

## Food as a Path to Healing

*Our relationship to food is an exact microcosm of our relationship to life itself. I believe we are walking, talking expressions of our deepest convictions; everything we believe about love, fear, transformation and God is revealed in how, when and what we eat. When we inhale Reese's peanut butter cups when we are not hungry, we are acting out an entire world of hope or hopelessness, of faith or doubt, of love or fear.*

Geneen Roth – *Women, Food and God*

I discovered Geneen Roth because of my cat, Donovan. After my partner and I brought home a new kitten, she'd packed on a few extra pounds. My partner and I joked that she was eating to soothe the pain of having to share our affection. When I saw Geneen Roth's book *When Food is Love* in a box of books to be given away, I had to bring it home. I sat with Donovan on the floor next to her food bowl and showed her the book. I petted her while she ate and promised her that we still loved her as much as ever. I tried to convince her that she didn't need to seek solace in food.

I never opened the book. I was a feminist. I knew that social pressure to look like a super model kept women down. I had dedicated my life to challenging this system. Still, I secretly struggled with food and body image issues. I was afraid that reading *When Food is Love* would signal to the world that I was a fraud.

It was only when a friend told me about a different Geneen Roth book, *Feeding the Hungry Heart*, that I had the courage to admit that I was in the same boat as most of the women in the United States. Geneen's examples, both from her own life and from the lives of people who'd participated in her workshops, helped me normalize my own relationship with food and with my body. She helped me see that the real issues had nothing to do with how I looked or what I ate. These were just ways I'd found to escape from the critical voice in my head and the painful feelings that welled up inside me. She also pointed me to the path of self-acceptance I've been on ever since.

Fast forward a decade and a half and I've read dozens of books about food and body image issues. I've written columns and facilitated workshops on the subject. I assumed that I pretty much understood the issues and the solutions inside and out. And then I picked up a copy of *Women, Food and God* and was totally blown away. Geneen has long preached the message that transforming your relationship with food and your body will transform your life. In *Women, Food and God*, she goes on to explain how our patterns of eating (or not eating) reveal our core beliefs about life – what we believe about “feeling, suffering, receiving, nourishing, abundance, resting, having enough.” But this book isn't just about food. It applies to all of our obsessions – working, drinking, taking drugs, gambling, shopping, having sex, surfing the internet, compulsively working out, looking for a partner on an online dating site, and any other thing we can think to focus on that will take us out of the present moment.

According to Geneen, Our food choices (and other means of escape) expose the extent to which we do or don't feel: safe, connected to something greater than ourselves, and/or trust in God (or the Universe, or some sort of higher power) to give us what we need. The point is that most of us use food (or shopping, or alcohol, or drugs, or work, or obsessing about our health or sex or relationships or...) to avoid our feelings. And anytime we eat (or use another escape route like the ones listed above) to avoid our feelings, we are saying, “If I feel these feelings I'll die. I have to numb myself.” Or, “I'm powerless to change this situation. The only thing I can do is check out.” Or, “I'm broken and worthless, so I might as well check out.” Or, “Eating (or shopping or gambling...) is the only way I ever feel loved, deserving, or adored.”

The feelings we are running from now are rooted in experiences we had in the past. They are kept alive by the stories we tell ourselves based on the relationships of yesteryear. When we feel mortified about yet another break up or financial crisis, the roots of the intensity of this shame lie in our early relationships and experiences. It's as if we slip back in time to the point where the entire third grade class rejected us, or earlier, when we learned to read the implicit memo from our parents that said, “You will never, ever be good enough.” As young

children, we learned to bolt from our painful feelings because we had little or no control over our situation. We needed someone to hold us, love us and feed us so that we could live. Over the years, we got so good at bolting that we didn't notice that we are no longer completely vulnerable.

Our obsessions about food, our body image and everything else give us something besides this deep seeded pain to focus on. Ironically, the very same obsessions and compulsions that get us in trouble and help us disconnect from our selves can also help us connect to our authentic selves. If we listen to them, rather than get lost in them, they will help us debunk the critical stories we tell ourselves and heal our emotional wounds.

If, instead of following the impulse to dig into a pint of Ben and Jerry's ice cream, you take the desire as a cue to listen to the thoughts that are pinging around in your brain, you might hear a critical voice screaming horrible things like, "You are such a spoiled brat! Who do you think you are?" or "You are a total failure. You'll never make anything of yourself. You don't deserve to be loved." or "No wonder you're still single (or in a bad relationship), look at you..." When you tune out the thoughts with Cherry Garcia ice cream, you accept them as true. If, on the other hand, you listen to them from an objective perspective, you can deflate these vicious, critical thoughts. Are you really a spoiled brat? Does a reasonable person not have a right to want to be treated with respect and dignity? Are you really a failure? What about the fact that the stray cat in the neighborhood depends on you for affection and kibbles? What about the fact that you learned to tie your shoes? What about the fact that you learned to navigate the complexities of your HD TV or figured out how to use your iPhone? Don't these accomplishments count for something?

Obsessions and compulsions can also lead you through the pain of your volatile emotions to a place of peace. If you sit with your desire to eat a bag of potato chips when you're not hungry, you can catch a glimpse of the feeling that you're running from. And if you sit with that feeling and just observe it, without judgment, as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world, you will see that it shifts and eventually dissipates.

If challenging your beliefs and facing your feelings seems overwhelming, fear not. Geneen lays out a framework to help you work through these challenges. Perhaps most importantly, Geneen reminds readers, over and over, that we are not our thighs or the chocolate cake we ate or denied ourselves the pleasure of eating. We are not the person the critical voices in our heads say we are. We are not our obsessions. We are something more, something better, something lovely. She reassures us that beneath the critical voice that beats us up every chance it gets, beneath messages we got as children, beneath the horrific experiences we had, beneath the horrible things we've done or said to ourselves and to others, beneath all the brokenness, self-hatred and fear, there is a core self, a self that has never been broken. And she shows us how to connect to that part of ourselves so that we can find the peace and amazing sense of being alive.

Finally, at the end of the book, Geneen includes seven clear, simple, gentle guidelines for eating that will help you taste, experience and enjoy the food you put on your plate.

If you think of your scale, your mirror, or food as the enemy or struggle with obsessions or compulsions of any kind, *Women, Food and God* will lead you to freedom and help you transform your self-hatred into self-love.

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