

RICH BARLOW | SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Putting faith in a weight-loss plan

By Rich Barlow | January 5, 2008

Over the years, Renee Vigoroso has sampled a steady diet of diets. In an e-mail, she says she has tried "the banana diet, the grapefruit diet, the seven-day diet, the no-food diet, the skipping meals diet."

But she swears by the 3D plan, a pioneering faith-based eating program begun in 1972. Vigoroso, an administrator at Lexington's First Baptist Church, has been in 3D groups since 1976, treasuring the plan precisely because it is a nondiet diet, emphasizing a balanced relation with God, rather than being runway-model skinny. 3D (for diet, discipline, and discipleship) is "not life-denying and restrictive, as are other diets," writes Vigoroso, who lost 25 pounds on the plan.

Just in time for New Year's resolutions, two Cape Cod women - Carol Showalter, who invented 3D, and Maggie Davis, a Brewster dietician - have co-written a new book updating the plan. "Your Whole Life", published by Paraclete Press, where Showalter works as a publicist, maintains the plan's original focus on the heavenly scales, not the ones in the bathroom. "The word diet does not actually mean losing weight," the authors write in their book.

They promise you will carve off those holiday pounds with faithful adherence to their program during the course of the 12-week regimen. It's just that 3D, with its mix of nutrition and exercise advice, daily biblical readings, suggested memorization of one short Scripture passage a week, diary keeping, and prayer has a more ambitious aim, the book says: "You work with God to bring your life under his will and guidance."

The collaboration between Showalter and Davis, begun six years ago, grew from a meeting of minds on nutrition and a synergy of souls on the role of spirituality in health.

Showalter was something of a spiritual entrepreneur in 1972, when she invented 3D decades before the slew of faith-based diets that have grown as numerous as the inches on the average American waistline. The wife of a Presbyterian minister and then living in Rochester, N.Y., she had long battled the bulge. In a joint interview with Davis, she said that church life exacerbated her problem, "which was getting overweight through stress, through emotional needs . . . and trying to be a perfect minister's wife" while raising four children.

Vacationing on the Cape in 1972, she heard a Christian speaker first mention diet in connection with the other two Ds as part of a Christian life. The notion was a thunderbolt to Showalter - why would God give a divine hoot about diet? - and she started the first 3D group at her church.

"It wasn't that I was preaching to everybody else that they had to have a spiritual dimension" to dieting, she recalled in the interview. "I had to have a spiritual dimension."

That jibed with the professional experience of Davis, to whom Showalter went for nutrition advice six years ago after having moved to the Cape. (Showalter says her weight remains an ongoing battle.) In 30 years of professional practice, Davis said, she has seen plenty of clients who need a spiritual component to inspire them in their eating program.

"I don't necessarily bring [spirituality] up in the first visit with a patient, but people make it very clear . . . that they do have a need to go deeper with this," Davis said. "Many people who have dealt with this lifelong find that tapping into whatever their spiritual system is - whether they be Jewish, Christian, atheist - there's a spiritual component that many of them find extremely helpful in gaining strength to make some of these crucial changes."

Most dieters gain back their weight a few years after losing it, and no studies have been done to confirm whether 3D is more effective. But Vigoroso says she has been able to hold her weight at a "healthy level."

The authors insist that the spiritual bent doesn't rule out the diet for atheists or those of the keep-the-theology-I-just-want-to-lose-weight variety. "They can skip the devotionals," Showalter said, and just follow the eating advice, which is based on the US Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the food pyramid, and Davis's input.

As for that longstanding, faith-based ritual, the New Year's resolution to lose weight, "I think that New Year's resolutions are often overly ambitious and set people up for failure," Davis said. "But I think New Year's is a good opportunity to rethink [eating habits] after the holidays."

Showalter and Davis are scheduled to sign copies of their book today at Booksmith/Musicsmith in Orleans from 2 to 4 p.m.

Comments, questions and story ideas may be sent to spiritual@globe.com. ■

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