

newspaper edition



Stories of Recovery

edition newspaper

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Numbers Game

Against my therapist's suggestions, I continued my dance with the scale until recently. Mr. Noise kept telling me that he still needed control of the situation, or the illusion of control. In reality, it was not control, it was utter domination. I continued to step on the scale several times a day when I could have been waking up from my body image nightmare and getting some sleep. Before coffee, after coffee, after working out, after going to the bathroom, with clothes, without clothes or just for the hell of it. And it wasn't just one or two of these offensive machines, I was getting on whichever ones were available at the time, just like what they call a 'garbage head' type of drug addict who will ingest any drug available to get their high. I'd never before looked at my eating disorder as a hardcore addiction before this. Reality was harder and harder to deny.

Mr. Noise just got louder in my head to keep having his way. At that time he countered with, 'Giving up the scale is for just anorexics. You don't need to do that.' People looked at me in the grocery store when I would get on the scale twice to make sure the weight was correct. I'd go use the restroom and come out and weigh myself publicly again. They would furtively glance towards me, then quickly away to avoid eye contact. They thought I was nuts. I was.

After three months of my out-patient recovery, I decided to try something new. I got rid of the scale. Even after giving up the device, it wasn't easy. I would walk past it, with Mr. Noise shouting that if I stopped measuring myself, I just wouldn't 'count' anymore, and that the ability keep my weight down and take pride in my appearance was some sort of heavenly nirvana, certainly not one for mere mortals. 'Face it,' he said, 'Everyone out there gets fat. Except you, my girl, you're the special one'. The problem with his illogic is that the heaven and nirvana that he promised never showed up in my life. My life continued to be hellish, no matter how much my weight went down. And I did some pretty mean things to my body at times in order to achieve that. Over-exercise, diet pills, cocaine, the works. Then I would just consume more, injure myself more. I knew that that my behavior would ultimately render me needlessly crippled, and totally unable to work, maybe even function without pain medication. It was in my best interest to turn a deaf ear to Mr. Noise, and his machinations in my brain. I knew by this time that he was a stone cold liar!

There were times I felt like crying. I was not strong enough to walk past the scale at the gym yet, so some days, I could not go to the gym, but opted for a walk or no exercise at all. I didn't die from lack of exercise. Not knowing a number in my head, I often forgot about what Mr. Noise was trying to say. I found that giving him a cold hard number adds ammo to his gunfire, and giving him anything to crow about made no sense at all (it still doesn't). So I continued to avoid the scale. Days went by. He shouted at me. I returned to the gym and was able to walk right past the scale. It popped out a little at the market, but I refocused on healthy meal planning and went straight to the produce aisle, where the scales posed no danger to me.

One day in my therapist's waiting room, I was reading a self-help book that made reference to a famous eating disorder clinic that speaks to their client with terms of endearment, affections such as 'darling,' 'honey,' and 'dear.' They serve client's meals on individually personalized dishes from home. The book went on to say that the utmost love and care is shown to every one of their residents to plant and reinforce a new idea to them; that they are unique and special people who deserve their bed in the clinic and worthy of a chance to feel love and get well. At this clinic (The clinic is the Montreux clinic in Canada), the work hard never to impart to their patients of feeling of being 'just a number' in a medical setting. Most of them, if they've been struggling with the disease long enough, have come to see themselves that way anyway.

This resonated with me. Suddenly, I was in tears. I was crying silently and could not stop. I was in front of other people; feeling unexplainable grief and joy at the same time. I was not sure why. Luckily, the door to the waiting room opened and I was ushered into the office. I reached for Kleenex and plopped myself down, determined to process these feelings. I explained what I was reading, and what had just happened to me.

"What about this touched you so deeply?" she asked me.

The answer flooded my mind. This is the 'reward' part of what it means to be in recovery; to suddenly explode awareness from time to time, a new revelation every day have a new one. This is what it means to be alive and well.

Here's what the revelation was: For most of my life, I have never been tender with myself, or cut myself any slack for any shortcomings. Most hurtful of all, I have allowed our society and its morbid obsession with statistics to measure my worth. I've even taken it a step further into this obsession/control thing with Mr. Noise at my side, urging me to always work on and think about my body image. 'He's got to go,' I thought. 'I'm not helping him do his thing anymore, and I'm so glad I gave up the scale a month ago.' This is why.

As a former world class athlete, high school 'A' student headed for Stanford, commercial actor in LA, model, alternative radio disc jockey with ratings to make and advertising salesperson, I have been marginalized and further reduced myself into every measurable dimension and rating available: Speed of 440 yard relay; percent body fat vs. lean muscle; Height; inches of vertical jump; waist size; Cup size; money earned; money saved; weight; test scores; endorsements and commercial jobs booked annually; money earned annually measured against the success of my father; grade point average; clothes size... The list goes on.

As the eldest of four bright, high achieving sisters, I might have gotten perfectionist messages from my family, because every parent wants the best for their children and have different ways of expressing this, some parents doing it differently than others. It was more how about what I saw and interpreted from

those messages that drove the final bullet home and caused me to go south. And I did.

I went through a 20-year rebellion, railing against self and reveling in self imposed perfectionism. I resorted to drugs and lived a fast life with older, moneyed men. I always had the drugs to keep myself thin, because with the men that I chose and who chose me, if you weren't physically perfect, they'd find someone who was. I had to keep myself that way to appeal to my choice of companions. Or so I thought. I never questioned it.

I stayed in rebellion, until my eating disorder pinned my back to the wall, and I was forced to change. Everything. Especially the way I think.

No more numbers. One of the things about being measured numerically is that numbers are very black and white. They are unforgiving that way. You are either first or last, best or the worst, the other or 'the one' because numbers do pile up that way. With numbers, you either count or you don't. Numbers are the cruelest way we humans keep track of ourselves. But I guess in a certain type of society, statistics are inevitable, so we pull out those 'scales.'

From now on, I'm going to matter to myself. To myself, I'm going to count. But I'm not going to count using numbers, not ever again.

Free from Bulimia

Hi, my name is Barbara, and I am a recovering bulimic of 21 years, after 15 years active. I grew up in a large family where "fat" was not tolerated. I was the fattest of all 6 kids, and by today's standards I was not that big; sort of like the pre-teen who sheds pounds after a growth spurt. I used to ask my family members if I looked like this person or that, so I could figure out just how "fat" I was. Thus began my obsession with body image...mine and everyone else's. By the time I shed the extra pounds, around the age of 12, I was in a deep depression. My world went flat, and I gave up fighting any authority figure, real or imagined. I also stopped growing emotionally. By the time I was ready to go to college, I had to ask my parents why I wanted to go to X school, as requested on the application. The verbal abuse continued, and I "swallowed" it, whole. One of the "musts" I heard over and over as a child was, "You must never swallow a prune pit." Well, freshman year was the first time in my life that I ate the way my parents told me to: three meals, nothing in between, and I "cut out" desserts, too. I lost some weight, and was praised upon returning home for winter break. One afternoon during second semester, I swallowed a prune pit by mistake; I became obsessed with getting rid of it, and did the only thing I could think of. My fifteen year cycle of bingeing and purging began that day.

Having come from a foreign country, I always felt inferior to American students, even though I was an American. That feeling of "less than" fueled my disease. Enter my disordered thinking process, and the fire was out of control. By senior year I had added self-mutilation to my repertoire. I tried to burn my tongue so I wouldn't want to eat.

I met my future husband and told him about my terrible problem. He reassured me that our love would wipe it out. He was the only person I told until I sought help. No one ever said anything to me, even though I knew people knew. The first year of marriage I worked at a school where there were always treats for the staff. I felt powerless over them and all food. I used to go home twice a day to purge. Then I would swim, and feel good, like everything would be OK.

I asked myself if that feeling of alone was worth my risking all to get. One time I used a coat hanger, and injured myself enough to go to the hospital, and still no one said anything. By now I thought I had everyone fooled. My disease continued through four pregnancies. By this time I was using alcohol on a regular basis, and it numbed me about what I was doing, but also enabled me to eat more.

When a famous singer died young from heart complications from an eating disorder, I woke up. I did not want my children to find me dead in the shower. That fear drove me to seek help, after watching a talk show on bulimia. I was astounded that others had this same problem. The day I walked into the therapist's office was the first day free from the binge-purge cycle in 15 years. That was 21 years ago, and I have not done it since. I have embarked on a

journey of recovery from smoking, drinking, obsessing on people, places and things.

And now back to my eating disorder...Two years ago a dear friend's eating disorder became apparent, and I became obsessed with "her" disease. The more I researched, the more my fingers pointed back at me. It was then that I contacted EDA. I recognized myself in the literature, and knew I needed to work a program around my relationship with food. I felt truly grateful to have a place to go to recover from my primary disease. Whenever I became addicted to anything, I lost weight. I had adrenaline rushes, loss of appetite, and a wonderful high. Being without these terrified me because I feared being out of control with food.

Today I know that I suffer from depression and am under a doctor's care for that. My obsession with body weight and image has been a real struggle, as I continually look at women's arms, backs, and stomachs to see if I'm "bigger" or "smaller". Thanks to EDA, I now know when I'm hungry, and also when I'm full. Full does not feel good to me, because I feel "fat" when I'm full. I am working on stopping eating when I'm comfortably full, because moderately full feels too full. I used to exercise compulsively, both to punish myself for what I had eaten, and because my self-image and esteem relied on it. I hurt my body doing that. Today I have a moderate program, in which there is no pain and I feel peaceful afterwards.

The greatest thing of all is that I now have a passion for some things today; and these won't kill me. One is EDA, and the other is doing Pet Therapy. My dog has been such a comfort, and I am beginning to accept the love he has for me. I laugh now, and try to play. Having fun is not in my dictionary, but it is in my dog's. He is very patient with me.

I know I have a Higher Power who cares for me and loves me, and that is all that matters. Well, I know that, but keep forgetting it. Restricting is my middle name, and I know I'm choking myself with my own rigidity. I am also so grateful to know this today. Knowledge of all the aspects of my disease has given me the power and the willingness to try doing it differently. I owe EDA a debt of gratitude for putting it all down for me to see. Our EDA meeting has met for two years. We now have a Step Study group that has propelled me to go to any lengths to recover.

Unconditional Love

As a little girl I was best friends with my father. There was closeness with my father that was irreplaceable. After my parents got a divorce when I was six years old I developed my own way of dealing with this new reality. I escaped deep inside myself in order to accept the loss of the unconditional love. I definitely felt abandoned as a young child. Another way I dealt with this pain was to hide inside myself and daydream. While the other elementary school girls were playing, running and bonding together, I was off by myself on the swing set dreaming of Prince Charming's secret plan to rescue me. I would fantasize that I was the most beautiful girl in the whole world and that as long as I was the most beautiful girl, no man would ever want to leave me again.

It was not too long after I entered middle school that I discovered boys and had my first experience with alcohol. My new interest in boys ended abruptly though, when I was date raped at eleven years old by a family friend. Now there were two major losses in my life and the void in my heart was just beginning to widen. Due to this relentless emptiness I started to feel inside, I sought out refuge. I started my endless search for ways to fill this void and find the answer I was searching for.

My first answer ended up being alcohol and drugs. This was my outlet. I could numb my feelings of loneliness. I also started looking for men that could replace this great loss that I was feeling in my heart. One day a simple thought dawned on me. To this day I have no idea where it came from. I thought I would just use my body for the answer. With the right kind of clothes, hair style and especially physique, I might not only get the man I wanted, but keep him.

It wasn't until I was fifteen years old that I got the courage to use this newfound answer. I had developed this serious crush on a senior in my high school that of course had no idea I was even alive. I thought if I could get perfect enough, he would ask me to the school dance. Of course, that did not happen. This was the first time I tried bingeing and purging my food as a solution. I was a bulimic from the start. At that time, I developed a rigid attitude about food, and exercise became very important. These new habits were adopted to get me what I ultimately desired: love.

This pattern continued for many years. I continued to act out, overusing alcohol and food to help keep my feelings stable. I had such a total lack of self-acceptance that I entertained thoughts of suicide on a daily basis. By the grace of God, on April 14th 1997 I hit my bottom with alcohol, and started working the 12 steps of the A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous) program. This was a short term remedy because my eating disorder also went away. I was still a bit rigid about food and exercise but not to the extreme I had in the past. In 1998 I got married to an A.A. member and we started our life together.

My true EDA story starts 6 yrs later. In the 2001 the new marriage was showing signs of impending disaster. The issues started to become overwhelming to me. No matter how I would handle a situation, no solution I came up with would work anymore. These stresses led me to push myself to the point where my own body finally retaliated against itself. I began to have stomachaches and other related problems that made my life completely unmanageable. It started to threaten my sobriety, serenity, and placed me in the middle of misery. I decided in July 2002 to move out and seek a divorce. The man I was married to then did try his best to help, but he just could not understand what I was going through.

Very soon after my decision to move out I ran into a good friend at my gym. I asked him if he knew of anyone who was looking for a roommate. It turned out he was himself and if I wanted I could room with him for a while. So, I moved in and soon thereafter I had surgery where they removed my gall bladder. My stomachaches were a result of gall stones that kept passing through my body. Unfortunately, though, the surgery did not fix all my stomach problems, and after the surgery they diagnosed me with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and I still deal with that today.

My divorce was final in December. My new roommate -- who by now had become my best friend -- and I started a new relationship. My life seemed perfect and settled for a while. My disordered eating habits were very apparent to him right away. He was and still is a very health-conscious person. He did try to influence me in many ways to try a different way of life. He gave me positive ways to think differently and act in more healthy ways, but I just was not ready to listen yet. Looking back now I can honestly say that was the first time since my childhood with my father that I felt unconditional love again. I really fell head over heels in love with this man, so much so that in March of 2003 I mustered up the courage to ask my new love to marry me. To my horror he did not feel the same way I did and turned me down flat. I was devastated.

At that point I again turned inside myself with daydreams, but this time destructive ones. I was two days later when the overwhelming anxiety hit, and I went out and bought as much junk food that I could carry home. I was trying desperately to fill that lonely, rejected void. I binged and purge again. The main thought in my mind was, "Maybe if I was just more beautiful and perfect, maybe he would change his mind." So, after the cycle was done I was stuck with a huge amount of guilt and fear. It only took a few weeks before I was back to doing a daily, day-long cycles. An all-day cycle included buying large quantities of snack items and food which enabled me to throw up the food with greater ease. I was particular about what I would buy, too. I knew I needed a variety of everything from sweet to salty so as to experience all of the pleasure. I would do numerous cycle of eating then purging all day. My body would continue to crave, so I would continue to act out on what it wanted.

This new habit quickly changed me. My reactions and attitudes rapidly started to destroy all of my peace of mind. It was also affecting the people around me, especially at home. My bulimia did not seem to care if I loved the people I was

hurting or not. I forgot things and my work life suffered from my careless errors. My body felt so fatigued that when my love would want to do something fun I never could because I knew my body would just give out. If I was to collapse I was very fearful that he would find out and leave me.

By the time June rolled around it became clear my course was aimed straight at hell. I had thoughts of suicide while the tornado was out and shredding everything in its path. On June 13th, 2003, I was going to perform the same all day cycle, but for some reason this time I did not want to anymore. All I could do was picture my love's hurt eyes. He always gazed at me in this certain concerned way after one of my mood swings or unjustified arguments. I was acting strange and he could see it. It did not stop me though. I did my deed reluctantly and then after I was done this time, I sat down on the floor and just cried. For the first time I felt powerless over this problem. Why did I do this and how could I stop? I mustered up the courage to call my sponsor and reveal my secret. She was scared for me and really did not understand the issue, but decided to help me anyway. She talked me into getting through the night and telling my love of my dilemma. I waited until my love arrived home and then I slowly let him know about my lifelong problem with food. Once again, to my surprise this time he was very supportive. He told me he would do what I needed for me to get through this.

That would be a great ending to my story but that is not the end. The very next weekend on June 20 2003, I did another all day cycle event. When my love returned home he found me frozen on the floor next to the bed. I was absolutely powerless over my problem. The bulimia and the fear had eaten me alive, and I was not sure what to do. That was the beginning of the end of my love and I being together.

The next day I searched everywhere to see where I could find some help for myself. I was on limited funds so an expensive counselor was not going to suit my needs. By the grace of God, I accidentally stumbled upon the EDA website, www.eatingdisorderanonymous.org. I read about how I could start my own meeting and I found some meeting listings in the locate area. The closest one was in Naples, FL, and was run by a woman who had been out of her eating disorder for two years. I called her that day and that is where my true EDA life starts. She was already involved in the program and had gone through the withdrawal process and worked the steps. I could not even imagine a day, much less two years. She assured me that if I just did not purge anymore for a little while, there would come a day when I would not want to.

I took her advice and ordered the meeting materials. This was to be my new solution or purpose to live. I started working the steps toward recovery from my eating disorder with my sponsor and I jumped into A.A. But it was too late for my love and I. The withdrawal was horrible. I had mood swings and massive disillusionment. I did not know up from down and this craziness took over and left us with nothing. He came to me and told that he had fallen out of love with me and that he was not happy anymore. So, I made a plan to reluctantly move out.

Today I still say that was one of the hardest things I have ever done in recovery. I got through it and did not drink, use drugs, or purge. It seemed this grave pain was helping me. It was giving me courage to grow and realize that in order to get better I needed to do this for no one else but myself and that I really was worth it.

My sponsor and I continued with the steps and the Tuesday night "Another Way of Life" group started on August 5, 2003. I made flyers and pamphlets and that is how I advertised at first. The A.A. women were extremely supportive to me during this time. I ended up making all kinds of new friends. Best of all God stepped in again, and allowed me to have enough courage to call my Dad after many years. We talked and I told him of my grief at the loss of our former close relationship, and about my eating disorder. To my delight he told me he would be there for me and most importantly that he never did stop loving me. Now we call each other once or twice a week. He calls work and tells me he loves me. That unconditional love was back and I could feel the void slowly starting to fill, this time with healthy things. I had a hard time with the emptiness I felt after the loss of my love. I miss and still wish for his love everyday. At first, I wanted so badly to show him how much better I was doing, but I knew I had lost his trust. So, I decided to write him a letter saying goodbye. I never sent it, of course, but it helped ease the pain. I needed to get well in order to ever have a healthy relationship with anyone.

Today, I sponsor two A.A. girls. We have about five to seven girls come to the E.D.A meeting every Tuesday, and with God's help I am sure it will grow. I am just about finished with my EDA steps with my sponsor, and now I talk to other women about my former dilemma. I strive for balance today using spiritual tools I have learned through both programs. I am reaching out to local therapists and half-way houses to introduce this new meeting to women and who need it. I have gone back to church and started counseling with a spiritual advisor. I don't look for Prince Charming anymore. I love me, and that to me is a pure miracle. It was of the other hard lessons I had to learn through these programs. I owe my newfound attitude to the fellowships of EDA and A.A. I am also thankful for my pain today. It helped me to grow into a better person. As my old sponsor used to say "If you don't grow, you will go," and today I want to stay.

One of the last things -- and one of the most important things -- I did was to contact a physician and get started on a regular daily eating plan. I have a vigorous willingness to get well and opened my mind to get physical with my own body. I recognize what is going on with it at all times. It takes a lot of practice, but has created numerous positive results. I did end up gaining weight at first and that was very scary for me. I just kept trusting God and exercising regularly. My body just simply adjusted and worked itself out. Today I try to think of food as fuel instead of pleasure. To me that is pure surrender: my first step away from my disease of bulimia. I hope my sharing my experience has helped you. I was given a choice, "Either you can pick up a phone or pick up the food." Which ever way you choose, just recognize that all you have to do is try your best today.

Good luck to you all and God bless. Remember it works, if YOU work it!

Jen R.

Dancing From Darkness to Daylight

My name is Jessica Beth, and I am a recovering bulimic. I've been in recovery for a little over a year and a half, after having my eating disorder for almost 10 years. My eating disorder began when I was 12 years old. I was a compulsive overeater, and at that time didn't know it. I was young, and was having a love affair with food. It was my best friend and my worst enemy. I ate as a reward, and I ate as a punishment. Despite my father's relentless teasing of the pounds adding on, I continued to torturously eat (or non-torturously as the case may have been). I had already been self mutilating since the age of 9, but at that age, I didn't know that's what it was, I just knew that what I was doing made me feel better after I did it. Little did I know that I was in a downward spiral that would last through my teen years into adulthood. I would go on diets, only to fail and beat myself up at my failure. I didn't realize that my compulsive overeating was the start of something big, bigger than me, than the food, than all of it. I was out of control and I hated it.

I don't know what happened, but one day something snapped, and I went on a diet with a friend. We decided we were going to rollerblade x miles after school every day and that we were only going to eat certain foods. I don't know what made this time different than all of the other times, but it was. I stuck to my regimen, and the pounds started dropping off of me. It was the best feeling in the world. People started complimenting me on my weight loss, and on my gaining control, and I was on top of the world. I started to realize that I could eat less than I was eating, and up my exercise, and still survive just fine, so that's what I did. As I progressively did this, my friend dropped out of our diet, realizing that she didn't need to lose any more weight. But not me. I was almost down to normal weight, and people were telling me it was time to stop dieting. Were they absolutely insane?? I was having the time of my life! For once I HAD something, I was in control, I was doing something amazing, and I felt really awesome about myself. It was powerful, exhilarating . . . I didn't listen to people when they told me to slow down my dieting. I did the complete opposite, and sped it up. I continued to cut calories and fat, I became a vegetarian, I went periods where I restricted for days, went on liquid diets, etc. As time went on, and I lost more weight, my diet turned into something that I couldn't control any more. It became an obsession. I was exercising just as many hours a day as I was sleeping, and I was becoming worn down. Thinner wasn't ever thin enough. And people were very concerned. But I was still on a rush. I was so hungry though. One day I binged on Chinese food, and I said to myself that I was going to purge, just this once. So I tied my hair back in a rubber band, and did it. It was both the most awful thing I had ever done, and it provided such relief at the same time. But I swore I would never do it again.

The next six years of my life were filled with compulsive exercising, starving myself weeks at a time, bingeing and purging sometimes 15 times a day, abusing drugs and alcohol, self mutilation, and low self esteem. On the outside I tried to be perfect, and I lost myself in the midst of all of the things I was doing. I was a

functioning anorexic/bulimic/alcoholic/addict, or so I thought. I had finished high school and went to college, but dropped out of college because it was best to (I really just couldn't admit that I did so because I was sick and I couldn't handle it!) I was holding down a full time job, supporting myself financially and living with my boyfriend. But I was still lost in a whirlwind of addictions. I hit rock bottom at the age of 20. I had developed knee problems due to malnutrition and over-exercise which sometimes didn't allow me to even walk. I had a borderline to mild heart attack, my teeth were in horrible shape, my hair wasn't so hot either. I at times lost ability to control my bowels. I had rectal bleeding that sent me to the E/R a couple of times. Physically I was knocking on death's doorstep. At half of the weight of what I started out as, the prognosis wasn't looking great, unless I was willing to recover.

My eating disorder doctor looked me in the eye and told me I was going to die from a heart attack the next time. My vitals were all screwy which triggered the first episode. At that point I was referred to The Renfrew Center in Florida, a residential treatment facility for eating disorders and women's issues. I had already been in therapy for years prior to this, and my therapist (whom I still see once a week and I love to death) but it was time for me to get the foundation built. Therapy was only doing so much for me; therapy would do much more for me on an aftercare basis, and this I knew. I was at Renfrew for 2 months. It was hard, but it was the best thing I could have done for myself. It was there that I regained my self esteem. That I began to live. The whole process wasn't an easy one, but it was well worth it, and to be honest I would go back there in a heartbeat. I loved it there. I learned so much about myself, my feelings, that I had feelings - my eating disorder, dynamics of why I do what I do, my thought patterns. I can hardly describe everything that Renfrew taught me about myself. It was simply amazing! I highly recommend a good residential program to anyone considering it.

Since I have been back from treatment, things haven't been easy. I am glad that they prepared me for that while I was in treatment. Residential was just the foundation, aftercare is the real work. Right now I am just taking things one day at a time. I go to therapy once a week, I attend 3 AA meetings a week, 1 ANAD meeting a week, and I started up an EDA meeting here in my area. For me it's about perseverance, and about realizing that I am only human. It's about honesty and willingness to grow and experience that growth. It's hard not to want to rush the process, but I have to remember to just take things one day at a time, and enjoy life, because this is a life I wouldn't have had if I didn't step onto the road of recovery. And for that I am truly grateful.

*With Love & Light,
Jessica Beth*

Observing Obsession

I grew up in Germany. Both my dad and mom are obese. Both my younger sister and I have struggled with bulimia.

I was a chubby baby. My mom appreciated how easy it was to get me to eat. She considered a sound appetite a sign of good health. My 2 1/2 years younger sister refused to eat most of what was offered to her. I was the "good" kid. I ate. I ate a lot.

My parents were born into World War II and grew up in its aftermath. Nutrition and nurturing were difficult to come by. Food was a precious commodity, to waste it an abomination. Then a sudden economic upturn made Germany bloom and threw this generation, which was brought up on fears of war and memories of hunger, into overabundance. Confusion was a logical result. Like many children of my time I grew up facing contradicting messages.

Traditional German mothers wouldn't allow their children to leave the family table before they cleaned their plates. No discussions. If you don't eat up, the weather will be bad and children in India or Africa will starve! One doesn't waste food. Under no circumstances is food to be thrown away. It depended on each mother's parenting style, if she physically forced you to eat or "guilt tripped" you into it. My mom was gentle about it. She looked sad when I didn't eat and happy when I did.

Most women of my mom's generation (I was born in 1966) were home makers. To praise and appreciate their cooking gave them feelings of pride and validation. My grandmother and other female relatives enjoyed the fact I liked their cooking. So did most of my (few) friends' mothers. I used to clear out serving dishes at the end of meals and earn amused and pleased looks of the mothers who had cooked those meals.

This early pressure to always eat up to avoid meteorological mayhem, world hunger, or offending people still shows in many of my current neurotic ideas and behaviors around food. I'm not blaming my parents, they did as well as they could under the circumstances. It helps me to understand the connection though, to see where my ideas are rooted.

One idea is that the way I eat influences what happens around me. "If I just find the perfect food, I will be happy." "If I reach a certain goal weight, I will be happy." Today I know this is magical thinking. It's giving food too much importance. The fact that I understand how the resulting feelings arise doesn't make it easier for me to face them. It doesn't make it any less tempting to ritualize food, and it doesn't make it

less disappointing when the rituals don't work.

Sometimes it seems that there's a war going on between what my body tells me and what my environment expects of me. I hate disharmony, people yelling at one another or being angry at me. I can't remember a time when I didn't try to please everybody around me, to make people like me, and to have them make me feel better. I felt dependent on others. I didn't know how to act unless they told me. I felt like an alien. A very klutzy alien. I lost myself in the process of trying to make others happy. Constantly pleasing others put me into awkward situations. Different people unfortunately couldn't agree on who they wanted me to be. Parents wanted one thing, peers, teachers, and siblings wanted others. The only person whose expectations matter, is I. However, to constantly figure out what others expect and try to match up is distracting. It makes it harder to decide what I expect of myself and set realistic goals. Then, when I've been a doormat for too long, stuff comes up, and I get angry or depressed, and, once again, look for food to comfort me. I've wrestled with these food issues for a few decades now, searching for a normal, balanced relationship and failing, again, again, and again. There are shimmers of hope now: the times between what I experience as "failures" are longer. This is progress. Today's binges have become less destructive. I still obsess about food, worry, eat larger portions, eat faster, and lose my attention for the present moment, when I face intense emotions. I don't overeat as often as I used to and I don't purge afterwards. I take responsibility. Even at my most challenging times, I manage to take care of myself, no matter how imperfectly.

I've spent much of my life distracting myself from sensations and emotions with daydreams and complicated eating rituals. I learned to numb myself with food when I was tired, stressed, scared, excited, angry, worried, anxious, bored, or lonely. Then I escaped the consequences by going through crash diets or throwing up. Through years of emotional eating I un-learned what it feels like to be hungry or moderately full. I treated my body and spirit with contempt, while celebrating my mind. I was smart, not wise. I was missing the point. I started swinging between delusional ideas of grandiosity on one side and desperate self-loathing on the other. I felt I didn't need anybody one moment and was desperately clingy the next. The more and the harder I tried, the stranger and more hostile my body seemed to behave. I ignored the constant flow of signals my body gave me. When the signals got more intense, I projected them to the outside, blaming people, institutions, and the universe itself. Instead of allowing my emotions to help me with my choices and with prioritizing what's important to me, I declared them the enemy. I wanted them gone. Eating made me feel peaceful and comfortable. I kept eating after the hunger was gone and got used to overeating.

My body, this unpredictable, untrustworthy instrument let me down. How could you, body? I didn't see that I had started the fight, by mistreating my body, and not listening to its desperate pleas. I tried to find a way out by declaring my body alien, foreign territory, inferior to the clarity and the sharp beauty of my logical mind. My mind doesn't get tired. My mind doesn't hurt, doesn't bleed, and

doesn't need to be comforted. My mind grants me precious moments of pure exaltation. My mind doesn't pee, puke, shit, or get horny. My mind is clean, clear, and in its own way, sacred. My mind makes promises it can't keep. Empty promises: "If I eat, it'll make me feel safe. If I eat, it'll make mommy relax. If I eat with others, I will feel a connection. If I eat chocolate I won't be sad. If I eat, it'll calm me down." I believed these promises for so long. It even worked in the short term. In the long run I paid a price. "If I am just slender enough, he will love me. I will be successful.

I will be adored and appreciated. I will get all the attention I want. If I eat this, it'll finally make me happy. If I don't eat this, or if I throw it up, after I ate it, it will make me pure and a better person. I will never, ever have to be sad again. Forever after. I kept stuffing myself. It doesn't work. Food isn't meant to satisfy spiritual and emotional hunger. To try and use it for feeding my longings for connection, love, safety, and calmness, for counteracting stress and finding protection from a world full of demands and expectations, won't work. There will never be enough food to fill the emptiness. Believe me, I tried.

As a child, I was a loner. I preferred the company of books to the company of other children. With books I knew what to expect. Sure, they were over at some point, but usually they didn't let me down. People had shown a potential to hurt and disappoint me. I was afraid of them. My younger sister made friends quicker and more easily. I was convinced I knew the reason: she was "pretty" and I was the "fat and ugly" one.

Years later when I saw myself on a video taken in a speech class in college I was surprised to see a fairly normal young woman on the tape, not the grotesque freak I expected.

Relationships with people were sources of anguish and disappointment. My relationship with food wasn't. Food became my tool of choice for distraction, as escape, and to numb myself. It came through every time. My comfort, my cradle, my ever-available, trusted friend. My helper, my source of happiness, my safety net, my secret hiding place, my magic device, my escape. Complete control. Mine. Mine. Mine. Always ready when I needed it. Always just one bite away, available when friends or believe systems, anything or anybody had let me down.

As far as I can think back, I hated disappointment. I wanted the universe to be fair and just. Anything, which reminded me that it isn't, tends to trigger feelings of despair, depression, worry, and anger. I didn't want to feel these emotions. I had given myself

the role of the good kid, the mature one. I was supposed to function, to handle whatever life threw at me. I was terrified of disappointing the expectations others (and I) had created. If this had to be an unfair, unsteady, dreadfully unreliable universe, then

I, at least, would be the one aspect of it that people could rely on. No matter the cost. Eating away the frustration by eating whatever I could get my hands on was one of my strategies for making this "work". Talking about fears and

frustration was out of the question. So was asking for help. The isolation into which I had forced myself through my shyness limited the number of available listeners. Admitting fears and weaknesses to them, showing helplessness might make these precious few go away to! I didn't want to burden others with my problems. I decided there had to be ways to handle them on my own.

In high school I got teased a lot. Who doesn't? I didn't have a boyfriend and figured it was because of my weight. My classmates' taunting focused on my clothing. I wasn't fashionable. I didn't have a choice in the matter. My parents had loaned money to buy a home. They tried to cut corners wherever they could. Other kids were in similar situations. Some of them grew with their challenges. Others shrugged and shook it off. I felt hurt and alone, and withdrew deeper and deeper into the safety of my daydreams.

Most of my childhood memories involve food in one form or another. I remember what I ate during vacations. I remember what I ate during celebrations. I forgot faces and names but I can recall the taste of the food on my confirmation party. I remember the traumatic early childhood moment of dropping an ice cream cone, and how the ice cream rolled through the dirt after I only had a couple of licks.

One day I discovered the magic of dieting. My inner puritan loved it. My competitive nature jumped at it. It backfired. Food became the forbidden fruit. The Holy Grail. Eternally lusted for. Never close enough to touch. Limit something and you make it more precious. I can't have what I want. I don't want what I can have. Then binges... eating it all. Giving in. Giving up. Through years of self-abuse, my desires stopped being messengers announcing true needs. They turned into insidious ways my body used to trick and enslave me. I had declared war on myself. I was determined to win it. My mom and I dieted together. I enjoyed struggling together and the feeling of closeness. I was thrilled about temporary weight losses. I had difficulties maintaining them. Each time I slowly crept back up to the weight I had been at before.

Food was a symbol of power in my family. The father, as the head of the household and the one who works hardest, deserves and gets the biggest piece of meat. My mother waited until last before serving herself. Years later, when my parents' marriage eroded, my mom bought expensive foods for herself, which she hid, while cooking cheap food for my father. Today I still catch myself routinely checking the size of dishes served. If I manage to get a large one, I tend to feel a tiny rush of success. I can't sit in a restaurant and eat with somebody else without checking out their food and feeling a notion of envy. They surely got the tastier dish! I should have ordered that... I can get intense cravings when I see (or smell) somebody else eats. Some of these cravings have been with me for days, occasionally weeks. They are triggered by something I see on TV, in the window of a restaurant, in the hands of somebody on the street, on a billboard. A food I haven't had in a while. Something crispy. Or something salty. Something with chocolate in it, or with peanuts, maybe. It might be a

specific dish at a specific restaurant. Then the thought doesn't leave me. It stays. Obsession. What a great excuse for not paying attention to other things in my life. What a wonderful reason to procrastinate on projects of which I'm afraid. No, I can't do this right now, I need to obsess. It's the food. I'm not responsible. It's a powerful force, beyond my control, taking my energy, wearing me down, taking me out of the game. Suddenly I'm a victim.

When I finally succumb to the craving, it sometimes leads to bingeing. "Just a little piece" can turn into eating, eating, eating, until I can't stand the thought of eating any more. Part of me wants to stock up on this taste, get more than enough, to stop the intense desire for good, to keep it from ever returning. I can't get no ... satisfaction. No. No. No. Hey. Hey. Hey. The solution: Keep myself from automatically going to the food. Instead, be present, notice my breath, my posture, my sensations. Stay with the emotions. Write into my journal until my fingers hurt. Keep my sense of humor. Call somebody. Go to a meeting. Accept that nothing in life is perfect. Be happy about little things and try to relax about the big, scary stuff.

Healing has to do with both, claiming my power and admitting my powerlessness. Is that a contradiction?

I claim my power by taking responsibility for my thoughts, emotions, and actions. One choice at a time I stand up for what I've done and what I'm doing. Mistakes present opportunities for learning. I don't need to use my mistakes as excuse to love myself any less. If I feel an emotion, it's okay to admit it. I don't need to use others' behaviors to excuse my feelings. "You make me sad!" Statements such as this declare me a victim. What an easy way for immobilizing myself! It might be painful, but is, in its own, sick way, infinitely comfortable. Pain I know can feel safer than change towards something I can't predict. Change or failures are what I fear most.

While accepting my power, I need to realistically look at the extent of it. There are many things beyond my control. I can't control another person's emotion. I can't make somebody love me or be my friend against their will. It's their choice. I can't control the weather. I can't control what will happen. I can't create world peace by performing little rituals; not with food, not with anything else. I can't manipulate people into doing what I want them to do, without causing damage to their and my spirit and our relationship.

I faintly remember the first time I noticed I could make myself vomit. It fascinated me. It yielded feelings of power and control over my body I hadn't known before. I used it a few times when having stomach aches from something my body wasn't "agreeing with." It was an amazing discovery. I was hurting and I was able to make it stop! I remember watching some kind of after-school special on German TV dealing with the topic of bulimia. The information in the program helped me develop my bulimic ritual.

I often had "tummy aches" as a child. Whenever I had an exam I felt sick to my

stomach. When being nervous or stressed, I got diarrhea. I had told my father about it. It worried me. His answer was, that this was the way it was supposed to feel, that he had felt the same things growing up, that it only meant I was taking my exams seriously, and that it was therefore something to be proud of.

Three years ago I had thyroid surgery. I didn't have over- or under-functioning of my thyroid gland, just a lump on it that wasn't supposed to be there and that could have been cancer. Fortunately as it turned out, it wasn't. The fear of the operation (the second in my life, the first one being at age 18) and of its outcome rocked my world. At that point my weight was up to 225 lbs. at a height of 5'11". I had dieted my weight up and down, by then eating very healthy foods, but by far too much of them. Over the course of that year I had experimented with my diet. There were several juice fasts. I selectively reintroduced specific foods to examine how my body was reacting to them. I tried different food combinations. I got a better idea of which foods perk me up, make me tired, what is easily digested, what was causing or intensifying allergies. I still tried to find the perfect combination of foods, the one which would make me happy. I was looking for the magic bullet, the one-size-fits-all solution. There was no doubt in my mind that it was only a question of finding the right food and the proper ritual when eating it.

For several months I lived on an all-raw-foods diet. I felt incredibly healthy and energetic. I stopped when my cravings for meat became overwhelming. Right before the surgery my doctor mentioned that my blood pressure was much too high. He offered me the choice between blood pressure medication and trying to lose some of the weight. High blood pressure runs in my family, my mom has been on medication for the past 20 years to control hers.

The sudden health concerns infused my dieting quest with new vigor. A close friend of mine, who's a family physician, gave me tips on how to maximize workouts. I purchased a heart rate monitor. I started working out with a vengeance.

That winter my father came to visit me in San Francisco. I was surprised how old and fragile he looked. Around that time I did start throwing up on a regular basis again. My husband and I had built a little business together. It did badly. I was worried. The little money we had I spent on food.

The weight came off quickly. I started a double life. On the outside I was a health nut, eating very well, and exercising extensively. In private I created an infrastructure of secret eating and purging. All over the city I scouted out restrooms with enough privacy and background noise to be useful for maintaining my "habit." I was alone a lot. Both, me and my husband were working unbelievable hours to keep the store going.

I had gotten great feedback on my weight loss. My blood pressure was down. My clothes fit nicely. I got plenty of compliments. I started was absolutely terrified

of gaining the weight back. At some point I threw up on a daily basis, carefully integrating it into my busy schedule.

I never binged excessively, just ate all the things my diet did not allow me to eat, but in almost moderate amounts. Then I threw up all the "bad" things. I ended up feeling intense relief, goodness, cleanliness, purification, and dizzy confusion. I liked the feeling a lot. I prided myself in using bulimia responsibly. I searched on the internet for potential health problems and side effects. I got very creative with adding details to my ritual to counteract those. I didn't feel that I had a problem. I thought I had found a somewhat unconventional but pleasantly successful way of weight management. I was so full of myself. I felt so empty inside.

The secrecy around it made me want to stop. No matter how responsible and healthy this behavior seemed to me, something was very wrong, if I felt I had to keep it from the people closest to me, if it made me hide and lie. I've always considered myself an honest, upfront person. This didn't fit. I decided to see a therapist (something my husband, concerned about my mood swings, had suggested), and did "come out" to my husband, my best friend, and my sister, the three people closest to me at that time.

I was not ready to go to 12-step meetings at that point. I stopped throwing up from one day to the next. But the fear to gain all my weight back, and then some, was still there. So I started exercising compulsively, running daily, for 1.5 to 2.5 hrs each day. It took me another 6 months until I realized that I was still bulimic. I had just changed my purging method. Instead of throwing up I was running it off. I still used food to escape from life's disappointments and from my emotions. I was still on the run.

There has been a tremendous amount of growth since. I've noticed that I can't run away from my problems. I noticed that if I don't face my emotions they tend to control me. I noticed that the scariest part is not the fear but my being afraid of the fear, and my fears of the fears of the fears, my spiraling off into a hyperemotional, and completely self-centered world of meta-meta-etc. emotions. I noticed that living life is about finding balance. I noticed that it doesn't matter how hard I run if I run in circles. I noticed how important it is to be honest with myself and with life. I noticed that the universe doesn't revolve around me. I found a concept of higher power and I am having an on-going relationship with this power. I noticed that there is an incredible sense of meaning and satisfaction in unconditionally being there for others, that giving is truly more blessed than receiving. Sometimes I manage to translate what I noticed into action. There are moments of trust.

There are still times when I feel, I'm not getting enough. This usually corresponds with feeling I'm not being enough. I compare. I judge. I feel I fall short. Chewing thoroughly and slowly can make me feel somewhat deprived. I sometimes catch myself eating as fast as I possibly can. Gobble it all up before somebody can come and take it

away before I am done. I know I can't get rid of the bad taste in my mouth and the stuffy feeling in my body from overeating on something by eating something "healthy" on top of it. I still get the impulse. I just don't follow it anymore automatically. There is awareness where there used to be none. I have accepted the fact that my spirit uses food as a metaphor, to red-flag moments of deprivation and imbalance.

Food continues being a source of both, torture and pleasure. It's still easier for me to fast or to binge than to eat appropriately and in moderation. It's also a fantastic tool for learning and growth.

I'm curious about what will happen next. Will I get better at knowing the difference between what I want and what I need? Will I be able to more skillfully resolve situations where the former and the latter seem to fight one another? Will I manage to remember that I'm not the center of the universe? Will I be able to remain linked to and rooted in my past, to learn from it, to ground myself in it, without regrets but with responsibility? Will I manage to head into my future with awareness, serenely and with courage? And will I be able to live my life the way it wants to be lived, without making excuses, without looking for easy ways out? Will I be able and willing to stay away from my hiding places, to leave the safety of my preconceptions, my assumptions who I am and what the world is like? Will I still remember what is really important to me, when momentary mood swings turn me into Miss Drama Queen?

Will I live my life with love, awareness, and balance? Will I listen to others, and continue to learn and grow? Will I be patient with myself, and kind when falling back into old habits?

Will I manage to face it all, the joy, the pain, the excitement, the sadness and take it all in, have it move me, have it enter into me and me enter into it, immerse myself, fully, completely, entirely, into the adventure to be who I am?

We'll see. Time will tell.

Julia K., living and (mostly) enjoying life San Francisco while recovering from bulimia.

My Recovery Process from Bulimia Nervosa

BACKGROUND

Well, here I am on January 19, 2002 writing a story that I never thought I would be writing My Recovery Process from Bulimia Nervosa. Who would have thought? Certainly not me. It's hard to believe that in August of this year I will be passing my ten-year recovery anniversary. I have remained quiet and out of the loop this entire time but I promised myself many years ago that if I ever reached this milestone that I would only then consider myself to be in a solid state of recovery and could begin to share what I have learned. My experiences are specifically directed to those with bulimia, since that was my disorder of choice, but many issues cross over into Anorexia Nervosa and into obese overeating.

Let me begin by stating the obvious. Variation exists in everything in life and that includes bulimia. I believe that those with this disorder can place themselves on a bulimia continuum, if you will. On the left side of the continuum are those who dabble in the behavior briefly and then are able to quickly get themselves back out. On the right side of the continuum are those who allow the behavior to completely envelop their lives to the point of not knowing how else to live. And, of course, there are all of those who fall in between the two extremes. I think it is important for those reading this story to know that I was as far out on the right hand side of that continuum as one could possibly get. I am not saying that to be melodramatic. I am saying it because it is true. I was absolutely addicted to food and exhibited the textbook signs of addiction. I lost friends because of this behavior, I lost jobs because of this behavior, and, yes, I even stole to support my habit. Once I started stealing I knew that I had a SERIOUS problem and I also recognized for the first time that bulimia is most definitely a form of addiction and must be recognized as such.

Allow me to offer further proof that I was indeed on the far right wing of this continuum. I was in the behavior pattern for a solid ten years of my life. Yes, an entire DECADE. The first time that I remember engaging in the binge/purge pattern was when I was fifteen years old and I continued in it until I was twenty-five. Think about that – at that point in time I had been bulimic for almost one half of my entire lifetime! I was hospitalized three times for it and had been in and out of therapy for the majority of those ten years. Towards the end of that time frame even my counselor had given up on me. How sad is that? She said that she had done all that she could do for me and she thought that perhaps a different counselor might be able to help me more. If this does not prove my point that I was a “professional” when it came to this disorder then I do not know what will.

I am writing this story to chronicle my efforts and to offer hope to all of those reading it that recovery is possible. Absolutely no one reading this story can be any worse than I was and if I can kick and scratch my way out of that behavior pattern then anyone can. What follows is the process that I went through in order

to get to where I am today. There are many lessons that I have learned that I want to share and I hope at least one person out there can benefit from my mistakes. Please take to heart anything that you find helpful and disregard anything with which you may not agree or find offensive. No two people are alike and, therefore, no two recovery stories can be identical but I do believe that common threads do exist.

THE PROCESS

Again allow me to state the obvious (I'm good at that) and say that everything in life is a process. That includes recovery from bulimia or any eating disorder for that matter. Some are able to breeze through the process while others, like myself, prefer the long, hard, and dragged out version. I have always been a hard head after all. In the words of John Mellencamp, "I do things my way and I pay a high price." I certainly paid a high price when it came to bulimia.

I think the first step to my recovery (this probably holds true for many others) was to blame everybody else for my problem. I mean, why not? It's certainly the easiest thing to do. Why not do the easiest thing first? So I did. You bet. I blamed everybody. My controlling mom, my dad that I had only met once and who didn't want anything to do with me, my step dad, my brother, my dog, bird, whoever. I wasn't particular about whom to blame – as long as it wasn't I. But one day it dawned on me that while taking a look at my various relationships allowed me to understand how I allowed myself to fall into the behavior pattern, blaming those relationships didn't help me at all in getting out. Alas! I was forced into blaming no one but myself for continuing in it. Although I am presenting this realization with a hint of comic relief, I cannot stress its importance as the very first turning point in my recovery. However, it would be many, many years from this realization to the first day of my recovery. It was a long road indeed.

Unfortunately, while I am able to identify the first step in my recovery, I am unable to neatly and chronologically lay out all of the other steps that were involved. I believe that what "the process" truly boiled down to for me was a literal reprogramming of many ways in which I thought and of every single way that I dealt with my feelings and emotions. Because of this fact, the rest of the steps all happened so slowly and with so much unbelievable trial and error that I cannot honestly say which one happened next. Therefore, I have decided to discuss the larger issues in what I believe to be their order of importance.

As I mentioned above, the first and most important step of my recovery was accepting full responsibility for my behavior. I learned early on that I was unable to depend on anyone other than myself to take care of my problems and to see me through to recovery. Although I tried the "Give Your Problems to God" route, that road just wasn't getting me anywhere. I needed to be in full control of my own life and not allow anyone or anything else, which included deities, to have a hand in it. In that way I ensured that all blame was placed on me and not on anyone or anything else. I had to learn to trust and depend on myself first and

everyone else second. I realize that this is not a path that works for all but it was the one that worked for me.

The next issue that I want to discuss is the concept of eating only when one is hungry and stopping when full. This was such a difficult concept for me to learn (or rather re-learn) and continues to remain such a cornerstone to my recovery that I am unable to find words with which to express its importance. I will go out on a limb and state, for the record, that I believe this issue to be a common thread to ANYONE who is recovering from an eating disorder. Those that abuse their bodies with eating disorders for long periods of time, such as I did, lose all understanding of what hungry and full feel like. It is the very first thing learned as an infant but once lost, it is very, very difficult to relearn. After I quit the bulimic behavior, I did gain approximately ten pounds while I desperately sought to figure out what those two biological concepts meant. Since then my weight has leveled off at what I believe to be my body's set weight and as long as I follow that basic rule of recovery, not to mention biology, my body takes care of itself and my weight no longer fluctuates.

Another big reprogramming process that I had to go through was to, first, be able to figure out WHAT I was feeling and, second, to be able to express those feelings in respectful and productive ways. You have to understand that my mother, who was my only parent, was a self-proclaimed bigot. She was the "Archie Bunker of the neighborhood." I do not like to speak poorly of her since she is no longer alive to defend herself but I think it is important to understand how certain feelings and manners in which they are handled are learned responses. Once learned, it takes a virtual reprogramming to learn to handle them differently. That is what happened with me. I did not want to be a bigot. I am pleased to say that putting myself through college provided me with the tools I needed to be able to think for myself and to get myself out of that pattern of thinking. However, learning to figure out other feelings that I had other than those of bigotry and how to handle those feelings took many, many years of counseling and much trial and error. Of course, stuffing one's feelings down with food isn't helpful in this area. Because of this, I think the majority of my progress that I made with regard to identifying my feelings came after I stopped the binge/purge behavior. It was pivotal for me to be completely honest with myself as to what I was feeling and, more importantly, to establish WHY I was feeling that way. I had to learn to trace my feelings back to those circumstances or events that caused them. Once I learned how to do that it made acting, or sometimes not acting, on them much easier. The ability to trace my feelings also made expressing them much easier. It then became a matter of cause and effect: "I feel this way because this occurred or because this was said."

With respect to feelings, I need to share one more important lesson that I have learned. Feelings are neither right nor wrong - they just are. This was a tough lesson for me. I had to learn that I feel what I feel and to stop beating myself over the head if those feelings were inappropriate or negative. Learning to trace my feelings back to their source allows me to either validate them or to alter

them depending, of course, upon the situation. This continues to be one of the most powerful tools in my recovery.

One final important aspect to my recovery was the development of a respect for my body. One of the best classes that I took in college was a human biology class. I found it fascinating and developed a whole new respect for the human body. It is a remarkable piece of machinery with tens of thousands of processes occurring every day. It needs nutrition to run properly. I know that this fact goes without saying but those of us who abuse ourselves have a tendency to disregard it. There is something to be said in the phrase "ignorance is bliss". Once I learned more about how my body functioned it made me more aware of the damage that I was doing to it. That's not to say that I immediately turned to recovery. Again, it would be many, many years before I took that final step. But it was another turning point. That's what it's all about – turning points.

THE EVENT

Here it is – here's what you've all been waiting to read: My Epiphany. What was it about that one day in August 1992 that allowed me to take that final step? I'm sure this is quite a let down but I have no idea. Honestly – I do not know. For many, it takes a "bottoming out" of some sort but for me, I truly believe that there was no bottoming out. I could have continued in the bulimic behavior pattern until my little heart finally said, "no more, I've had enough" and quit working before I would have ever bottomed out. As the years have passed I've spent many hours thinking about that eventful day but I am no closer to an answer now than I was then. Like many of you reading this story, I had made the commitment to stop the behavior many times in the past but had been unable to follow through. Why did I follow through that particular day? I just don't know.

I think there is a part of me that does believe in a higher power of some sort. I don't know if I would call it "God" necessarily. I find myself wondering if it's more planetary than anything else. Certain stars and planets that are aligned just right to create such change as to render them "unexplainable." I believe that August 1992 was one such period of time, at least for me. I have no explanation for it. Perhaps part of it was the fact that I had worked on all the other parts of my recovery that I could over that ten-year period and the only thing left was to finally leave the behavior behind. To let myself fly so to speak. I just made the decision that I was finished and it was time to move on. It sounds trite but it's as close to an explanation as I can offer. I wish I had more insight into that day but I just don't.

MILESTONES

Again – more of the obvious - all processes have milestones that serve as benchmarks to success. This holds true to the process of bulimic recovery as well. I have not kept up on the literature but, in my day, there were two benchmarks used in order to gauge one's achievement. One such milestone was to pass a two-year consecutive period of binge free behavior and the other was to experience a traumatic event. Well, I can say that I definitely have both of those covered. I passed my two-year mark almost eight years ago, and my traumatic event I passed approximately seven years ago when my mother died of breast cancer. She had been diagnosed with it five years previously and had undergone a radical mastectomy in addition to taking an experimental type of medication. Unfortunately, the cancer reappeared in her lungs five years later at which time she refused all other treatment and allowed the cancer to consume her. It took eight months for her to die and it was, to date, the second most difficult thing that I have had to live through (my recovery, of course, remains the hardest).

Although I can't say as though I ever had thoughts at that time of returning to my old ways of dealing with stress, I can say that my eating patterns did change, which I believe to be a normal reaction given this type of situation. I was working full-time, finishing my last year of college full-time and watching someone that I love die a long, slow, and extremely painful death. I was physically sick to my stomach more often than not, which made eating an unpleasant affair. I ended up losing approximately fifteen pounds during that time frame. After she died and things returned to a quasi-normal state, I put five pounds back on and have remained at that weight ever since.

Of course, as one might guess, I have my own opinion concerning benchmarks that can be used to gauge just how solid one is on his/her path to bulimic recovery. I completely agree with the traumatic event milestone. What I do not agree with is the two-year consecutive period of binge free behavior. I think this period of time needs to be more flexible and case specific. In my opinion, I believe that one must be out of the behavior for as many consecutive years as one was in it. For me, I was in it for ten years. To be out of it for two years wasn't nearly long enough. Now that I am approaching year ten I will allow myself to believe that I am on a solid road to recovery but I will NEVER allow myself to say that I am recovered (past tense). I think that stating my recovery in the past tense is extremely dangerous. To exemplify my point, let me say that approximately three years ago my husband and I started having marital problems. We ended up separating a couple of times. I had been in my seventh year of recovery at that point and I cannot tell you how perilously close I came to slipping. It was the closest I have ever come and I had already been in recovery for seven years! As I have stated previously, because I believe that bulimia is an addiction, I know that I can NEVER use the binge/ purge cycle again to handle my feelings and emotions. Never. Not once. Not ever. I will do whatever else I have to do (as long as it's productive) but I absolutely cannot use that as my outlet. This is the thinking process that I have acquired that has

allowed me to stay out of the behavior and in recovery for as long as I have. I believe this to be another commonality to recovery.

So there are my most important lessons learned neatly laid out and appearing so easy. I wish I could have learned them sooner and without all the damage. But that is a "What If" scenario and not the reality of my life.

THE HERE AND NOW

Today, I believe that I am one of the most normal eaters that I know. I eat approximately four meals a day and I eat REAL food. I do not eat food that is diet, low fat, low calorie, or low sugar. I go out to eat at restaurants and no longer worry about the holidays and all of the food associated with them. I eat anything I want and I NEVER allow myself to be hungry. The funny thing is I no longer want all that junk food that I used to eat as a practicing bulimic. That's not to say that I do not eat any junk food because I certainly do but my body craves foods with substance such as meat and potatoes. I can do all of this because of my basic rule of recovery, which again, is to only eat when I am hungry and to stop when I am full. I am five feet six inches tall and weigh 125 pounds. That is the weight that my body settled at after my mom died. It remains a constant with a normal variation of two to three pounds. I am a female and whether I like it or not, female body weight fluctuates. I deal with it and no longer worry about it. I still do occasionally weigh myself perhaps three times a year but it just isn't necessary. There are many bigger issues to deal with while in recovery other than normal weight variation. Ten years ago I never thought that I would get to this point so I will say this again for emphasis, if I can get here then anyone can. It is possible. I am living proof.

Looking back I wish I could have found a more productive and healthier way to learn all of these things about myself other than falling into the food obsession cesspit. But, to be honest, if that was the only way for me to get to where I am today then I would do it all again. I am not ashamed of the path that I took and I will not remain anonymous. The person that I am today, with all of my good qualities and with just as many bad qualities, is a direct product of my bulimic recovery experiences. I have evolved from a person who had absolutely no self-esteem and no self-respect into a person who now emits those two qualities in the air that I carry around me. As a matter of fact the major non-food related motto by which I live today is that I no longer care if people like me but I demand respect. I will respect others as long as they do the same and if returning that respect isn't possible then I expect them to stay away from me. It's that simple. This is a far cry from the person who I used to be.

I am certainly not finished recovering nor am I finished becoming the person that I want to be. I remain a process of continual improvement. What I do believe is that I have finally reached the point of self-acceptance. It has been a very long hard road but I do believe that the trip was well worth it. For those of you reading this who thinks that you can't reach this point, then think again. Keep trying and

don't ever give up (even if your therapist gives up on you)! I know that you CAN do it. Remember, that statement comes from someone who has been there – and I mean who has REALLY been there. Who better to offer proof?

Kristin J.

January 19, 2002

It's My Choice

"Dear God, please take away this eating disorder and make me normal. I don't want to hurt like this anymore. Either heal me or let me die, but do something! Thank you, God. Amen."

How many times had I prayed this prayer or another like it? How many times had others prayed for me to get well? Too many to count. As I opened my eyes, the depressing realization fell over me, yet again. God did not answer my prayers. He didn't heal me or let me die.

For a brief moment, I felt a flash of anger toward God, but just as quickly turned it back on myself. What was wrong with me? I mean, how many times had I been in and out of the hospital already? Inpatient, outpatient, day treatment, support groups, medications . . . the list went on . . . and here I was sicker than I'd been before. If I was a REAL Christian, if I wasn't so bad, selfish, and worthless, I wouldn't have these problems! Maybe I really was hopeless and would never get better, just like that psychiatrist told me back when I was about fifteen years old.

Looking back, I can see that God knew exactly what I needed all along. I wanted him to take away the eating disorder (but, not ALL of it away--just the negative consequences, really). I wanted him to make me well (but, not make me give up the twisted pleasures of the disease like clinical low weight and absence of periods). I wanted God to cure me (but not expect me to do anything to attain or maintain my recovery beyond taking some pills, going into a program for a few months, or seeing a counselor for awhile). However, God loved me too much to let me off that easily.

"Recovery takes time; it's a process; it's a journey . . ." I'd heard these words spoken time and again--even believed them to a certain extent--but, until I truly accepted in the deepest part of me that recovery would be a *life-long* journey, I was doomed to relapse after relapse.

Do I find the fact that recovery never ends to be depressing or discouraging? Not at all! When I look back over the past three years of my life and see the progress I have made so far, it encourages me to know I have many years ahead to get that much better. By letting go of this self-made illusion (or delusion) of, "Perfect Recovery in XX Days," I am freed to go at God's pace, which is always perfect.

Upon my last admission to Remuda Ranch in early March, 1998, I knew something had to change in order to put an end to this cycle of chronic relapse I had lived with for the past fourteen-plus years. The third step of Alcoholics Anonymous reads: *"Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him."* I finally took that giant leap of faith by making a conscious commitment to follow any and all recommendations of my Remuda treatment team. It was so glaringly obvious that my way did NOT work. I could

not allow myself an inch of leeway in this commitment. Little did I know just what I was getting myself into!

If you had told me then that it meant not only spending five months in inpatient and residential treatment, but then giving up my job, my condo, my church, and living near my family and friends to relocate to AZ for continued long-term outpatient treatment, I would have thought you were crazy! However, looking at the big picture, what a small sacrifice for the gift of continued recovery. Had my eating disorder progressed I would have eventually lost all of those things anyway.

So, after fifteen years of engaging in eating disorder behaviors of one kind or another, what has it been like to go without them for the past three years? Well, I'd certainly be lying if I said it's been easy or fun, although in the past year or so it has definitely gotten easier and I even occasionally find myself having fun! As lying is such a central part of the eating disorder, I will be brutally honest here--it has been HARD.

Recovery from an eating disorder involves the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Each component is crucial. To the uneducated onlooker (and even me before I knew better!) it appears as if once the eating disorder behaviors are ceased and eating patterns and weight are normalized and stabilized, all is well. This couldn't be further from reality. While it is a necessary first step, as the remaining components are all seriously hindered by the physical consequences of eating disorder behavior, it's far from being the only step. The saying is true, "An eating disorder is NOT about food and weight."

Without the numbing effects of the eating disorder behaviors my emotions were intensified to the n^{th} degree and seemed to be all over the place. Tears, anger, anxiety, depression . . . at times I felt so overwhelmed I thought I would die. "*I must need medication!*" I thought to myself. "*I'm doing what I'm supposed to--I'm eating. I'm not exercising or compensating for the food in other ways. I'm not engaging in any "weird" rituals. I'm attending my groups and therapy. I should be feeling better, right?*" Not necessarily!

Now came the next step: realizing that life is full of setbacks, sadness, and discomfort (as well as periods of peace, joy, and happiness). It wasn't until I fully accepted the idea that recovery wouldn't always be easy and wouldn't necessarily bring me happiness and normalcy, that the benefits of feeling the pain of life outweighed the fleeting illusion of control the eating disorder had brought me.

Maybe six months ago I went through a dark trough of depression. I cried for what seemed to be a week without end. I toyed with the idea of calling my doctor and begging for medication to take away these horrible feelings. They couldn't be natural! They must be the result of some chemical imbalance in my brain! I even went so far as to think of how using the eating disorder might bring relief (of course, conveniently "forgetting" all of its own pain and misery that

would be sure to ensue). Instead of succumbing to these unhealthy ideas, I used some of my recovery "tools" to get me through. I was honest about my feelings in my support group and with my therapist. I prayed. I wrote about it. I continued to eat. I continued to cry. And, eventually, the feelings passed. The crying stopped. The depression lifted. Only God knows why I felt this way in the first place. I did not have to "figure it out." I just had to let the feelings be. By letting go and just letting the feelings happen, they eventually passed even though at the time it seemed I'd ALWAYS feel horrible forever and ever.

During those years of illness, my emotional development came to an abrupt standstill. When I began the work of recovery at age twenty-six and again at age twenty-eight (after a relapse), I had to "catch up" to my chronological age. Who was I? What were my likes and dislikes? I had spent so much of my life in search of other's approval I barely knew how to make a decision for myself. I had spent so much time developing an unhealthy relationship with my eating disorder I didn't know how to have healthy relationships with people. I felt like a pre-teen in a grown-up's body and it was scary! I had to learn new ways to think, feel, and act towards myself and others. I am still learning.

Two years into my journey of recovery, I married a wonderful man nine years into his own journey. The challenges of marriage add another dimension, namely, the thoughts, feelings, and issues of another person whom I cannot (despite my best efforts) control. Thank God my husband is patient and is working his own solid program of recovery!

This past week I was faced with an opportunity to revert back to eating disorder behavior. I was feeling under the weather due to a urinary tract infection. On top of that had some minor surgery requiring a few stitches on the inside of my lower lip. How easy it would have been to act on my thoughts of, "I feel yucky, and besides, my lip hurts too much. I can't eat." However, I knew all too well just where that would lead and it wouldn't be good! Once again, I opened up to my support group for accountability. I reminded myself of all I stand to lose if I return to the eating disorder. And, despite the feelings, I ate anyway.

Today, I got a survey in the mail regarding body image. Although accepting my body the way it is continues to be one of my greater challenges, by filling out this questionnaire I was better able to see just how far I've come in this area as well. I no longer base my feelings on a number on the scale (in fact, I no longer weigh myself at all, which is a major feat in itself!). I exercise moderately for the purpose of building bone mass, not burning off X amount of calories. While I'm still not at a place where I can say I love my legs, I have begun wearing shorts in public (which is a good thing here in AZ where it's over one hundred degrees for half of the year). I am now able to connect "feeling fat" with other issues going on in my life--mainly holding feelings in, not setting boundaries, or expecting myself to be perfect.

In the end, I am responsible for my illness and I am responsible for my wellness--not in the sense of causing it, but in the sense of owning it. It is my choice to go

on being sick or take the steps necessary to recovery. Although this is far from everything I have learned on my journey of recovery so far, I would like to end here with one of God's promises as spoken through the prophet Isaiah. Let it be an encouragement to you, as it has been an encouragement to me. God bless you on your own journey.

*"I will lead the blind on their journey;
by paths unknown I will guide them.
I will turn darkness into light before them,
and make crooked ways straight."*

Isaiah 42:16

Three Week Program

I would like to share with everyone a part of what I've learned about myself in the past 3 weeks. I've lived with Bulimia for almost 21 years. It began when, I was only 14 years old and I'll soon be 35 years old. I've spent almost my whole life battling my bulimia. I did have a period of recovery, but I relapsed. When this happened I found out that having insurance coverage doesn't mean you can receive the treatment you need. I was denied coverage for treatment in a treatment facility. I fought with my insurance company for six long months and got no where. By the time I reached the end of those six months, I only weighed 84 pounds and knew I had to do something to get back on track.

September 14, 2002, I spent the entire night on the internet searching for self-help books. I found the most incredible book in the world to help me be able to help myself. The name of the book is *Bulimia: A Guide to Recovery*, written by Lindsey Hall and Leigh Cohn. This book has a "Three-Week Program to Stop Binging" chapter in it. I'm here to tell you this program honestly saved my life.

I began therapy on September 19, 2002 and weighed in at only 84 pounds. My EPS (Expanded Psychiatric Services) in my insurance contract covers every penny of my out-patient care. On September 29, 2002 I began my "Three-Week Program to Stop Binging" and completed the program successfully on October 19, 2002. I went for my visit with Susan, my therapist, last Thursday which was November 7, 2002 and I weighed 106 pounds. My dedication to my therapy, my stop binging program and myself is paying off. I'm here to tell everyone that the book *Bulimia: A Guide to Recovery* is a wonderful recovery tool. It will honestly teach you so much about yourself. It has taught me more than I could have ever imagined.

I want to share with all of you what I've learned about myself. I hope it will help you to remain on your journey to recovery.

"Steps to Happiness I Now Know"

I can't be all things to all people.
I can't do all things at once.
I can't do all things equally well.
I can't do all things better than everyone else.
My humanity is showing just like everyone else's.

So:

I have to find out who I am and be that.
I have to decide what comes first and do that.
I have to discover my strengths and use them.
I have to learn not to compete with others.
Because no one else is in the contest of *being me*.

Then:

I will have to learn to accept my own uniqueness.

I will have to learn to set priorities and make decisions.

I will have to learn to live with my limitations.

I will have to learn to give myself the respect that is due.

And I'll be a most vital mortal.

Dare To Believe:

That I am a wonderful unique person.

That I am a once-in-all-history event.

That it's more than a right, it's my duty, to be who I am.

That life is not a problem to be solved, but a gift to cherish.

And I'll be able to stay one up on what used to get me down.

One Day at a Time

My name is Trish and I am a recovering anorexic, bulimic, compulsive eater, emotional eater, well... you get the point. I've been all over the board with abusing food. I began my battle around the age of 11, and I am now almost 22. I have wasted almost half of my life on this awful disease, and I am not willing to let it have another minute of my precious life. I have been actively seeking recovery for about a year.

So many things contributed to my eating disorder, that I don't know exactly where to begin. There wasn't one magical moment when I decided that I was a piece of crap, fat and useless- therefore I was going to starve myself. I was never a thin child. Always a little chubby. Very strong, in mind, body and spirit. I was tall for my age, always towering over everyone in school. I developed early, around 10. Got my period and breasts that were all of the sudden a DD cup. I wasn't really even uncomfortable with my body at that point. I became uncomfortable when people close to me began pointing things out. My stepfather remarked that I was "busting out at the seams" of my jeans- which had been handed down twice. My best friend, for reasons unknown, put a picture of me in a bathing suit on an envelope that contained an "I hate you" letter, and wrote that I didn't just need a thigh master, but a tummy master too.

Around this time, my stepfather left, and my mom had 3 kids to support. We moved in with various relatives until we got government assistance to have a place of our own. In order to get privacy, I turned the walk in closet in the master bedroom into my room. Bed, nightstand, and dresser- it was huge! My mom worked nights at a local bar, and I watched the kids. I felt guilty about eating at around this time, because I knew my mom was skipping meals so there would be enough food for us kids. I started skipping meals too. I also stole food for me and my siblings from my friends and families homes. I thought it was the least I could do. Besides, I was fat enough; I didn't need to eat with all the reserves I had built up. My uncle, who was helping to provide for us, also happened to be molesting me. Through all of this we moved and moved and moved and well... you get the idea.

Not much stability in my life. I continued to starve, and skip meals, fast for days at a time, and exercise excessively. I went to the library to research ED's so I could be better at it. I didn't start purging until about 14 or so, I caught my friend doing it and thought---- AHAH!!! Now, I don't have to be hungry, and I can get even thinner like her. It didn't register that we were already wearing the same size clothes, and she was 6 inches shorter than me. When I was 16, I had a weird condition with my spleen. It caused my stomach to shrink, and I lost a lot of weight before and after surgery. I went a good 2 or 3 years without being acutely active in my disease.

When I was about 19, I went to a psychiatrist for help, and he told me that it was obviously a control issue, that I didn't have an eating disorder, I hadn't lost

enough weight. I started purging again when I was in an abusive relationship and this was my first experience with overeating. Our whole relationship was based on food. When he and I finally broke it off, I was free. It felt fantastic. He had been so controlling. Sometimes, the only way to get away from him was to make myself throw up, because he couldn't stand the sound or smell. I lost a lot of weight when we broke up, because food wasn't my only outlet anymore. I went for another year, and then it crept back up again. I began restricting and purging everything I ate. I would spit out food before I swallowed it. I lost 30 lbs in 3 weeks. I fessed up to this guy at work. He and I had a really great friendship. Very loving and supportive, but so far nothing outside of work. He was very supportive.

I went to a treatment center (AMA) and signed on the dotted line in June 2001. I left AMA after 5 days. I hadn't seen a nutritionist, a therapist, or an internist. It was a mistake to leave so early, but I was frustrated. I haven't had any follow up care, but am trying to line them all up now.

As for the real recovery story, I've always known that God has me here for a reason, so in times of desperation, when I wanted to give up, throw in my towel, and even end my life... I plunged forward. My brothers and sister were also a great source of strength for me. A laugh, a thank you, to see them sleeping, it kept me going. The guy at work I told you about is now my husband. He's a member of another 12 step fellowship. He suggested I look for an anonymous group. I found EDA. Now, I attend face to face OA meetings, online EDA and OA meetings, and do service for both fellowships. Honesty has been the biggest difference for me. I used to lie and manipulate, but now, I show up, shut up, and do the next right thing. I am honest with myself and honest with others. I pray daily, I journal, and I eat real food. Sometimes not enough, sometimes too much, but that's okay, because the difference is, now... I notice. And I am able to deal with it honestly.

I work a program of progress, not perfection... everyday. One day at a time. Perfection is what got me into this mess. Only God is perfect. I am not God. He brought me to it; He'll bring me through it. Reach out; help is up there, out there, and in there.

Dual Diagnosis

My story has a dual aspect. On the one hand I was fully and completely immersed in my eating disorder, which began when I was thirteen. On the other hand I had given myself over to drugs and alcohol to quiet the shame and guilt from my eating disorder and to numb myself to the depression and constant berating in my head. From the time I began experimenting with purging until the day I fully surrendered to my Higher Power, I floated between these two addictions; sometimes I was sober but engaged in eating disorder behaviors, sometimes I was using chemicals heavily but my eating was more stable, and other times I was simultaneously using both in an attempt to escape from a life that I thought was unbearable.

I couldn't tell you when I started to hate myself. Some of my earliest memories include feeling fat, or stupid, or "not-good-enough." That isn't to say that I had a terrible childhood. For the most part I was a completely normal kid. My parents were still together and I had a little sister who I (sometimes—when I wasn't being mean to her) got along with. I loved to play soccer, climb trees, sing, read, and eat McDonald's cheeseburgers. But inside I think I always knew that something was different about me. I always felt an incessant need to show people that I was smart and that I was a good kid. I constantly sought the praise of my parents, coaches, and friends, but I never felt like anything I did was ever good enough. I always compared myself to my friends; this friend was a faster swimmer, that one had better toys, and another was skinnier than me. Kindergarten was the first time I decided that I was fat. My best friend's family was all naturally very tall and slender, and I felt inadequate next to her. I would battle the thoughts of coming up short to my friends for years afterwards.

But I couldn't ever put a name to the "disease" I was feeling until the end of my seventh grade year. That year I first attempted suicide and my life was forever changed. By the middle of eighth grade I was chronically suicidal and kept copies of suicide notes in my desk drawers. I started self injuring through cutting and bruising and started to get curious about drugs. I went on and off psychiatric medications during this time, often refusing to take them because they made me feel numb and I continued to see different therapists. But nothing seemed to help me break free of the depression that was controlling my life.

During this time I also started experimenting with dieting and various methods of weight control. I hated my body and wanted it to suffer the way I was suffering inside. I vividly remember the first time I tried to make myself vomit after eating dinner with my family. I sat on my knees in front of the blue porcelain toilet in the bathroom attached to my bedroom and violently shoved my fingers down my throat. I heaved and gagged, but nothing came up. Eventually my insides hurt so bad that I gave up and cried myself to sleep because I thought I would always be fat.

Next I discovered diet and caffeine pills. They were easy enough to get and made me feel less hungry during the day; they also gave me a rush of energy and focus that I had never experienced. I began to take them daily and always carried them around with me in my bag. I believe now that those pills served a dual purpose in my addictions to food and chemicals; first they gave me a sense of control over food and my body and second they introduced me to the intoxicating feeling of an altered state of mind. Granted it was mild, but something changed in my brain then and I figured out that external substances could make me feel the way I couldn't feel on my own.

As I hit high school, my world became a dark haze as I looked at it through the lenses of depression. I began to experiment with more drugs by smoking pot and stealing adderall from my sister to give me the high I wanted. I continued to play around with purging on and off, but on the outside I looked fairly normal. All of that changed when I reached my junior year in high school. By this point I had begun a slow transition towards more alternative lifestyles and clothing. I traded in my jeans and t-shirts for baggy pants and oversized trucker shirts. I started a punk band and began dying my hair different colors and wearing black makeup. I wanted to exude an air of confidence and standoffishness. I used this as a protection to keep everyone at arm's length away and as a way to start making friends who thought and acted more like me.

My drug use became significantly heavier. I started to rely completely on chemicals to take me away from my feelings of loneliness and sadness that had consumed me. I dropped from an honor roll student the first semester of my junior year to failing almost all my classes the second semester. In order to graduate on time I was forced to transfer to an alternative school but there my pattern just continued; the only change was that my classes were easy enough that I could still pass without attending much. So, instead of going to school I went to friends' houses and got high or drunk. My life became a constant search for drugs. My eating at this time was stable enough to where my weight never changed and I didn't put too much effort into changing it. I was still consumed at moments of hatred for my body and wishing I could lose weight, but I had found that as long as I was high I didn't have to think about it.

Complications with my eating disorder didn't begin until I decided to take my uncle up on an offer to live with him in Manhattan for a few months and take care of my cousin while he was in school. Coincidentally just before leaving I happened to step on a pay-scale at the mall. To my horror I found out that I weighed nearly 20 pounds more than I thought. It was then and there I decided that while I was away in New York I was going to lose weight by whatever means necessary. I didn't tell anyone about my plan, but got on the plane dreaming about how much better my life was going to be when I weighed less. From there on out it was a downward spiral. I started surfing "pro-ana" sites, joined forums for people with eating disorders, and cut down my daily intake to dangerously low levels. I started exercising more through walking around the city and at a gym that was nearby. I purged when I felt I had eaten too much and began once again to invest in diet pills to quell my appetite. Much of my time in

NYC was marked by the pants sizes I dropped and the sense of accomplishment I felt as each size grew too big on me. I also developed a taste for alcohol. I acquired a fake ID and began drinking profusely to escape from the knowledge that what I was doing was wrong. And the entire time I was lying to my aunt and uncle about what I was doing and how I was feeling.

Returning home was much of the same, though my habits changed a bit to accommodate being around more people who might ask questions. I started exercising in secret, usually leaving work early so that I could get a run in before I was expected anywhere. To the mix I added a substantial cocaine habit and I further fell into the pit. Each day was measured by the numbers on the scale; good if it went down, bad if it went up. I'd make multiple trips to the bathroom each day to inspect the bones that were beginning to protrude and I became obsessed with how much or little my thighs touched when I walked. To me anorexia was the answer to all my problems. As long as I could lose weight, everything else in the world didn't matter. For months I dwelt in the denial that I had control over my eating disorder and my drug addiction; I could stop when I wanted to... I just didn't want to.

The realization that my beliefs about the eating disorder were all a façade came to me harshly one day, and in a matter of minutes my ignorance was shattered. One day at work I felt the familiar hunger pangs in my stomach and the light-headedness that came along with restriction. I quickly tallied up the calories I had consumed that day and decided I could eat something. I walked down to the cafeteria and my mind raced with thoughts of what I should or should not eat when I got there. When I stepped into the cafeteria the entire room seemed to close in on me. My heart seemed desperate to break out of my chest as I walked from station to station in the cafeteria looking at the food and wondering if I could eat it. As I circled for the third or fourth time I realized that I wasn't the one in control anymore. I had to ask permission from my eating disorder to let me eat, and the eating disorder always told me no. There were no foods that were safe anymore; each time I put something in my mouth I was a failure, and the eating disorder was sure to make that clear to me.

Within a few months I checked myself into a hospital-based treatment program. But my desire to recover quickly subsided as the eating disorder quickly convinced me that I was losing more than I was gaining if I let go of it and gained weight. My journal from the time I spent inpatient is filled with self-hatred and anger at myself, my body, and everyone around me. When I had given over to the eating disorder I began to do anything I could to subvert the treatment I was receiving. I began to hide food, found ways to purge, and would lie in my bed at night doing leg-lifts or sit ups. I knew that when I got out I wasn't going to mess around anymore. My low weight going into the hospital wasn't good enough. I needed to go below it. I didn't have a need to delude myself anymore with thoughts of "stopping" my weight loss, rather I was going to lose weight until there was no more weight to lose. I couldn't even be distracted by drugs and alcohol at this point. I decided to quit chemicals in order to devote all my focus to the eating disorder.

The next year and a half of my life is a blur of hunger pains, vomit, and food. I resorted to methods I would have previously found appalling to avoid eating, to steal food, and to purge. As my body reached a critical point of starvation the primal instincts of survival took over and I began to binge and purge uncontrollably. I cycled upwards of 10 binge and purge sessions per day. By my calculations, I was consuming upwards of 20,000 calories per day. Because my denial about my condition was obliterated, the self-loathing and disgust at myself now consumed my mind and each time I binged and purged it was a simultaneous accomplishment and punishment. I pulled away from everyone and soon I had no friends left and I had alienated myself from my family. My ability to have emotions other than sadness, hatred, and anger disappeared and I spent most of my time numbed to the world.

Eventually I wanted out. I was so filled with hatred for the eating disorder that I wanted to cast it off, but the fear of gaining weight kept me chained. As much as I hated what was happening I still loved the eating disorder in some sick way. I loved seeing new bones appear. I loved feeling light headed. I loved the bruises and pains from lack of the protective layer of fat. I loved not being able to find jeans that fit, and I loved that for certain items I could reach for children's clothing. In truth, the eating disorder had me convinced that I loved these things; what was really happening was that these were the times that the mental anguish I was going through subsided because the eating disorder stopped berating me for a few minutes when I had "accomplished" a goal it wanted. However my desperation to escape the eating disorder continued to grow and so I tried what I thought would be the key to getting away from it. I was going to relocate myself into college and everything would be ok. I would stop the cycle and I would get on with my life... but I was still going to control what I ate enough to stay thin. What happened was the exact opposite of what I wanted, my cycles of bingeing and purging grew worse and I became more miserable than ever. A few weeks into my first semester I had to take a medical leave when I overdosed on my own concoction of pills that, in my mind, equaled a diet pill. I was out of school for over a month. The saddest part about the experience was that by this point I was so disconnected from everyone, including my roommates that I had to walk myself to the emergency room.

I returned to school and finished out the semester, doing exceptionally well in all my classes. I found that I loved school, but with the eating disorder I couldn't put my energy towards it. So, next I tried moving into my own apartment for the summer to regain my footing. What I hadn't realized at that point, though, was that I could never move away from my problems as long as I was taking myself with me. Drugs began to sneak back into my life at this point as I resorted once again to stealing ADHD medications. But, I told myself, I wasn't a drug addict because I was only stealing the medications to help me focus on things. I wasn't using them because I needed a chemical to alter my mood.

I reentered treatment that summer when I finally hit my first bottom. My bingeing and purging had escalated even more because I was living alone and my

weight continued to drop. I had received blood work from my doctor saying that my electrolytes were off and I was in danger of a heart attack each time I purged. I couldn't lie to myself anymore that I would be ok doing this. I knew that I had to go back to treatment or I was going to die. And while I prayed every evening for my heart to give out in my sleep, something in me wasn't about to let me die. I believe now that my Higher Power ultimately stepped in when I couldn't do it alone. I realized then that I finally had something that was more important to me than my eating disorder and that was school. Having to take the medical leave and almost not finishing the semester felt terrible to me. I returned to the hospital and was determined to get past my eating disorder and move on with my life.

Treatment this time went great; too great. I took everything seriously and fought through my bad days. I regained weight and my body stabilized itself. I worked with the treatment team and was completely honest. I thought everything was going to be great from here on out. I returned to school that fall and began to reconnect with a friend from elementary school. I told her about my struggles and how hard I was working on getting better and she supported me through it all. Life, to me, seemed brand new. Everything seemed glorious as I awoke each day with my new resolve to be healthy and have a "normal" life. Unfortunately my "normal life" included drinking like a college student, or at least how I thought a college student was supposed to drink.

Within a month I was drinking almost daily. I would get drunk when my roommate wasn't home and buy new bottles so she couldn't tell. I would drink with her and her friends on the weekends and spent many mornings very hung over. Two months into that semester I was raped twice while intoxicated; the rapes were exactly one week apart and were completely unrelated except for the fact that I had been drinking and blacked out.

My idea of the world being perfect and the sense that all would be ok was shattered. Almost immediately I began to focus on food again in order to avoid thinking about what happened. The eating disorder happily came back into my life and settled back into my head. This time, I was convinced I was going to do this right. I would lose weight through eating less and exercising more. I would control food and my body, but I wouldn't go too far. I didn't want to end up like I had last year, so I'd just take it a little easier.

The next year was a series of bouts with the eating disorder and with chemical use. I spent a summer exercising, restricting, and purging and did lose weight. I had sworn off alcohol at this point, but still made a few exceptions and didn't see anything wrong with resuming my pilfering of ADHD meds in order to help me study. In the back of my head I always knew it couldn't last forever and I tried many times to stop my destructive patterns. I'd last one or two days, but ultimately I'd return to the eating disorder. What I didn't realize at that point was that I was trying to give up parts of the eating disorder and keep others. I thought I could give up bingeing and purging, but keep restricting and keep my low

weight. I wasn't fully ready to completely surrender to recovery, because the eating disorder still had me convinced that my life would fall apart if I gave it up. Again I hit a bottom when I realized that my credit card was nearly maxed out from buying binge food. I had heard about the 12 Steps from some friends who were in Alcoholics Anonymous and thought that maybe I could apply those to my eating disorder. I started doing research and found Eating Disorders Anonymous on the web. But there were no meetings formed in my state. Disappointed, but not dissuaded, I resolved to do the 12 steps by myself. I printed off the worksheets and began to do more reading. But my attention quickly diminished as I had no one to share it with and I was easily beaten back into submission by the eating disorder.

About a month later I wandered back to the EDA site to try and learn more. I happened to check the website one more time. To my surprise the first meeting in my state was starting that weekend and it wasn't too far from where I was living. A new feeling came over me. For the first time in a long time I felt hopeful that something might be the solution. Though I was scared, I mustered up my courage and went to that first meeting.

What I found there was amazing and it carried me through the next difficult months. The people I encountered at that meeting fully understood me. They knew my struggles and they knew the desire to recover. They accepted me, despite my tearfulness and fear that I displayed the first few meetings. It was also these same people that suggested I take a look at my chemical use. They pointed out to be that recovery can't come in certain parts of our life and be excluded from others. If I wanted to live the principles of the 12 Steps, honesty open-mindedness and willingness, I had to look at my entire life.

I wish I could say that my symptom use stopped right then and there. But it didn't. The process of letting go of my eating disorder took a long time, what mattered most was that I never gave up on it. I held on to my hope that I could recover and did what I could each day to move forward. In my persistence my life slowly began to change. I started doing what members of the group told me to do in order to better my life, and I started taking tips from AA and applying them to my eating disorder. And as my thinking changed, my behavior slowly started to follow.

I made the decision to go back to Intensive Outpatient Treatment after about 9 months of trying recovery on my own. I felt I had stalled and even hit a point where I teetered on full relapse when my cousin went through a terrible accident and almost didn't survive. During this time I continued to attend EDA meetings and was living in a sober program at my school surrounded with students who were also in recovery from chemical dependency.

I believe the precursor to my being able to stop using symptoms was the moment I started getting fully honest with myself and with other people. I opened up to staff and peers in my sober program about my eating disorder and my attempts to recover. I asked for help with accountability and support

when I was struggling. To my surprise my peers responded splendidly. Many had also struggled with food and understood where I was coming from. And those that hadn't were still supportive and wanted to help in any way they could.

I didn't even realize I had stopped using symptoms until the end of the fourth day of abstaining. I was attending a Monday session of intensive outpatient and we were supposed to report on how our weekend went. As I sat on the couch listening to the others in my group I started thinking about my weekend and was surprised to recognize that my weekend had been symptom free. I had been so immersed in my life outside of my eating disorder that the eating disorder hadn't crossed my mind. At that moment I felt genuinely happy.

Recovery from then on hasn't been easy. At first I had to take things day by day. I worked with a sponsor, kept close contact with my Higher Power, and did my best to live by the 12 Steps. It was far from easy, but the support I kept close around me helped me to persevere. The moment I reached 30 days was one of the proudest moments in my life and I knew at that point that, by the grace of God, I wasn't willing to give up my recovery for anything.

Slowly I started to live a normal life again. As I began to consistently nourish my body I found that I could think clearer and that I even had moments where I wasn't thinking about food. I began to make friends and learned how to have meaningful relationships. I also started to tackle my fear of men that resulted from my rapes and eventually fumbled my way into a wonderful relationship with a man whom I love deeply.

The hardest part about recovery has been learning to get comfortable with change. Life stops when we are immersed in our eating disorder, and to fully recover we have to realize that change is inevitable and even desirable. The person I was becoming through my work with the 12 steps was beautiful, inside and out. The going was tough. Learning to experience and understand my emotions and life situations was terrifying. But each situation I made it through showed me how more clearly that living a full life meant keeping the eating disorder out.

I now see that when I try to control my life, whether through food or chemicals, I wind up unhappy and sick. But when I surrender fully to my Higher Power and live life the way God wants me to then things are better. When I was in the middle of my eating disorder it didn't matter if things were good or bad, life still sucked. But when I live under the guidance of my Higher Power and the principles of EDA, it doesn't matter if life situations are bad or good, life is still amazing. And for that I am a truly grateful recovering anorexic and bulimic.

Jenni P.

To Life, To Life, Hallelujah

I would like to start by taking a moment of silence for the individuals who have lost their lives to a battle with an eating disorder.

I would like to take a moment to accepting ourselves for who we are on the inside and for allowing positive changes to radiate out to the world.

As I think about the first step of the twelve in the eating disorder anonymous list: I am powerless over my eating disorder, I recall my battle with my disordered eating, my body image, my self- esteem, my courage, my voice, my inner peace, my happiness, and my well being; and I think about the ups and downs while in denial, attending groups, seeking treatment, wanting support, and hoping to achieve recovery. This culminates into a long story, one that seems daunting to recall and one that could be summed up either simply or lengthy. I have avoided writing for several days, but my first attempt is now, not knowing how much will appear on the pages before me.

I am not in denial of my eating disorder, as much as I feel compelled to admit of my disordered eating, I want to also say that I am so happy to be where I am today, but it has not been without much hard work, determination, reminders, relapses, secrecy, lying to others, shame, doubt, highs, lows, emotional outbursts, anger, resentment, suicidal thoughts, jealousy, and self hatred. Most recently I have begun the slow road of acceptance and willingness to change my negative ways into more positive means of coping.

My struggle started just over 13 years ago, when I was 13, which has been half of my life. Now 26, I honestly can't remember eating normally and not giving eating and food my entire daily concentration. For as long as I can remember I have obsessed about what to eat, when to eat, how much to eat, whether it would make me fat, what was good, what was bad, where and when I would binge, where I would purge, should I exercise intensely, or should I just hide in my room feeling crappy about myself and my choices. I have always been a functional woman with an eating disorder. I have excelled in school, held jobs, graduated twice from bachelors programs, became a registered nurse, started my own business, and had boyfriends. I looked happy and put together on the outside. On the inside, I was tearing myself apart emotionally and physically. I was deeply sad and angry. I was spiritually empty, I felt like the world must be against me in some way. I longed to be normal like those around me. All I wanted was to be able to eat normally. I wanted the obsessions to stop.

I have a rough past with several major hurdles that may have gotten me to where I am today. I was physically abused by my father as a child, I adopted motherly qualities at an early age, I lost a friend at the age of 13 in a tragic accident, I was a people pleaser, I was a perfectionist, I rarely showed emotions, two close childhood friends lost a parent to chronic illnesses, I was in bad relationships with men, I had falling outs with close friends—probably a result of

my increasing isolation from others, I sought out men and intimate relationships to fulfill a burning desire for attention, I had an abortion and carried the guilt of my promiscuous acts and longing to be loved, starving for attention and acceptance I went overboard and attached myself so tightly whenever someone showed the slightest interest in me. And subconsciously through it all my mother and friends commented negatively about people's weight, size, and shape and I'm now only beginning to see that this has had a great affect on my self-esteem and my ideals for what it means to be successful in today's society.

It wasn't until the fall of 2005 that it really hit me that I had an eating disorder. It progressed from anorexia, anorexia by day and binge eating at night, to overeating, to bulimia. Over the many years I finally realized my obsessions about food, weight, and shape were not normal. When I finally put a name to my patterns of eating, I began the road of wanting and getting help. But it was a lot of testing the waters, trying therapy out, checking out programs, seeking support, but it was all a very minimal investment on my end and 99% of the time I got scared and ran away from those who were trying to help. I was put on medication for depression and anxiety, which quickly lead to suicidal thought and becoming even more depressed. So I tried again with other medications, but never got anywhere.

I contacted the Emily Program in the fall of 2006 but walked away from intensive outpatient treatment. I can recall it just like yesterday, as I walked out of the doors, the therapist told me I'd be back...that not only would things continue but I'd slip down a worse road and the slope would be steep. She told me that recovery can't happen alone and that my battle would go on until I accepted that. Part of me convinced myself that I could get better on my own, I believed I was in control of this beast and I was going to do it on my own. The other part of me was convinced I was never going to get better, that this was my life, my luck of the cards I drew when I was born, and that there was no light at the end of my tunnel. In all of my attempts to reach out, I was far from ready to fully admit or commit to changing my behaviors. As much as I knew I needed assistance, I was scared to death to give it up. Again I made an attempt in July of 2008, this time admitting myself to an inpatient eating disorder center for 14 days. It was there that the very first layers of realization happened and that I just barely scratched the surface of the 25 years of stuff I had been burying deep deep down. It was in the hospital that I became increasingly fearful. I didn't know how to live without my eating disorder, I didn't know who'd be left if I wasn't my eating disorder, and I didn't want to make lifelong changes, it was all too daunting and too much work, or so I thought. As soon as I was discharged my eating disorder met me right back by the exit doors. I was planning our reunion the days prior to leaving and knew exactly how my bulimia would regain its control. I remember feeling so disgusted with myself, ashamed at my behaviors, and repulsed by my disordered eating. The worse I felt the more I engaged in the behaviors and the deeper my trials with depression became.

Since last July, over the past year, I've made some very real and desire-full attempts to recover, and although I'm at it again, I have gained invaluable

knowledge about myself, who I am as a person, my strengths and weaknesses, my correlations from the past to the present, and how to start loving myself and accepting who I am. It's a slow road and at times I feel like the rope I'm holding onto is extremely short, but with the help of others and the trust in myself I keep going.

Honestly as I'm trying to recall the past the foggier and harder it is to remember. It all seems like a blur. And with the retelling of my story bits and pieces pop into memory like a skipping CD. It doesn't feel like I've been at the low of lows or the high of highs. I don't know what is real. I don't quite know what to believe from this journey of mine. It's hard to think I've spent half of my life in a world so demented by my own mental state that everything was skewed. My perception of others, my existence day to day, my decision making abilities, and my attempts at healthy relationships were frightenally off balance.

So instead of talking about the past and dwelling on what my life was, I will talk about recovery and living in the mode of acceptance, willingness, possibilities, and being capable. Just recently I coordinated many forms of support for myself, the U of M research study on bulimia, eating disorder anonymous, anorexia and bulimia anonymous, the joy project, art therapy, equine therapy, attending synagogue and church services, and listening to uplifting Christian radio. In total I feel the support immensely and I feel that I am not alone in this most often times very lonely battle. I see others in the various groups I attend that are further in recovery than me and I know that I can get there too. I look forward to being in my own stable recovery and helping someone on the road to their own recovery. The more open I have been in the past 5 years, the more and more I have heard of similar struggles with disordered eating and although they have achieved a state of recovery in their own ways of treatment, they re-assure me that it is a road I must trudge for myself in every moment of my life. And that life has many blessings.

I have learned that sometimes you must set healthy boundaries with your family members when all your life your goal was to please them and to not upset or hurt them. I have learned that you cannot take on others feelings of guilt, that you cannot blame yourself for what has happened, that you must live for yourself, you must follow the beat of your own drum, and you must be willing to get right back up when you fall. I have learned that nobody is perfect, everyone has their difficulties, it is our coping mechanisms that distinguish one person from another. I have seen more clearly now than ever that life is more than looking like the supermodels or the people on TV. I have also realized that there are things called airbrushes and they actually use them. I have realized that life is not easy and challenges will come no matter where you live, what your job is, if you're married, if you have children, or if you have all the possessions you could ever want.

What does this mean? We're all human, there is no such thing as being perfect, there is no escaping the horrendous tragedies of life no matter how hard you try or how far you run, and that it's okay to cry. I have learned that expressing my emotions actually makes me feel better, that I must choose who I talk to and not

openly rely on the first person who looks in my direction. I have learned that at the end of the day, it is me that I must live with; and that I look forward to nurturing myself in so many wonderful and fulfilling ways, that I just can't wait to live.

Recovery is about faith, hope, and a willingness to accept what you have not faced before. Recovery is being a better person to yourself, loving you for who you are; and what you are... not only on the outside but on the inside. Recovery means sitting with the negative feelings and knowing they too will pass. Recovery is challenging, but so well worth it.

I look around today and I am thankful for all of the people in my life, those who have stood very patiently beside me as I learn to love myself, and learn to cope with life's challenges in a better way. I honor all of the participants of this group and know that we can all achieve recovery if we just believe in ourselves and each other. So what comes next, just the beauty of each and every moment. The unknown that can be so amazing.

Let's all say together, To life, To life, Hallelujah.

In the spirit of my art therapy I would like us all to create our own mandalas. Pick a sheet of paper, draw a circle, and let the writing utensil do the rest. You'll be amazed at what comes from your heart.

Shira G.

July 25, 2009

Thank you for reading our stories of recovery. If you have a story you would like to submit your story to this book, please email: info@eatingdisordersanonymous.org.