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## The Defining Moment

by Jennifer Shoalmire

“...the journey is not the end, it is the place where we try and sometimes fail, we stumble and sometimes fall, but where we always, always move forward.”



While growing up, school pictures were very important to us as a family, and my mother proudly displayed mine and my two siblings' pictures in the hallway of our family home in south Louisiana. My brother, sister and I each had a section on the wall where all of our pictures were hung in order. As a teenager, I began to notice that in the photographs taken of me between 3rd and 4th grade my appearance had changed dramatically. My face was fuller and my smile was a little different, but I really didn't know why I was changing that dramatically at such a young age. Later, I would recall this as one of my most defining moments.

Each year, I would see my face get a little more full and my smile change slightly, and I knew, deep down, that there was a happy girl in those pictures. She was trying so hard to show her joy, but she was also struggling with how to show herself love and care. As an adult, thinking about my childhood, I remember some of the things I heard from adults went something like this: “You weigh 95 pounds,” (as a 4th grader being weighed by the school nurse, in front of the class), “Your tummy is too big,” “Can't you just stop eating?” or “Why are you eating that? What is the matter with you?”

I truly thought that something was “wrong” with me, but as a child and later as a teenager, I didn't really know how to answer those questions. My response was to act defensively, protect myself and answer in ways that could have been interpreted as sarcastic or disrespectful. I had ways of defending myself, mostly through hurtful words, and I was deeply affected by what others might have thought about me.

In order to not think about my feelings of low self-worth, I chose to use food to cover up those feelings. It was a pretty good coping mechanism, especially for a child. In south Louisiana, in the heart of “Cajun Country,” food equals love, and there are so many defining moments in my life where good times, good food and good fun with family and friends revolved around a steaming hot bowl of spicy seafood gumbo or my Mama's homemade chocolate cream pie.

However, the hidden flavor of choice in most Cajun dishes is fat, and lots of it. It satisfies for the moment, but in the end we all end up wider. Breaking away from all of the home cooking and overindulgences was one of my biggest challenges. As time went on — and my waistline increased — I eventually weighed 379 pounds and was suffering from sleep apnea, hypertension, bouts of depression, high cholesterol and a lack of hope. After many years of strict dieting, self-imposed calorie and food restrictions, exercise regimes, negative self-talk and much, much more, I realized that I could not go further in this condition, and I chose to have gastric bypass surgery.

When I walked into the hospital at 6 am on Nov. 2, 2012, my husband told me that at that moment, I was the bravest he'd ever seen me. This is in stark contrast to my previous experiences as a child, because even though my mother worked in the charity hospital and was the supervisor of the local blood bank, I was terrified of doctors, hospitals and anything that resembled a needle. When it was time for me to get a booster shot for school or lab work for the pediatrician, I would run away screaming and crying before the nurses could even get the tourniquet on my arm.

I had my husband take my picture in the hallway of the hospital on the day of my surgery because I knew in my heart that I would never look or feel like that again. That day was another one of my defining moments.

After 18 months of strict adherence to protein and food guidelines, daily exercise and measuring my water intake, I had lost 200 pounds and was at what I thought was my goal weight. My body knew better though, and I continued to lose 30 more pounds, even after I increased my daily calorie and protein allotment. Today, I am 40 months post-bariatric surgery, and I continue to track my protein, calories, exercise and water consumption. I am right around 150 pounds and well on my way to living the life I dreamed about before my surgery. The process in and of itself was life-changing, to say the least. My entire approach toward life has morphed me into a new being, more in tune with myself and my surroundings, and with other people as well.

So, here's what works for me. This may or may not work for you, but at the very least give yourself enough love to take the time to figure out what you need and what you want for your healthy journey.

## **These are the truths that I have come to embrace so far:**

- ♦ Life is definitely for the living, and I don't have to have everything figured out right this second. So until then, I will enjoy the ride.
- ♦ I keep myself on track. I need to pack my pink lunch bag every day with my protein shake, spinach salad, healthy snacks and water bottles.
- ♦ It is easy to mess up and sometimes hard to clean-up, but the cleaning-up brings order —whether it's with people, housework or life in general.
- ♦ Daily, I make a conscious decision to take care of myself by eating healthy foods, moving every day and drinking water.

With these truths as my guide and my new outlook on life, I am taking time to remember some of my fondest defining moments. I bet you can recall very specific moments in your life when you had to stop and think - maybe even take an extra-long breath just to process and record in your memory what was being said, what you heard, what you smelled, touched or even tasted.

While the weight-loss goal on my journey may have been reached, the healthier, fuller part of my life journey is just getting started. As a child, I used food to cover up my feelings of inadequacy and it worked very well in the short run. As an adult and after bariatric surgery, I still struggle with choosing healthy coping mechanisms.

Sometimes this comes by blaring my music loudly, or by walking or running, praying, cheering up a friend, calling a family member or many other fun things. Other times it's realizing I'm scared that I might try to use food to cover up my feelings. It's during those moments that I'm grateful I have someone I can talk to who doesn't judge me and takes time to truly listen to me.

One of my favorite healthy coping mechanisms is competing in organized races that benefit charitable organizations that I support. I completed my first competitive 5K in College Station, Texas, at their annual Turkey Trot. Three friends and I walked 3.1 miles in the windy, cold air, and I crossed the finish line after 61 minutes.

For the very first time, I felt like an athlete. That was definitely one of the toughest things I've ever done, and it's another defining moment in my life. Previous to that, I could only walk one mile and it took me about 30 minutes. I did that one mile loop every day in order to keep moving and progressing on my journey. Currently, I have completed numerous 5K's, one 10K and two half-marathons. I mostly walk each race, and my challenge to myself is to cross each finish line a little quicker than I did in the last one.

Another one of my favorite healthy coping mechanisms involves the friendships I have made through my local bariatric surgery support group and my membership in the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC). I learned about the OAC from Michelle Vicari, who runs her Web site [www.TheWorldAccordingtoEggface.com](http://www.TheWorldAccordingtoEggface.com). She is also a gastric bypass patient and continues to have success fighting the disease of obesity and advocating for people who may struggle from this horrible disease.

While surfing her Web site for yummy, protein-packed recipes, she shared about her work with the OAC and I felt so inspired to help others who may have suffered like I did, so I joined that day. I also learned of the *Your Weight Matters* Convention through the OAC's emails and newsletter and I applied for a scholarship so I could attend the Convention in Orlando, Fla.



*Jennifer Shoalmire and her spouse at a race event in July 2014.*

Once the scholarship applications were reviewed, I was notified that I unfortunately would not be one of the recipients of that year's scholarships. I emailed the staff at the organization and thanked them for the opportunity. I also shared my excitement for those who had been chosen and that I hoped they would enjoy their experience while learning from all of the experts.

Later, I received another email stating the committee had chosen 13 recipients and that my application was number 14. As fate would have it, one of the 13 recipients would not be able to attend the Convention, so I was able to attend! From the moment I snapped my non-extended seatbelt on the plane in Texas, to the last day when I said goodbye to my new friends in Orlando, I took every opportunity to listen, learn, and share with others during that 3-day conference. That time in Orlando was another one of my defining moments.

My advice to you is that as you go along on your journey, remember that what works for me may or may not work for you, but I can tell you that there is ALWAYS hope. You have options. You have an ability to give yourself grace, and you have an opportunity to share love with yourself and others in a healthy way. You are not "an obese person," "a sad person," "an ugly person," "a fat person" or any other negative adjective you might have heard someone say to you. You are a good person with honest struggles, and there are healthy ways for you to seek and receive help to guide you on your way to a healthier, fuller life. But the journey is not the end, it is the place where we try and sometimes fail, we stumble and sometimes fall, but where we always, always move forward.



*Jennifer Shoalmire and her husband during the U.S. Army's "Dining Out" event in December 2014.*

Special thanks to my husband, Alan, who calls me "Wonder Woman" because of what he sees in me — a person with super-human strength in the face of adversity.



# ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

## LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

### Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
  - Community Discussion Forum
  - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



**JOIN TODAY: GO TO [OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN](http://OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN)**

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