

## *Sacred Nourishment*

*We all have priceless things in our lives. Have you ever stopped to consider what is the most precious thing you have in the world. What is the one thing you have that if it were taken away, you would never be the same again? Think about it. Take a minute.*

*You may find that a particular relationship you have is the most precious thing in the world. Perhaps it is your health and the health of those around you that is most precious. Perhaps you have a different answer, though when you consider this question very carefully, is there not something that takes priority over it all?*

*I would suggest that our awareness is our most priceless gift. We usually take it for granted.....Indeed the only reason anything is precious to us is because we are aware of its value.*

David Cooper, adapted from God is a Verb, p.32, 1997.

It was a snowy March day. Hastily crossing the main street in my Long Island suburb, a sign in the window of a health club stopped me in my tracks. A surge of rage raced through my body as I absorbed the message in bold red letters:

**“If you think the flu season is bad, wait till the bathing suit season---  
And it’s only three months away. Join now!**

How infuriating! I stood gazing at the sign as the wet snow melted on my face. *Should I go into the gym? Explain that these messages have a disastrous impact on mind and body--that dieting is disastrous to soulful living? ·*

I stood in the biting wind staring at the sign until suddenly, a blast from the fire house reminded me that it was 12 noon, and Lana, my 12:30 patient would soon be sitting in my waiting room, only blocks away. Within a short time, I was seated in my therapist's chair.

"I feel like a bomb was dropped on me," began Lana, age 29. Her "filthy habit"-- as she referred to her bulimia-- was out of control, once again.

"Do you have any ideas about now? Why now? What has happened?"

Slowly, her story emerged. The week before, her twin sister Jan had been diagnosed with leukemia. A crisis escalated, quickly and dramatically. Lana spent much of the week intimately involved with Jan: making critical decisions about physicians, second opinions, the pros and cons of chemotherapy vs, radiation, home-care. For most of our session, Lana alternated between denying and digesting her sister's life-threatening diagnosis. Together we teased out the relationship between her pain and the bulimia. For months we had been delving into her long-term pattern: when unbearable feelings surfaced, first she numbed herself with food. Then, she shamed herself with self-attacking thoughts about being fat. Atoning by ridding her body of her the reminder of her sinful ways was her grand finale. Grappling with unspeakable horror wasn't easy, I reminded as once again, I encouraged her to put words to her pain, for successful psychotherapy is predicated upon the ability to put one's feelings--all of them-- into words, yet for Lana, as for many eating disordered patients-- developing access to her feelings was at the heart of our work together.

The session was about to end. We were standing at the office door. "Knowing I make sense to you makes a difference," Lana said, thanking me. Her words energized me and released a burst of warmth within my body, for helping a patient develop awareness, compassion and self-empathy is at the bedrock of healing. But my feelings of warmth quickly evaporated as her

next words blew in an icy chill which lingered even after the door was shut and I was left with her final comment, still dangling:

“We’ve been talking about how sad I feel-- and I really do. But there’s something else I haven’t wanted to mention..” Her voice dropped an octave. “I feel like a disgusting person,” she continued. “Even in this session with you, I kept thinking: *Poor Jan has leukemia...and all I can think about is: How am I going to get to the gym?*”

Alone in my office, I found myself adrift in a sea of emotions. Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and frustration washed over me. Dissociation both protects and causes pain, I reminded myself, for giving up old “habits,” is not easy, even when they have outworn their usefulness, for “habits” cover wounds, and living with our wound--the price of consciousness--is often too painful to bear. Suddenly I was reminded of the sign in the window of the gym. How difficult it is to stay awake, aware and tuned into our inner voices when we are incessantly bombarded with insidious media messages that dull our awareness, rob us of space for the soul’s growth.

My buzzer interrupted me and my day plodded on.

“My 12 year old daughter confessed that she had gained nine pounds this year. When I reminded her that she had grown three inches in the past year, she became furious and stormed out of the kitchen. The next day she began a fast with a vengeance. ”

Rhoda, a mother of a 12 year old

“How did I end up in the hospital? No one believes me, but it was my boyfriend Andy’s words that pushed me over the edge. Everyone keeps telling me there are “underlying reasons,” but I don’t buy it. What worse trial is there than being called fat? Being fat is like one of the ancient plagues from the bible. How can I ever redeem myself?”

Allison, a 99 pound college student

“Why do I eat? I eat if I’m sad, angry, lonely. I eat when I’m bored. I eat when I’m confused. I guess I really don’t know why I eat. All I know is I can’t stop eating. You’re my last hope. I’m praying you can help me shed these unwanted pounds”.

Susan, a 39 year old therapist

“I eat to fill the hole in my soul.”

Martha, a long-term patient.

Listen to the haunting images and solemn language of sufferers who eat-- or don't eat-- attempting to satisfy the yearning of the soul. Perhaps you, too, have lived in this space. Have you ever

“Confessed”... your weight?

“Prayed for redemption” after over-eating?

“Fasted” so you could slip into a dress that no longer fits?

Felt like your body was a curse-like “plague from the bible?”

*We are born hungry and forever, until we take our last breath, we must feed and nourish our hungers, appetites and desires. How is it that what begins as a sacred right-- feeding ourselves-- has become, for so many women, a dreaded taboo? That the pursuit of thinness has been elevated to a spiritual quest? That suppressing out needs for nourishment -- nutritional-emotional-psychological and spiritual--have been banished to the dark recesses of awareness?*

A woman with an eating disorder is consumed with a burning agony. An inner anguish gnaws at her soul. *Thin, thinner, thinnest! Let me lose weight!* goes the mantra in her head, a mantra that keeps her disconnected from an awareness of her deeper hungers. It is impossible to dislodge her from her trance-like, meditative state, for it is because she has lost faith in herself and the world around her that this obsessive quest has developed. Disconnected from her own sense of aliveness, her capacity for awareness has dimmed. Against this backdrop, she takes refuge in prayer.

*Help me shed these unwanted hideous pounds.*

*Help me be special, acceptable and find love.*

*Give me the strength to “be good.”*

A woman with an eating disorder prays. She prays for an answer to life's darkness. She prays that losing weight-- being thinner-- will bring her peace, fulfillment and renewal. In her search for salvation, she performs unique rituals:

A diet of rice cakes, diet soda and chewing gum. Rigorous exercise. Daily weigh ins  
Counting calories. Laxatives. Vomiting. Diuretics.

Her body is her temple. A calorie book her bible. The scale is her confessional. Her size  
1 jeans her holy robe. Her mantra: I must lose weight. A holy hymn

*Mirror, mirror on the wall,  
Who's the thinnest of them all?*

On a conscious level, these rituals offer her a vision of enlightenment. In reality, a wall of  
darkness dims her vision, overshadows her life. And, unless there is a shift-- an insight--, a  
moment of transformation--an opening of the heart-- she will remain stuck in an automatic state  
of mind.

This is the healer's challenge-- to find a crack in the wall that surrounds her; to touch a  
place in her heart that expands and deepens her awareness of both the darkness and light within;  
to help her realize the spiritual longing which underlies her almost religious quest for thinness.

### ***AWARENESS***

If *awareness* is our most important possession, we need to help our patients dip into a  
deeper awareness of what is. There are things we can do to heighten or lower awareness. If you  
are willing, you can expand your awareness right here, now.

### ***Expanding Our Awareness***

To expand your awareness, you do not even have to turn your head away from  
this page. Just allow your vision to expand peripherally. Just notice that as you look at this page,  
and read these words, you can take in more information about what is happening around you at  
this moment.

What else has come to your attention? What else about your surroundings are you now aware of? Notice how it feels to widen your visual awareness. You will discover immediately a sense of more alertness and greater presence. At first it may take an effort for you to sustain this alertness but with a gentle reminder, you can rapidly expand your sense of visual awareness.

You can further expand your awareness by paying more attention to the sounds that are occurring around you at this moment. Normally, while we concentrate on something, we ignore the sounds around us. But if you focus/shift your attention, you may notice a sound that has been present all this time and has gone unnoticed. You do not have to stop reading to intensify your listening, to deepen your higher sense of awareness.

Next, notice your body. Feel the pressure of your buttocks as you sit. Feel your feet as they touch the ground. Become aware of any sensations in your neck, your shoulders, your hands as you hold this book. All of these details are constantly furnishing us with a steady flow of information.. (adapted from God is a Verb, p. 40)

When I sit with patients, meditative exercises like these are useful in heightening awareness of the present moment, a preliminary to developing psychological awareness.

### ***Meditation***

To meditate all you have to do is sit and be still. It simply involved making time for yourself. You can do it anywhere. Whether you call it meditation, you undoubtedly achieve a meditative state more often than you are aware. Taking time to simply stare out the window, becoming engrossed in music, or feeling lost in a daydream are examples of times you have probably meditated. You can do it when you drive your car, when you take a walk, when you sit quietly indoors or outside, when you take a bath. True meditation is about making the time to experience the essence of your core. Knowing you can create and return to a time of quiet contemplation provides a solid anchor deep within. Meditating simply involves allowing yourself a few minutes of uninterrupted quiet time, creating a time to relax by concentrating on an image, thought or sound you choose and breathing deeply.

## ***Breathing Meditation***

Take a moment and gently breathe-- in and out, in and out. And let your body find its own natural rhythms. Now, take a few more focused breaths. As you breathe in, allow yourself to fill up with the energy of the universe. Feel yourself expand with new energy, new life and now, as you breathe out, allow yourself to surrender. Breathe in, deep within, into the deepest places in your body, into your heart. And as you keep breathing, see if you can draw in a bit more energy. Bring your breath in, deeper into your heart and very softly, lay your energy there .....on the doorstep of your heart.

Now, cross your hands over each other. Keeping your hands crossed one on top of another, hold your heart with your hands. Breathe deeply as you hold your hands, one on top of the other. Breathe deeply. Ask your heart how it feels about you making time to slow down and pay attention to it. Watch for a physical response.

Take a few more deep breathes as you feel your heart, and imagine that somewhere within, a light is kindled. See if you can stay with the light within. We can kindle our inner lights in many different ways-- with our breathing, with our bodies... and one way of kindling a light is with words. Sometimes a word, sometimes a phrase or even a single word is a lantern that allows us to explore the soul.

## ***HONORING OUR HUNGERS***

“What do I like to eat? It’s been so long since I asked myself that question. I don’t really know anymore.”

Rosa, a 52 year old widow

“No man wants a fat woman.”

Rosa, age 16

Much of my time is spent talking to patients about food. Learning to nourish the hungry soul is the core of my work. Most people I see are filled with guilt, contempt and hatred for their hungry selves. Many have lost touch with their hungers, desires and appetites. *Labeling, affirming and acknowledging nutritional hunger is a first step in validating and legitimizing emotional and spiritual hungers as well.* With the goals of supporting the right to nourish oneself, I designed the following meditation:

Imagine you are at a banquet, a banquet in the sky. There is a table before you, filled with food. Let your eyes sweep across the whole table as you look for your favorite food. Take your time, no need to rush...allow your eyes to sweep across the

whole table, back and forth, as you search for your favorite food.

When you search for your favorite food, perhaps a food come to mind...and you are looking for that food, now. Let your eyes sweep across the table, going back and forth as you take your time, looking for, searching out, seeking your favorite food. Take a good look at all the foods that come into view as you let yourself see everything, as you search for a favorite, your favorite food.

What is it like to see the table? How are you doing, searching, seeking, finding your favorite food? Take a good look, and let your whole body: your eyes, your nose, your mouth, fill up with this food as you breathe into it, as you breathe in what it means to be with your favorite food.

Soon you are going to eat this food. What kinds of feelings come up as you imagine eating this food. What are you feeling? Excitement? Joy? Terror? Dread? Take another breathe and dip into yourself as you ask the question: What am I feeling as I sit with this food?

Soon we will be eating this food. But before we do:

Take a moment and think about the first time you had this food. Allow a scene to come to mind: you, with this food-- the first time you had it. How old were you? Where were you? Can you recall the time of year- was it warm or cold, summer or winter.

Think about the last time, the most recent time you had this food. When was it? Where were you? See yourself eating this food, the last time you had it.

Think about the next time you will have this food. Do you know when that might be? Have you planned it? Or does it usually happen spontaneously, unexpectedly, that you just have this food?

Imagine we will be having it for lunch today. How would you feel about eating it here, today at lunch? with all of us, together? Imagine tasting it. Do you pick it up with your hands? Touch it? Or use a fork and knife.

Do you touch it? Does it slide into your mouth? Is it gooey? Crunchy? Listen to the sounds you make as you taste it

Imagine smelling it. Does it have a particular odor? strong? sweet? pungent? mild? wild? Or no odor at all.

What is it like for you to taste your favorite food? Imagine it entering your mouth

Do you eat it delicately? Do you feel prim and proper? Or do you eat it with enthusiasm and gusto? See it, taste it, listen to the noises it makes, if it makes any noises- as it goes down your throat, touch it: is it gooey?

Let your whole body get involved as you allow yourself to eat. Imagine being with this food, and as you eat, see if there is some information way down deep that emerges for you....whether any part of you comes to know something new about you as you imagine being with your favorite food.

Using this guided imagery meditation has powerful healing effects. It rekindles the awareness of the mind-body-spirit-soul connection. It deepens one's awareness of how food is inextricably connected to a wide variety of emotions and relationships-- both painful as well as life-affirming. It offers patients the opportunity to unearth complex buried meanings buried and embedded in food and eating:

I Brownies are my favorite food. I grew up with a strict German mother who never stopped talking about how spoiled Americans were. I think she thought that by controlling the food, she would keep us from being over-indulged. Once my brother and I ate a whole box of Entemanns' brownies when she was out. We were terrified she'd punish us-- but she didn't. Perhaps she didn't even know we ate them. To this day eating Entemanns' Brownies gives me a thrill!

We I love artichoke hearts. It was my mother who introduced me to this adored delicacy. had a rule in our family--when we ate artichokes, my Mom got all the hearts. It didn't seem insane to me then, but now it does. Now, when I have an artichoke, *I get the heart*. Nobody gets to eat *my* heart anymore but me. What do artichoke hearts do for me? They remind me that now I'm in charge.

Lobster- that's what I thought about --lobster. I remember the first time I ate lobster. I couldn't have been more than 10 but I remember being at a beach party with my whole family. We were allowed to swim way out in the ocean late at night-- and then, feast on lobster. It was really special.

Can food be sexy? You bet! I chose Chocolate Kisses as my favorite food. Just thinking about them makes me slurp!!I'm slurping!

My favorite food is bittersweet chocolate. What I realize is that although it's my favorite food, I don't eat it very often. How sad that I so rarely give myself what I truly yearn for.

My favorite food? I don't know any more. I've been dieting for so long I forgot what I really like.

Eating --or not eating...offers us a limitless number of emotional experiences. For some, our food choices offers a sense of control and comfort. Our decisions can help us feel special, sexy, and loved. What we eat, and how we eat it can help us feel sneaky...can allow us to experiment with risk-taking. Eating...and not eating can help us become aware of how we connect to or disconnect from our families and/or our cut off emotions. Understanding how food and eating are connected to deep wounds allows us to ask the next question that leads us on the journey of recovery.

Often food is misused in the quest for wholeness. Eating--and dieting-- and alternating

between the two--always express deeper concerns. Understanding the hunger, appetite or desire manifested in eating and/or dieting behaviors helps us connect with our patients at a deeper levels as we generate new question, deeper concerns, such as:

If you eat to feel connected to your family...*how else can you feel connected?*

If you eat to feel sexy... *how else can you feel sexy?*

If you eat when you are bored... *what else can you do to alleviate boredom?*

If eating helps you take risks... *how else can you take more risks?*

If you eat to feel whole....*how else can you feel whole?*

### ***CONCLUSION***

People who don't climb mountains tend to assume that the sport is a reckless Dionysian pursuit of ever-escalating thrills. But the notion that climbers are merely adrenalin junkies chasing a religious fix is a fallacy. ...at least in the case of Everest. In subjecting ourselves to week after week of toil, tedium and suffering, it struck me that most of us were probably seeking, above all else, something like a state of grace.

John Krakower Into Thin Air,p.194 1997.

In her dedicated preparation... of the special cabinets where she stores her food, she is, in fact, making a sacred ground for herself... hoping for rebirth.

Kim Chernin, The Hungry Self, p. 172-4, 1986.

Moments of deep knowing come from being open to and attuned to the sacred, the soleful, the desire for grace within every person alive, therapist as well as patient. The idea of spirituality offers clinicians a new perspective to their work. It takes us from the head to the heart. It expands what is allowable in our offices.

For many people with eating problems, talk and insight alone are not sufficient for healing and change. *Understanding does not necessarily result in symptom alleviation or healing.* Therapeutic practices often focus on retrieving painful memories yet neglect teaching people how to access and build up their own healing resources. Examining the emotional context of food and eating can help us deepen our awareness of how we nourish-- or do not nourish our ghosts within. Learning to create a life that honors our sacred hungers is the core of both the psychotherapeutic and spiritual journey.

Chernin, Kim. The Hungry Self. New York: Random House, 1986.

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To learn more about *Sacred Nourishment* seminars and workshops, contact Judith Ruskay Rabinor at 516-889-3404 or [jrrabinor@gmail.com](mailto:jrrabinor@gmail.com).