

The Death of an Addiction The Birth of Compassion

By Rhonda Ashurst

I used to be obsessed about food. Most of my day revolved around what I was going to eat, or not eat. Now eating is a natural part of my day—I eat when I'm hungry and until I'm satisfied. I love to cook and share meals with others. I can't recall the last time I binged and purged, or even thought about it.

What happened to my eating disorder? When I look back, it was a slow and gradual process, taking nearly as long as the years I was an active bulimic. Angels were sent to help me and by God's grace I found my way through the disorienting ups and downs of recovery from an addiction. What I didn't realize is that my addiction would become a pathway to developing compassion for myself and others.

While in the throes of bulimia, every waking moment was filled with thoughts of food. I kept a running tally in my mind of how many calories I'd consumed, carefully calculating when I could eat again and how many calories I could have. Inevitably, the time came when I would lose control and eat more than I had allowed myself. Suddenly, the addiction was triggered. I would be convinced people could see the bulge of my belly and would think less of me. I would get FAT! I had blown it again, so why not go for the Big Binge? Thoughts quickly turned to cravings. I would buy a large pizza and a carton of chocolate ice cream—a bag of Cheetos and a box of Oreo cookies—a burger, fries, vanilla shake—an assortment of candy bars: Snickers, Milky Way, Baby Ruth.

I spread out the purchases between different stores and restaurants, so no one figured out what I was doing. Then I'd find a quiet place to consume them—my car, the lower stacks in the

library, the house if my roommate was not home. Next was finding an even quieter place to vomit. I knew where all the private, public restrooms in the city were located.

After vomiting, when the rush of adrenaline passed, the shaking would start and I would think of food again. I'd eat anything to stabilize my blood sugar and stop the shaking, often triggering another round of binge-purge. Sometimes I would go through three or four cycles in a day, finally collapsing at night to sleep it off, hoping for a binge-free day tomorrow. Always there was the shame I felt about not being able to control my bingeing. I hated what I was doing and yet I was unable to stop. The harsher I was with myself the worse it became. I was desperate for a way out. The challenge of a food addiction is that you can't go cold turkey—you can't stop eating forever.

At times I went into long, downward spiraling slides that left the corners of my mouth torn and the tops of my knuckles bleeding. Hundreds of dollars literally down the toilet. I hated myself and my inability to control this demon. Then somehow, I would begin again to try and eat like a normal person.

I became a bulimic when I was fourteen, as a way to eat and not gain weight. When I finally admitted it to my family, the counseling sessions began. In those first years, counselors were useless. They looked at me with thinly veiled horror and made vague suggestions about avoiding trigger foods and improving family communication. I had no idea how to do these things. Trigger foods surrounded me every day of my life. And how was a 14-year-old supposed to improve family communication? When my father walked out on our first family session, refusing to ever return, it only reinforced my sense that it was hopeless. I felt misunderstood, ashamed, and impotent.

Then I went to college, moving from a small town to a city, and living with an older roommate in one of my parents' rentals. I had always been a good student and I pushed myself to earn A's in all my classes. It was the one thing I did well. The eating disorder was my new best friend, keeping me company in the lonely hours of studying. Unlike human friends, it allowed me to work almost continuously, without complaint. I could eat and study at the same time.

For all the surrogate comfort it gave me, I knew it was killing me and I had to get help. I tried a variety of individual therapists, but I continued to binge and purge. Then, one day I saw a notice about an eating disorder support group on campus. I went to the next meeting. For once, I was with others who did these same horrible things, who couldn't stop themselves either. At last, I felt understood and I knew I was not alone. I began to heal.

I noticed I was most tempted when I was especially upset or stressed. I read Geneen Roth's book *When Food is Love*. I realized that I used food to comfort myself. This was a major breakthrough. I needed to find other ways to soothe myself.

I'd been going about recovery all wrong. I thought I had to discipline myself into quitting or make rigid goals like "I'll never do it again, after this time." I thought the problem was a lack of self-control. It turns out it was too much control, too much harsh discipline and perfectionism. I pushed myself continuously—studying, going to classes, working, volunteering in campus organizations. There was no time for relaxation or fun. My boyfriend encouraged me to play more. I resisted mightily, fearful that giving in would lead me to become lazy and irresponsible. Then I really would be worthless. Maybe I was a bulimic, but at least I was a successful student.

Slowly, I began to understand that it was this merciless driving that was leading to my illness. I had to learn to play more, be gentler, and hold myself when I needed to cry or call someone else for a shoulder. I had to give myself permission to be sad, angry, have a bad day, be lazy, make mistakes, be human. I realized that I rarely spoke my truth when I thought it would disappoint someone else. I tried to figure out the least controversial things to be and do. I was a pleaser. I had no idea who I was, except a nice girl and a good student with an eating disorder.

In my mid-twenties, I started seeing a therapist who helped me begin to feel, to give voice to the many things I suppressed, to discover myself. She also encouraged me to meditate and I began a regular practice of meditation and prayer. I reconnected with my spiritual life, which I had abandoned. I'd felt that even God could not love someone who was so weak and out of control. During meditation I experienced a loving Presence embracing me, helping me to accept and forgive myself.

I was an active bulimic for over six years, and though I didn't meet full clinical criteria anymore, it took another six years before I completely stopped bingeing and purging. Even after the last binge, I continued the journey of self-discovery and the mending of my battered self-image. Looking back, my healing came down to a willingness to feel my feelings, to tell my truth, to loosen the tight collar of control, to be there for myself, even when someone else thought it was selfish. And I still work on those lessons every day. I thank God for the angels who helped me find my way and for the gift of knowing I am always loved.

My bulimia was a hard, ruthless teacher, but a good one. It left me, not because I demanded it, but because I was willing to tell my truth and treat myself with loving-kindness.

As my addiction died, compassion for myself and others was born and I understood that it is love which heals us.

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