

Observing Obsession Julia's Story

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 myself. 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 clinging 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, 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 eat. 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 binging. "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 failure 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 or 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 an 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, 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.