



Healing Your Hungry Heart

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As a child, my family's discussions often centered on the value of thin versus fat; my father even cited research studies to substantiate that thin rats outlived fat rats. Thus, the logical decision to stay the course, be it Weight Watchers, Atkins, Slimfast, the grapefruit diet, whatever trendy diet was in vogue at the time to achieve the almighty status of thin. Weight and the subsequent attachment to body image were critical factors in my life, not for health reasons but for beauty and self-worth. Thin people were in, fat people were out. Yet, binge eating was a way of life in my family. I learned that food soothed, silenced, sequestered my emotional overwhelm then sentenced my feelings to the inner darkness of my belly. I didn't have the skills to cope with life. Over the years, my weight came and went.

I started reading self-help books in my mid-twenties, about the same time I weighed 90 pounds or so on a 5' 5" skeletal frame. I recall my father getting rather furious one day while we were canoeing—he sat behind me counting my ribs as they protruded from my emaciated back. Starvation transitioned to binging and purging, to a 30 year relationship with disordered eating behaviors. I remember falling in love with Geneen Roth, Natalie Goldberg, and Anne Lamott; their first person approach to addiction and healing called to me. Yet, as always, nothing moved me to lasting change. Band-Aids. Stop gaps to address deeper concerns fueling the war with my body and the disconnect from my being, the grief and sorrow surrounding my soul and her desire to leave this life in any way, shape, or form.

Reading Joanna's book, *Healing Your Hungry Heart*, I felt a resonance with both the beginnings of my dysfunctional eating behaviors and the path I followed toward a healthier relationship with my body and with my self—the core consciousness I consider 'me' rather than the muscle, fascia, fluid, and boney frame that houses my energetic being.

For starters, Joanna shares her life with bulimia. She openly writes about her move into this destructive place of being and her struggle to transition away from its grasp into a loving place of self-acceptance. Her story is familiar in many ways, not the precise details, but the undermining feelings that collapse our faulty, if at all present, self-coping strategies to deal with what life brings our way. When it comes to therapists claiming to be eating disorder specialists, I believe it takes one to know one. Joanna knows. And her journey, within the pages of her book, offers a gentle step-by-step guide with strategies and skills to replace what was never nurtured, to teach

what was never instructed, to support what was never validated and loved.

She offers many strategies that are common place in eating disorder treatments—journaling, joining groups to avoid isolation, creating daily rituals, and repeating affirmations to stimulate cognitive and behavioral change. What sets this book apart from other self-help books for me is her engagement with the body and specific strategies to approach a relationship with what for most folks living with an eating disorder represents the battle ground, the war zone, the heart of the intensity and destruction. Joanna offers descriptions of what you may feel in your body such as, “a slight nervous sensation just below your shoulders in your upper arms, a leaden feeling in your abdomen, a prickling behind your forehead and a slight throbbing behind your eyes, a quivering in your upper thighs”—all these sensations, she says, can send you to food (p. 95). She teaches readers how to do body scans and builds a platform for mindfulness practices with

daily reflections and breath work—there’s time and practice to befriend your body and discover pleasurable body sensations, which are also blocked when so called negative feelings are shunned. One exercise asks you to be present to your feelings in the moment and as you pay attention to what you are experiencing, she asks, “What part of your experience is thinking? What part of your experience is emotion? What part of your experience is physical?” (p. 129).

Two exercises stood out for me.

The first is entitled, P.A.M.: Pause a Minute to stop overeating. When you find yourself in the process of overeating—at a meal, sitting at your computer, watching television, she recommends you pause, take a deep breath, and close your eyes. Pay attention to your breath. Don’t change it. Simply watch it. “Feel the oxygen enter your lungs and nourish your body. Tell yourself there is plenty of food in the world. You can have more at your next meal. Imagine your next meal. Commit to what time you will eat a nourishing meal again. Tell yourself you will be kind to yourself during the time between meals, and you will give yourself a good next meal” (retrieved from <http://eatingdisorderrecovery.com/>).

According to Joanna, “As you practice P.A.M. on a regular basis you develop the ability to break your overeating pattern. You learn to trust that you can bear your feelings. You earn your trust by supplying yourself with nourishing and tasty meals on a regular basis. When you trust that you will care for yourself and tend to your needs, you don’t need to overeat because you want to ward off deprivation. You know that you will provide yourself with enough. Do you trust yourself to give yourself the nourishment you need? How can you develop even more trust in yourself?” (retrieved from <http://eatingdisorderrecovery.com/>).

She writes that to heal “you create the opportunity and conditions for your heart and soul, your body and mind, to heal and grow beyond your present limitations” (p. 164). Every exercise in the book is designed to help you be more reflective, to see your inner worth through self-honesty and explore your own true

P. A. M. : Pause a Minute

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nature as you offer yourself compassion and appreciation for our imperfections as we live in an imperfect world. “Living a life without an eating disorder means living at a deeper level where you perceive more in the world, in other people, and in yourself” (pg. 203).

The second exercise that spoke to me is what she calls, “jibing”, a sailing term used when the boom shifts fast and hard from side to side of the boat forcing the boat to suddenly change direction. The idea is to shake things up, to “startle your mind, emotions, and body in a simple non-threatening way to learn how to focus on being present” (p.105). As your mind, body and spirit become more flexible, Joanna says we will become more confident in new situations, more resilient, creative,

and mature in order to “deal with what reality brings to you. You stay conscious. You stay present. You gather your resources and expand them to cope well and live” (p. 154).

There is a wealth of information as well in the appendices: affirmations; journal prompts; facts about eating disorders and treatment options; additional exercises and activities; recommended reading/CD/DVD list including fiction, spiritual, fairy tales and legends, human development, consciousness, memoir, and poetry; websites for support and study.

I know there are a slew of self-help books on store shelves, Amazon, Kindle, and more, and we all need to find what works best for us. There’s a resonance and when you find the right guide, you give it a try. *Healing Your Hungry Heart* resonated with me, and I highly recommend it for people living with eating challenges as well as for psychotherapists and health care workers (doctors, nurses, nutritionists, dieticians and so forth) who support patients struggling with disordered eating behaviors. Joanna’s website: <http://eatingdisorderrecovery.com/> offers excerpts of the book and exercises. You will also find blogs, forums, articles, and contact information.

Recovery is fluid, flexible, infinite, and learning new mindfulness practices is always a welcome addition to my current skill set. I’m jibing more these days and laughing at my attempts to do things from a different perspective, loving myself as I falter and as I succeed. I read the book in two sittings, actually, taking notes for the review and for myself, noting pages to return to for further reflection and to share with those who come to my door looking for acceptance and support. I truly appreciated Joanna’s candor and her willingness to be present on the pages of her book and in her work with people living with eating and body image challenges.