

"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 myself 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 *nth* 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 it's 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