

Chapter One

MY STORY

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us." We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

—Marianne Williamson

I grew up in front of the mirror. I was a dancer from the age of three, and with each passing year I watched myself more and more critically, scrutinizing my young form for imperfections. As my body began to develop in adolescence into a real woman's body, I felt completely alienated by the changes of maturation: I hated my widening hips, my developing breasts, the curves that seemed to have softened my form almost overnight. I cried at the onset of my menstrual cycle. Although I was developing a normal, real, womanly body, when I looked in the mirror all I could see was deformity, in the form of fat. My body, it seemed, was monstrous, a betrayal.

Food became my enemy. By the time I was in college, I had become obsessive about counting calories and exercising. I felt I had to dance off every single calorie I consumed. I spent hours in the dance studio, practicing stretches and combinations, all the while thinking, "Just five more pounds . . . then I'll be okay." Day after day I would vow to go on stringent diets in order to purify my body of what I thought of as the visible evidence of my lack of self-control. But as time went on I was less and less able to adhere to a strict diet. As I placed ever more prohibitions on my food and eating, I began to rebel against these violent and self-punishing strictures, bingeing on all the foods I had deemed off limits. Then, guilty at having gorged on fattening foods, I would purge by forcing myself to throw up, nullifying, I thought, the consequences of my moral lapse.

I used to call it "Praying to the Porcelain God," a spirit so powerful it grabbed me by the throat and choked me until the acidic juices from my stomach burned my mouth, every piece of my latest binge expelled. Tears would wash over me, a combination of relief and self-pity. One summer, at a dance camp, a fellow dancer taught me to use laxatives as an alternative to throwing up. I would binge, then swallow handfuls of these pink tablets in order to offset the size of my meal. The following day, gas pains would rip through my gut like knives. But still I went obediently to dance class, trying to maintain the facade that everything was okay.

Instead of dealing with the emotional issues underlying my self-punishing views of my body, it was easier to hide behind the cruel comfort of food. Secretly, like a princess waiting to be rescued, I kept hoping someone would come along and save me from the emotional dragon banging on my door.

But no one and nothing could save me, and in my self-destructiveness I virtually abandoned myself. I used to call my nightly binges "Smashing and Trashing." I would tear through the kitchen like a drug addict looking for a fix, drinking and eating until I was numb. I would pass out without brushing my teeth or washing my face, having attained peace at last.

Emotionally I had hit rock bottom. The peppermint taste of Tums could no longer quell the acidic churning of my bulimic stomach, nor could any binge soothe the ache of my head and heart. Finally I reached out to a trusted friend for help, and she recommended therapy. I had been looking outside of me, externally, for comfort and safety. Every perceived solution had turned to dust in my hands. Now it was time to turn inward.

In therapy I began to pay attention to the feelings that lay beneath my eating disorder. I realized I had internalized the idea that I could never be *enough*— never thin enough, never smart enough, never pretty enough to be "acceptable." Dance was my one saving grace. Despite the toxic, distorted body image issues, I had found an arena where I could express myself. Movement was the one way for me to release my soul.

Therapy also helped me become aware of the effects of living in a society in which we are bombarded every day with images and messages that say thin equals beauty and health, fat equals ugly and sick. The thinner you are the more love you will receive. I came to understand that this diseased social thinking had affected me and women around me; women like me who were torturing themselves in vain attempts to conform to unhealthy and unrealistic ideals.

In the process of my recovery, I detonated every idea I'd ever had about beauty, desirability, and value—I had to. I wanted a life that was joyful, and not ruled by pain. As my recovery progressed, I began to realize what being female, healthy, and alive really meant. It meant being in tune with my body, not working against it. It meant embracing who I really was. In fact it was through a movement regimen that my recovery took root. I continued to dance and I became a certified fitness trainer with the American Council on Exercise. The more I learned about fitness and understood about my eating disorder, the healthier I got. I wanted to share my new understanding with those who were killing themselves to meet societal pressures concerning their weight. And, most important, those treated worst in our fat-phobic culture: women of size.

I knew the statistics: Nearly half of all American women are overweight. Every year Americans spend over \$30 billion on the diet industry, yet every year the number of overweight people increases. If the average woman on the street wears at least a size 12, why weren't any of these women members of the gym I belonged to, or clients in my work as a personal trainer? Where were the real women, and why weren't they represented?

I decided to visit other gyms and health clubs to see if mine was somehow an exception, but it was the same thing again and again. Virtually all gyms and fitness programs totally ignored women of size. It was as if the whole fitness profession had labeled plus-size women as beyond help, or even unworthy of fitness—at least until they lost weight! I

believed a unique fitness program to help real women learn how to be fit and healthy, no matter what they weigh, was long overdue.

Many of us know that thinness does not equal physical fitness, but numerous exercise and diet gurus—the people who claim to know the most about health—seem to focus on weight loss at the expense of overall health. No one had created a comprehensive anatomical approach to exercise *specifically* for women of size. I conceived my fitness studio, In Fitness & In Health, and the *Real Fitness for Real Women* program to fill this void—they were created with the needs of real women in mind.

My first step was to study the body mechanics of women of size. I then devised a physiologically sound program for increasing strength, movement, and aerobic capacity. When I saw my individual clients make great strides in a regimen based on my independent research, I decided to get the credentials I needed. I earned a master's degree in individualized study at New York University, allowing me to research and design a program specifically for women of size. The end result? *Real Fitness for Real Women*, which contains the best program for enhancing the physical well-being and quality of life for women of size.

When I started my research, conventional wisdom held that weight loss was a prerequisite of fitness. Women of size had to lose weight first before they could really start getting fit. When I argued that women can achieve fitness at any size, that fitness was not about weight but about the body, mind, and spirit, many fitness professionals actually told me I was crazy. But when I offered proof, my fitness colleagues took note. My philosophy is simple: Women don't have to be thin to be fit. Some women may be slender and healthy, but one does not guarantee the other.

I opened my first In Fitness & In Health studio immediately after receiving my degree, and within a year and a half I had opened a second location. I appeared on *Weekend Today in New York* in December 1998. The response was overwhelming. I was inundated with calls from women thanking me for having the courage to articulate what they instinctively knew: The fitness industry discriminates against women of size. These women were relieved to find a fitness program that would regard them as the norm and treat them with respect.

Unfortunately not all women have access to my studios or even the time to schedule regular classes. But although many expensive health clubs and exercise programs would have you believe otherwise, getting fit is something you can do in your own home, right now. In *Real Fitness for Real Women*, I have outlined the same successful program that we teach in my studios. Despite the punishing "no pain no gain" doctrine of our culture, fitness should not be intimidating or painful. The women who have followed my program have told me that after just six weeks they have more mobility and stamina and are living fuller, happier, healthier lifestyles.

The program in *Real Fitness for Real Women* consists of a series of exercises tailored to the physiological and psychological needs of plus-size women. The program is designed to help you modify exercises if necessary and correct weaknesses and injuries that may be associated with larger bodies. Since fitness is as much about patterns of thinking as it

is about discipline, I offer self-empowerment techniques that will help you develop a healthier, more agile, and more powerful body.

Leading a physically fit life often will result in weight loss, but that is not the primary goal of *Real Fitness for Real Women*. By embarking on my program, you will learn how to:

- Achieve your full physical potential
- Increase your physical productivity and activities of daily living
- Enhance your immune system
- Increase your self-esteem
- Heal weight-related injuries and discomfort
- Enhance your energy, stamina, and quality of life

Instead of taking a pounds-and-inches approach, *Real Fitness for Real Women* takes the focus off dieting and puts it where it belongs: on empowering women through movement. Before you know it, you will have an increased awareness of your body and how it functions, and a sense of your grace and power. You will realize that fitness and beauty can be found in women of any size. This program will change your life!

More than an exercise manual, this book has a much grander theme woven throughout—that of a collective consciousness. As we redefine fitness and health, we begin to restructure the thoughts of all women in terms of shape and size. I often liken it to a pebble thrown in the water, making ripples that widen out through the lake. Each woman who takes an action to change her life affects the lives of women around her. We are in charge of our own destinies; we have the power to strengthen our own self-worth and self-esteem as well as that of others.

Through *Real Fitness for Real Women*, you will regain your strength, increase your quality of life, and enjoy your activities of daily living with a fit and strong body. Remember, you are not a number, nor a size—just real. Your spirit will burst forth, breaking the chains of inactivity. You are not alone—we are here for you. You will not fail. The secret is movement.

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