As she was leaving, a horsy girl with big shoulders and a voice like sliding gravel stopped by my desk. "You're my favorite teacher," she blurted, and then ran to join the others. I'd never taught her, but I guess she wanted me to know I was more than a joke.

A similar thing happened one day while I was playing golf with Mr. Cox. I'd lost about 50 pounds by this point, and as we walked down the first fairway, I confessed that the weight loss was making it easier to swing the club. And he looked at me and raised his eyebrows as if he was surprised to hear that, as if he didn't know what I was talking about. And I said, "Coxy, I've lost 50 pounds in the last year!" And he looked at me as if to say, "I didn't know you needed to lose weight."

That sort of kindness came from my students, too. I never *heard* one of them call me fat. Many did, of course, but never in my hearing. When I started to lose weight, they continued to say nothing, which puzzled me. My eldest son was in one of my classes, and after I'd dropped the first fifty or sixty pounds, I said to him, "Hey, I've lost weight, you know." Because *he* hadn't said anything either.

He said, "I know."

And I said, "Well, nobody ever says anything. Why doesn't anyone *say* anything?"

He shrugged and said, "You know."

"What?" I said.

And he said, "I don't think they want you to think that they thought . . . you know."

"What?" I said. "That I was fat?"

"Yeah," he said.

And I thought, *Wow*.

A few days later, I said to one of my classes, "I've lost weight, you know."

And they said, "Yeah, we know."

I said, "You mean you knew and you didn't say anything?"

They said, "Yeah."

And I said, "Was it because you thought I'd think that you thought . . ."

And they said, "Yeah."

And I thought, *Wow*.

That's so *kind*—that so many people would conspire, when I didn't feel good about myself, to give me those Gatsby smiles. . . as though I was fine just the way I was.

This brings me back to my experience in returning to Shawnigan this year. I taught here for a long time, but I was away for three years, and coming back meant meeting almost 500 new people. I was anxious. When I'm surrounded by strangers, I always feel fat. Your kindness has helped me overcome my uncertainty.

But I haven't spoken about this issue to invite more Gatsby smiles my way. I've told you my story to suggest that everyone around you has a tale of struggle and triumph . . . only not everyone has reached the triumph part yet. Acceptance is a way of inviting people in from the cold and respecting them by making them part of the community. If we all turn on our Gatsby smiles and accept the people on this campus for who they are *right now*, then maybe, in this small corner of the world, no one will feel fat at all.