A Dose of Vitamin M 
on Shaming & Bias. 
Is it simply 
black and white?

by Merrill Littleberry, LCSW, LCDC, CCM, CI-CPT

How does one begin to inspire others while battling self-doubt within? Can one truly empathize with a griever if you have not experienced loss? Is it wise only to seek a cardiologist who had heart issues? How is it possible for a person to make, “emotional deposits” when they are penniless.

Multiple times I have been asked similar questions, in one form or another. I thought these to be bizarre questions when directed my way. Ever since the day I graduated with my masters in social work, displaying the desire to make a difference in the world and truly believing it was possible, I have been met with haters and naysayers. Today, I still believe and have witnessed change in the lives of those who can visualize it, desire it and seek it out. Still, different versions of these same questions continue to find a way into a variety of my conversations. These questions come in the form of concern, contempt, compassion, criticism and maybe most of all – curiosity. If you didn’t live it, how can you understand it?

As a psychotherapist in the world of obesity, depression, public speaking etc., I oftentimes feel the need to justify these questions. Especially when asked the, “why questions.” Such as why bariatrics, why you, why addicts, why the county hospital, why do you think you can make a difference? It goes on and on. I guess the simplest answer would be because it’s where I was needed the most at the time. Now of course I don’t know that for sure, but I do believe so. Which leads me to this article asking the questions:

- What is my experience with shaming and weight bias?
- Who am I?
- What about me helps others?
- Why am I involved with the OAC?
- And why do I do what I do?

I’ll show you glimpses into my life and let you decide. That seems fair because in the end that’s what we do. We decide if it fits into our molds of reality we shaped throughout our lifetime.

I am Merrill, a biracial female raised by a single mother. I lived about half of my life below the poverty line. I was born and raised in Milwaukee where I experienced bias as many others did for one reason or another. Those unnecessary, unprovoked, shaming recollections, a result of the insecure and immature bullies of the world. I have experienced the disgusted looks, the exclusion, the cruel comments, blatant rudeness and continuous teasing – things that were so cruel I won’t even write it in this article! The mere writing of it would be offensive.
As a result, deep inside my core a seed of inadequacy was fertilized. Bring on the weeds of confusion, the deep unrealistic desire to fit in and the negative thoughts about those who hurt me. I didn’t like those feelings. However, the world at large continued to feed that seed. I never had my own check box that indicated I belonged anywhere. I didn’t matter. I didn’t even exist. That lasted quite a while in my psyche, until I realized my own truth. That is what I went through, that is not who I am! This is a very important lesson to remember. If you don’t take away anything else you read in this article, keep this. Just because you went through it, doesn’t mean you are it! Hopefully we learn from it, maybe it doesn’t make us stronger, but I hope that it makes us wiser.

I’m now 45 years old, a psychotherapist in private practice and a divorced mother of two adolescent boys. My heart has been injured and dreams altered. I’m a certified personal trainer as well as a licensed chemical dependency counselor. I’m a believer. I’m resilient and very silly at times and on occasions been told I’m hilarious. I stand 5’5 1/2” and today I weigh 127 pounds and unfortunately have not completed a full workout this year. Now, even in the kindest of souls in reading this felt some sort of way. Reading this information about me will make you feel a certain way ranging from bothersome, irritated, relevantly relatable or discarded as petty. You felt a certain way immediately about me and/or my situation. You may not even realize you felt a certain way, until I asked. Was it a choice to feel that way after thinking about it?

Because of yesterday’s experiences, those preprogrammed situations create nearly immediate reactions, emotions and thoughts. However, if your thoughts are negative, then your behavior will follow. If you don’t take away anything else you read in this article, keep this. Just because you went through it, doesn’t mean you are it! Hopefully we learn from it, maybe it doesn’t make us stronger, but I hope that it makes us wiser.
Change the thought and you change the feeling. You can’t have a feeling without a thought. In all topics of touchy matter, the first thing I ask people to do is, “Check yourself.” I believe a necessary step in eliminating infectious biases and life crippling shaming is through education and exposure. I believe with this, compassion will follow.

We need to first understand what’s programmed, preprogrammed, and what is our true belief system? Are you choosing to believe that way or is somebody choosing it for you? Many times we can’t change the situation, but we can change how we perceive it. The more difficult task is when the desire for change occurs but the resources, education, or research is not readily available for an individual to locate. It is in these scenarios that a great opportunity is missed. Make sure if you plan to be a change agent you don’t miss an opportunity just because it looks like work.

I guess an example of this would be my grandmother. She was a German woman I met when I was 35. We were in the same room once before when I was a child. I believe it was a funeral. I can remember her glances felt like investigative snares. I recall there was bewilderment, surprise and maybe expressions I didn’t understand as a child, in her eyes. After the passing of her husband (my grandfather), she invited me to her home in the small country town on the tippy top of Wisconsin – the home where my mother was raised. It wasn’t until halfway through my trip that I realized all these years of thinking “I missed out” and “she must be evil” were untrue. I was wrong. Her experiences and environment created who she was. The problem wasn’t with me, and it wasn’t even about me. The issue was her perception of me and the uncomfortableness of having a biracial grandbaby. She missed out! She missed out on the adult life of her first born. She missed the joy of her two grandchildren and having the privilege to know her amazing great grandsons. In that moment, I chose to bridge the gap. I’m glad I reached the understanding that she couldn’t give me what she didn’t have. What she shared with me was a smile. From my understanding, she didn’t offer that up much. I also have a photo of us sitting on her porch, and guess what? She’s smiling. Not long after that she passed. I chose forgiveness, and I choose not to make her same mistakes.

It can be uncomfortable to embrace what we don’t understand and more difficult to be an organization that stands to bridge such disparities. The Obesity Action Coalition’s (OAC) very conception was the result of a joint relationship of individuals ready to make a change and the individuals who desperately needed one. They didn’t come in on the ground floor, they created it! It is this foundation for
which the brave, isolated, educated, lost and the determined can build upon. Throughout the past 10 years in the midst of fighting for others, the OAC has become a champion in the field of advocacy, the finish line for acceptance and the visionaries for the possibilities to come. Often I hear, “Change is difficult.” I think continuing to stay the same is far more agonizing. Is it difficult or just different?

I don’t believe we popped out of the womb having excessive Falsely Acquired Thoughts (F.A.T.). If you’re thinking about changing, it’s likely because you’re uncomfortable with where you’re at. The same amount of energy will be used changing or not. It is at the end of the day your efficiency of it can be evaluated. Will you use your energy regretting you didn’t make a change, or will you sleep well because you already used your energy changing? Again, same amount of energy, how it was used will continue to define your tomorrows.

Since being introduced to the healthcare side of bariatrics in 2005, I have grown in knowledge, comprehension, sensitivity and understanding. Heading up one of the 1st support groups in the city, which still holds strong today, is something I am very proud of. It wasn’t until I became an active member of the OAC in 2010 that I became enlightened on a much larger scale. My passion grew stronger, and my focus more specialized. In 2015, I plan to exceed what I believed were my limits.

Being an advocate means you prevent your past pains from injuring others. You inspire through your healing and support others while standing on faith. You inspire change by pushing through life’s pressures, and you persevere with passion. It wasn’t until my 20’s I discovered a beauty deeper than anything eyes could see. I had more than I ever realized. I wasn’t either; I was both. I wasn’t half of anything; I was the best of both things. I was Merrill…the uniquely ordinary, complicatedly simple, me. I realized I had been blessed with so much love. I created a Christmas program that for 10 years with the help of like-minded, spirited, passionate individuals collected and delivered more than 100,000 gifts. We created a Christmas for hundreds of individuals who thought they were forgotten. We went to the homes of the shut in, shut out and children, like myself (the ones who lived below the poverty line). I remember as a child, wondering and asking, “Who is that person bringing bags of food and other cool stuff to our home?” I was humbled when I recognized I had become, “That Person.”

I get asked, not as often as in the past, “Have you ever struggled with your weight or did you have bariatric surgery?” I say, “I believe it’s the same war just a different battle. My battle came from a different army with the same intent, destroy. With an ally such as the OAC fighting with you and standing behind you, soon the war will be won.”

In hopes to inspire, encourage and educate people, I would not be able to otherwise, I started a public Facebook page with my newly coined name. I found I was far more encouraged and energized by the personal messages, the public posts and the blogs of the people who were inspired by me. It was like an emotional deposit that never stopped generating revenue. These are the things propelling me to take the next steps and stop sitting on my own book Stink’N Think’N. It seems like there’s always something else that needs to go in or something that needs to come out of it. Then my own stinking thinking starts. What makes me “That Person?” A person who writes a book impactful enough to be something that people want to read, something people need to read, something that will help them if they choose to read it. What if they don’t like it? Then I remember, “It’s not about you, Merrill!” If I do nothing, nothing could be worse than that.

How can you be the example, set an example and lead by example? Aim for progress, not perfection. If you feel like you’re always screwing up, then reassess your values, your ethics, your morals, your character and your company. We can spend our energy being depressed about the things we cannot change, or we can maximize the time we have to improve on it. Maximize your capabilities, don’t doubt them. Our health is something we have the option to improve every day. With the biases of the world today, someone will always find a way to degrade or discredit what they can’t figure out. If someone’s choices, appearances or situation is different than ours, it is labeled as bad, wrong, sick or unsightly, when in reality, it just makes us uncomfortable. If you’re going to exert energy in these types of situations, use it to help, not hurt, to heal and not hinder. Why would anyone choose pain for themselves or others?

I believe in who I am. I believe in what I do. I believe in you, and I believe in what the OAC can do.
OAC Membership Application

Why Join the OAC? The OAC is a nearly 50,000 member-strong 501(c)(3) National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to the individual affected by the disease of obesity and helping individuals along their journey toward better health through education, advocacy and support. Our core focuses are to raise awareness and improve access to the prevention and treatment of obesity, provide evidence-based education on obesity and its treatments, fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination, elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health and offer a community of support for the individual affected.

1. OAC Membership Categories (select one)
   - Individual Membership: $20/year
   - Institutional Membership: $500/year
   - Chairman’s Council Membership: $1000+/year

Are you joining for the first time, or are you renewing your OAC Membership?
   - I am joining for the first time (never been an OAC member).
   - I am renewing my membership (have joined the OAC in the past).

2. Donation Add-on
   Add-on Donation: Make a General Donation
   Make a tax-deductible donation to the OAC when joining as a member. Your donation helps the OAC’s educational and advocacy efforts.
   - $5
   - $10
   - $25
   - $50
   - $100

3. Membership/Donation Add-on Totals:
   Membership Fee: +$________
   Donation Add-on (optional): +$________
   TOTAL PAYMENT: $__________

Payment Information
   - Check (payable to the OAC) for $______.
   - Credit card for my TOTAL, including add-ons, of $______.
   - Discover®
   - MasterCard®
   - Visa®
   - Amex®
   - Credit Card Number: __________________________
   - Expiration Date: __________________________
   - Billing Zip Code: __________________________
   - CV Code: __________________________

Contact Information
   - Name: __________________________
   - Address: __________________________
   - City: __________________________ State: __________ Zip: __________
   - Phone: __________ Email: __________

BUILDING A COALITION OF THOSE AFFECTED

The OAC is the ONLY non-profit organization whose sole focus is helping those affected by obesity. The OAC is a great place to turn if you are looking for a way to get involved and give back to the cause of obesity.

Why YOU Should Become an OAC Member

Quite simply, because the voice of those affected needs to be built! The OAC not only provides valuable public education on obesity, but we also conduct a variety of advocacy efforts. With advocacy, our voice must be strong. And, member is what gives the OAC its strong voice.

MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

• Official welcome letter and membership card
• Annual subscription to the OAC’s publication, Your Weight Matters® Magazine
• Subscriptions to the OAC Members Make a Difference and Obesity Action Alert monthly e-newsletters
• “Bias Buster” Alerts, alerting specifically to issues of weight bias
• Immediate Advocacy Alerts on urgent advocacy issues and access to the OAC’s expert advocacy team
• Ability to lend your voice to the cause