

PART II  
THEY STOPPED IN TIME



(1)

## AS SICK AS MY SECRETS

*She showed up, did the work and, most importantly, told the truth. In return she was met with compassion, encouragement, and support that shaped her recovery.*

Many of us with eating disorders know about living with secrets, and I am no different. The biggest secrets, I kept—even from myself. I grew up in a house where “little white lies” to smooth over situations or feelings or imperfections were not only tolerated, but encouraged. I learned that honesty was rarely the best policy; that if I was honest with myself I wouldn’t like what I saw. Recovery for me has been about practicing honesty, getting comfortable with discomfort, and speaking my truth.

At age nine what I wanted for Chanukah was a bunny; what I wanted at ten was anorexia. At nine I hit puberty, but at ten the only things bigger and more unruly than my frizzy, Ashkenazi hair were my breasts. I was the only ten-year-old in the women’s section, often dressed more like my teachers than my peers. Baby-doll t-shirts and designer-labeled skirts eluded me.

I had seen the after school specials, the concern everyone felt for the willow-thin girls who always seemed to have a lot of friends and be very popular. They fit in at school and they fit into the cute clothes that lined the junior’s section. I thought the key to having everything I wanted was my weight. Diet and weight management would solve not

just my thinking problems, but *all* of my problems! Soon I began collecting evidence to support this. The most popular target for insults and bullying was my size. I watched the number of my friends dwindle as my body changed, getting bigger in what I thought were all the wrong places (read: everywhere). It started with exclusion. Suddenly, at recess I was playing by myself a lot more than I ever had before. Then it moved into name-calling: “fatso,” “buck-tooth beaver,” “fatty,” “tubby,” etc. The worst was the subtle mockery of popular, thin girls being nice to me only to realize halfway through an interaction that they were actually laughing at me. Boys were cruel in their own way: it was a grade-wide pastime to ask me out and harass me until I finally said yes, then laugh about how I totally thought they were serious. There seemed to be no greater insult to a boy than for someone to say they liked me or was liked by me. I felt like a fat tub of industrial lard waste, which meant I was a fat tub of industrial lard waste! I just knew that if I could lose weight, if I could have an eating disorder like the girls on television, my life would be perfect. Everyone would care about me. People would care about me and feel bad that they had bullied me. I would have friends again. I’d never have to be alone at recess with just my imagination and resentments to keep me company. I’d stop crying after school. All of my cures lay in controlling my weight.

I remember being so proud of myself when I skipped my first meal that year. I took my seat at the girls’ lunch table near a boy who had sat down at the boys’ table. This was a boy I thought was cute, and he abruptly yelled, “No, you go sit over there.” And I did, almost crying. He hadn’t said anything about my weight, but I **KNEW** it had to be because I was fat and unlovable. I didn’t eat anything at lunch that day because he was right. My best friend since

preschool tried to convince me to eat, but I couldn't hear her healthy advice. No, I knew what I needed to do. I wanted to make the bullying stop and make my peers like me again. The only way I would ever make that happen was to lose weight. And the best way, the only way for me to lose weight was for me to do something drastic. I loved veggies, I ate healthy, I liked being outside, but my body shape had refused to change. Clearly, if I could get control of that, I could get control of my life!

I thought that if I could control my weight, my intake, my size, then I could control how people felt about me. If I could control how people felt about me, then I'd never have to feel any of the pain that lived inside of me. I didn't like me the way I was, and no one else seemed to like me the way I was either. While my slender friends could eat whatever they wanted and would demolish a box of cookies at my house, their parents would admonish me to "watch what I ate." I got nutrition lectures. They would forbid their daughters to play dress up with me, because I would stretch out their clothes. When I went to the pool with them, they would talk about how great swimming was for exercise when all I wanted to do was pretend to be a mermaid because I loved how free my body felt in the water.

Home wasn't a safe haven either. My mother agreed with her friends: I was heavy and just needed to eat right. My mother looked the opposite of me, straight where I had curves, flat where I had mountains on my chest. She hated how she looked, and I grew up hearing someone I thought was the ideal beauty compare her "bird legs" to my shapely ones. My mother talked about her own experiences with weight-related teasing, but it was hard for me to sympathize. After all, *everyone loved a skinny girl and no one loved fat me*, I thought as I dug deeper into my disorder. They'd

love me when I hit the right size. *I'd* love myself when I hit the right size. I aspired to be anorexic, but didn't think I could do it. I hadn't skipped a meal after that one day in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I wanted to, but I feared wasting food and would use it to soothe my feelings. In middle school my prayers were consumed with God making me anorexic or killing me in my sleep. I just wanted to get out of what I saw as an unending pit of misery, and the only way out was an eating disorder or death.

Then I turned fourteen, and a switch flipped. After a bad break-up with a long-time crush, I stopped eating. I threw the breakfasts my mom brought up to me into my bathroom trash. I gave away the lunches she packed for me to boys who didn't care enough to ask questions. I would sometimes eat dinner; but, given the option, I tended to throw it away. I began purging if I ate something. But the thing about starving myself was that my brain was too focused on staying alive to let me feel anything, well...feel anything *except* for the anxiety that kept it going. I didn't talk a lot about it, making references to my "food issues" until it came out sideways and exploded. I wanted to tell everyone because I wanted them to worry. But I also didn't want to actually do anything about it. I wasn't skinny enough...or didn't think I was sick enough yet.

I kept that secret for four years or more. I told no one, hoping that I would get "better" at it and actually lose weight. I couldn't talk about it, because my behaviors felt necessary to my survival. But the thing about secrets is that they grow and absorb more parts of your life; you start keeping even more secrets so you can protect your big secret. I was consumed by my secrets in college. Freshman year might have been my rock bottom: purging multiple times a day for eating even "safe" foods, eating the bare

minimum to keep my friends from bothering me, taking diet pills that made me so shaky it was hard to hold a pencil. I told myself that this was something I had to do, because if I didn't, the good things in my life (friends, a major I loved, a school I loved, my boyfriend) would disappear, and I would go back to being unlovable, bullied me. My most toxic thought was that I *needed* to do this. I wanted to be someone different— someone loveable—in college. I was going to reinvent myself into the person I had always wanted to be, and to do that I needed my eating disorder. But as much as I said I did it to be loveable to others, I was alone in my disorder. I separated myself from those around me, because while it felt too big to tell them, it was “not a big deal” to me.

After a doctor heard some irregularities in my heartbeat, I finally came clean to my friends and family about how I had been starving, throwing away food, and throwing up multiple times a day. I made it clear that I was not going to go to treatment, but was meeting every two weeks with the college counselor and, “No, you cannot point out how small my meal is.” People knew about the disorder, but it was never something I let myself be held accountable for. I was not yet ready to give it up. I continued on that roller coaster, being “better” for a while and then sliding back. No matter where life took me, my eating disorder was there.

I met my husband-to-be during a “quiet period” of my eating disorder. While he knew about my history and showed a lot of understanding, it started to creep back in. First, it was expressing how much I hated my body or thought we were mismatched. Then I started eating less or eating erratically. I would sit at dinners and worry about what I was eating. By the time we were engaged, I had

gained weight because of my yo-yo relationship with food, which sent me into a deep shame spiral throughout our entire engagement. For the first time, I realized I couldn't act out on behaviors when he was around. I couldn't purge if he was in the apartment. I would eat dinner if he was around. I had to have space to keep my secret, even if it was an open secret. These secrets ate at me; they followed me across an ocean to another country. They got worse; and while my weight dropped, I was even more unbelievably miserable than I had been. I added compulsive exercise to make it seem as though I was incredibly healthy. I would run until all I could do was lie on the couch, because standing up made me dizzy. I forgot things, I was flaky with my plans, I had massive mood swings. My husband and I fought about my food and my exercise regularly. I couldn't fake the energy during job interviews. My hair continued to thin, and my skin was riddled with bruises from minor bumps of daily life. I didn't even have the energy to cry anymore. I was disconnected from most of my friends, a living, one-way mirror in which they could tell me what was going on with them, but I couldn't allow myself to tell them I was even "a little blue."

One of our goals in Twelve-Step fellowships is to carry the message of hope to others, and I saw in a member of another fellowship something that I wanted—happiness, joy, and freedom from the burdens of addiction. We sat on a park bench on a summer day before I started my dream job, and they told me about how painful their life had been before they started a Twelve-Step program. In that moment, I felt a desire to connect, to tell them why I always "ate before I came" or "ate like a bird" around them. I shared that I was in recovery for an eating disorder and had been recovered for three years. They congratulated me, with all



of their eight years of sobriety, and thanked me for sharing. It was all a lie. I had compulsively exercised and purged a few hours before the conversation happened. I lied to them and I lied to myself. I said it didn't count because it wasn't a long-term relapse (more self-deception!). I needed to deceive myself so I could stay in my eating disorder—a secret I kept even from myself. Their warm encouragement of my recovery made me uncomfortable with my secrets and lies. I turned it around and around in my head, that I was lying to everyone about my day-count, that I wasn't really better.

Seeing how much a Twelve-Step group had helped someone I admired, I decided to see if there was a local meeting of Eating Disorders Anonymous. I had tried what felt like everything, but I hadn't tried this. And I realized I was just so tired of living. I attended my first meeting online and the theme was "Show up, Do the Work, and Tell the Truth." In the chat room, I said "My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I have an eating disorder." I shared, and while I don't remember exactly what I said, I think I talked about wanting a perfect recovery and realizing that it was a lie; that I hadn't been in recovery for an incredibly long time—if at all. I had finally spoken my secret to a room full of people who had lived my same secrets, and they were reaching out. They were tired of being as sick as the secrets they carried around with them. I realized, miraculously, that I was, too.

I started with my husband. Instead of being angry at me or disappointed, his reaction was different. He was compassionate and supportive, perhaps sensing that this time I was really committed to change. I told a few of my very close friends; none of them said, "I knew it" or "Duh." They thanked me for telling them, and asked what they could do to help. I then told my Twelve-Step friends, even-

tually owning up to lying to them about my disorder and years of behavior-free time. Once again, I was met with compassion, encouragement, and support. My secrets had lied to me; I didn't need to do this to keep all the good things I told myself I didn't deserve unless I was thin/loveable enough. In fact, those secrets had cut me off from seeing how truly loved I was, not because of my disorder, but just because. I started to realize I didn't have to understand why or feel worthy of love to be loved.

Diving into more honesty practice, I attended my first face-to-face meeting. I was running late and was tempted to skip it entirely. I'm glad I didn't, because being at that meeting gave me not only more practice at honesty, but also a great network of others. I ended up sitting next to the person who, months later, would become my sponsor. I wasn't always honest in group; I found it was easier for me to be open and honest when things were going well, which is common. I wanted the group to think I was doing great in my recovery!

One night I told my husband that I was not doing well, but had told everyone at meeting I was. He looked at me and plainly said, "What's the point in going to meetings if you're going to lie?" Now that I was being more honest about my past, I knew I had to start being more honest about my present, including when I was sinking in relapse quicksand. I started slowly trusting others, sharing even simple sentences like, "It's been a really hard week" or, "Everyone in my office is talking about diets and it's triggering." Those little steps, one foot in front of the other, helped me share bigger things, like speaking about my relapse after ninety-one days without behaviors.

I could start to see where I needed more help, at times being brutally honest about the parts of recovery that

sucked, like trying to feed myself with no real nutritional experience. It opened me up to getting more help and honestly taught me to surrender, because I could finally admit that doing it alone had never ever worked in a meaningful way. And boy did I need all the help I could get when I got to Step Four! When you've been so self-deceptive, the idea of doing a fearless and searching moral inventory is anything but a fearless experience. As I did it, my own patterns started to emerge and I could see exactly what the stories I told myself looked like. In that knowledge, came freedom.

To stay honest with myself is a struggle; it's a challenge. To face down my character defects when they come up and see them for what they are, instead of an objective reality, isn't easy. But now I know I'm not alone in this fight: I'm no longer on a battlefield alone wearing the rusty armor of my eating disorder. I've got my Higher Power, my EDA network, my friends, and my family. I love the changes I've seen in my life, and the standout reason for that is a willingness to be honest with others and myself. As Mr. Rogers said, "Anything that is mentionable is manageable." By admitting how unmanageable my life was before I found EDA, working the Steps, and connecting with the sparks of my Higher Power and those around me, my life has started to become more manageable.

(2)

## A TREATMENT PROFESSIONAL SHARES HER STORY

*When she began to communicate out loud, her eating disorder quieted; she became comfortable with being perfectly imperfect. Happy and free in recovery, she shares that surrender meant “joining the winning team.”*

I have been asked many times what caused my eating disorder: What was my family like? Did they have weird eating habits? Was I ever told I was fat? Trauma? Anything out of the ordinary? Honestly, I grew up in what I consider a fairly normal/healthy household. My parents had a solid marriage. My older brother and I had a fairly normal sibling relationship, outside of the usual rivalry. In the same way I view any other addiction, I consider eating disorders to be complex. There is not one cause. I feel like the right personality, social environment, and biological factors created the perfect storm for my eating disorder to thrive.

As a young child, I was extremely shy. Between my brother and me, I was the “quiet one.” While he did all the talking and vocalizing, I kept to myself. I think my temperament alone was a factor in the development of my eating disorder. I internalized everything. And while I did have friends, I never had an abundance of them. My reservations and extreme introversion fueled fear surrounding new experiences and meeting new people.

As I entered middle school, my introverted side became detrimental to my confidence and consequently led to my insecurity about everything. I had friends, but I was never popular. I played sports, but I wasn't considered a "star player." I did my homework, but I didn't excel in any classes. Furthermore, like every other prepubescent girl, I went through what I can now say was a tremendously awkward stage. Weight gain, acne, limbs that were too long for my body, and still not hitting a growth spurt made me feel like I was an "ugly duckling." I remember looking at all the other girls, wishing I was as thin, petite, and "normal looking" as they were.

It wasn't until the summer going into high school that my eating disorder truly began to appear. A yearly physical was required, and as I stepped on the scale, the doctor called out my weight. My face turned bright red, and tears began to flood my eyes. I tried my best not to cry and remained silent for the rest of the appointment. This number has never left my brain. For my age and height, I was considered overweight. I remember that moment like it was yesterday. Driving home, I asked my mom her weight. I was shocked. She weighed less than I did. That was the very moment the obsession began. The eating disorder mentality ignited with fire. *How could I, a fourteen-year-old, be heavier than my mom? When did this happen? How did this happen?* I felt so ordinary in every other aspect of my life and now I considered myself "fat!" That day, I vowed to myself that I would no longer be average. I was not going to enter a new high school as ordinary. I wanted a new image for myself. I wanted to be perfect.

What started as a "healthy" change in eating habits, spiraled into a full-blown eating disorder. While other kids my age enjoyed their summer, hanging out with friends or

going to the beach, I was in the gym running on treadmills or swimming lap after lap, measuring, portioning, body checking, restricting, and purging. Watching the number on the scale decrease day-by-day had never given me so much pride and what I thought was self-worth. I wasn't average anymore. Then came the compliments—by family, extended family, friends, and parents of friends. “What happened to that chubby kid?” they would ask, and commend me on my new body. I was finally happy. That “chubby kid” was gone. I hit my growth spurt and felt like I finally stood out. By the time the first day of high school approached, I had done it. I was pounds lighter and ready to make my debut.

Not surprisingly, the weight loss wasn't enough. That's the thing about eating disorders; you're never satisfied with that number on the scale. Obsessive thoughts and numbers filled my head every day: *What if I were to lose a few more pounds? Another couple here? A few there?* The goal was constantly changing. I would get to my “magic number,” and be proud of myself for a day. Then the feeling would wear off and I was back to the drawing board: *How many more calories do I need to burn? What can I eliminate in my diet? What if I skip breakfast and have some fruit for a snack and swim for this amount of time? Then would I be okay? I have to eat dinner in front of my parents, but how much time can I spend at the gym after?* Those thoughts occupied my mind daily. It was exhausting. I was a prisoner in my own body. I was a prisoner in my own mind. While others had history facts, calculus equations, and vocabulary definitions floating through their minds, I had calories and numbers pertaining to sizes and exercise in mine.

Junior year was truly the worst year of my eating disorder. For my height and body type, I had become extremely

gaunt. I had sustained a knee injury requiring surgery during swim season, which I now attribute to my weakened and sick body. I was depressed. I was constantly fighting with my family, lost friends, and found myself in a verbally abusive relationship with my first boyfriend. I was irritable, and my anxiety was the highest it had ever been. My eating disorder had morphed into the only aspect of control I had in my life. I was depressed, so I used behaviors. I was anxious, so I used behaviors. I was lonely, insecure, sad, and angry; my answer was to use behaviors. I had become stuck in the most destructive cycle imaginable and couldn't find a way out. It was a never-ending battle that was surely leading me toward death.

I remember getting called into the principal's office, feeling puzzled as to why. When I walked in, I saw a guidance counselor sitting next to the dean who expressed her concern for my health. I remember laughing out loud. The meeting was a blur, but I remember the counselor saying that she was in recovery from an eating disorder. Like any other individual struggling with an eating disorder, I became defensive and was in the true definition of denial. The counselor asked if I was dieting or not eating. I lied. "My family is thin and tall. I don't have a problem," I stated. Lies. "You don't know what you're talking about. I am at a healthy weight." Lies. "Ask my mom, she sees me eat every night!" Lies. (What my mom didn't know was that I was purging through self-induced vomiting or exhausting myself at the gym burning days' worth of calories). I left infuriated. *Who did they think they were? How could they think I was sick?!* I was not about to let them take away my eating disorder. It was my pride and joy, my friend, my comfort, and my way of communicating! At this point in time, it was just about the only thing I

had left in my life. My grades had plummeted; I had no intention of going to college. I was getting D's in classes. I had lost everything: failing at life, but acing my eating disorder.

To this day, I can't blame my parents for not recognizing how unhealthy my eating habits were. To be in an eating disorder, you need to be a master manipulator and liar, and I had become both. I lied—A LOT. I lied about going to the gym. I lied about eating out. The web of lies became so excessive that I started lying about things that didn't even pertain to my eating disorder. I lied about where I was going out with my friends. I lied about being sick! I ditched classes and even full school days! I lied about a car accident that was *my* fault! I had turned into a monster. The more "attractive" I strived to be on the outside, the uglier and more unattractive I became on the inside.

The day my mom caught me purging, I felt so many emotions: shame, guilt, embarrassment, but also relief. I was relieved that she finally knew how bad it had become. I remember walking out of the bathroom and falling straight into her arms, sobbing and apologizing. The next day she made an appointment with a renowned psychologist who specialized in eating disorders. Although my mom had to practically drag me into that first appointment, I am so grateful that she did. I owe my life to my therapist. I had to come to terms with the fact that I was powerless over my disorder. My life had become unmanageable in every way, shape, and form. For the next three years I spent hours, sometimes multiple times a week in individual as well as group therapy, working on rebuilding myself. While all my friends went off to college, I had to sit back and work on picking up the wreckage that my eating disorder had created.



I took the recovery process a day at a time. Sometimes I took it an hour at a time, and in high stress, a minute at a time. I trusted my therapist and dietician, which was honestly one of the hardest, but most integral, parts of the process. Surrendering to the process is the only sustainable way through recovery. It wasn't easy, but the more I began to communicate aloud, the softer the eating disorder voice in my head became. The shy, introverted, shell of a human being I had once been transformed into an assertive, confident, young woman. I challenged beliefs about being perfect, and finally, after years, understood the idea of being "perfectly imperfect." As my behaviors subsided, my life began to thrive. I enrolled at a local junior college and began excelling in my classes. At the end of my second year, I had become an "A" student and had been accepted to two prestigious universities. Because of my experience of going through recovery, I majored in psychology and vowed to one day help other women facing the monster I had defeated.

Today, I am a therapist at an eating disorder treatment center. To say it was easy getting to this point would be another lie. It was hard! I had slips and relapses, but every one taught me something about myself. I became stronger.

Within my own recovery, as well as within my profession, using the Twelve Steps on a day-to-day basis has been a catalyst in my transformation. In meetings, I felt like I wasn't alone in this battle. I found a sanctuary where I could openly tell my story and feel not judged, scoffed at, or looked down upon, but understood. Others knew the hardships faced every day in recovery and the Steps provided relief from the insanity I endured.

Before being introduced to EDA, I struggled with admitting powerlessness and surrendering because I thought

it meant weakness. It took another member of the Twelve-Step fellowship to reframe this skewed perception. She explained that instead of seeing surrender as weakness, I should think of it as joining the “winning team.” That completely changed me: It gave me permission to finally let go of my disorder.

Even now, ten years into my recovery, surrender has to happen every single day for me. I continually recognize that in myself and I remind my clients who struggle, too. Working the Steps of EDA brought me from a place of captivity to a place of freedom and peace, and for that I am truly grateful. I know for certain I would not be writing this if it weren't for EDA.

When I have clients sitting in front of me, broken and hopeless, I recall where I came from and I try to encourage and reassure them about what can happen through recovery. With every ending of an eating disorder, there is a new beginning...a new life. And, believe me, it is so much sweeter.

(3)

## AUTHENTICITY FREED ME TO FIND MY PURPOSE

*Just as her connection to a Higher Power inspires her to pursue recovery every day, she inspires others to find their true worth.*

I put off writing my story, because my perfectionist mind told me I needed to have all the answers and be unquestionably successful before “giving advice.” But here I am, typing! That is the epitome of my recovery journey: challenging myself, my thoughts, my “Ed head,” and doing everything in my power to go against it. When “Ed” (my eating disorder) tells me to not eat because I will get fat, I can now defy him! I can shout, “No” to all of Ed’s rules, and I can stop the swirling anxiety inside my head. With each challenge, with each fulfilled human desire, I am made more aware of my humanness.

This scared me at first; and it still does, but not in the same way. Before, I let the fear of being myself express itself through starvation, bingeing, purging, and self-harming, because I utterly hated myself *that* much. I still have down days now, but nothing that compares to the insurmountable pain and shame that riddled me when active in my eating disorder. Sometimes I stop and remember the weight of those feelings and I can’t even fathom how I survived such darkness. My head swam all day with thoughts of what I would eat, careful and precise planning always involved.

Then, when I did eat the so-called “planned” meal, I was not only full of food, but also full of regret.

Allowing my belly to be full removed my starving distraction, and I was faced with feelings that I didn’t think I could bear. And even if I could, I didn’t *want* to. I verbally abused the poor little girl inside me, constantly telling her she wasn’t enough. I did this until I wanted to die. I did this until my obsession with avoiding my feelings of confusion and shame literally drove me to insanity. I did this until my pain broke me. It took looking into sunken-in eyes, dazed after being used and assaulted, to realize I could not go on like this. I would sit in my shower, empty after relieving my belly of that day’s distress, and let the water drench my face. Heaving, panting, and shaking—at the brink of ending it all.

In the end, I called my mother. In that moment she was not the mother of an adult. I had thought of myself as an adult for several years, but at that point I was a broken, wingless, little bird—and I needed my mother. She came and she conquered, bringing me home from college after just three weeks and checking me into treatment.

I cried as I unpacked my bags at the treatment facility, realizing where Ed, my eating disorder, had taken me in life. Ed’s desperate attempts to “save” and protect me ironically led to chaos that affected not only me, but also everyone who loved me. Ed made me blind to that love. No, my life had not been perfect, but people cared for me to the best of their abilities. I had been hurt, but I know now that we are all limited humans working through our own issues.

In treatment, I realized I had spent many years blaming myself for others’ actions and things I could not control. Instead of seeing the vicious taunting I faced in middle

school as a sign that my bully just hated himself, I was convinced that I had to hate *myself*. I would come home and look in the mirror and think that there was no possible way someone could look at another human being and tell them to die unless there was something wrong with them. But yes, people can be heartless. Through facing my own resentments, I have, uncomfortably, learned that. At first this made me angry, but anger is only toxic to the holder, so I began to look at everyone who had ever hurt me in my life with compassion, knowing that they only acted in such a desperate manner to soothe themselves. It seems we are all anxious and afraid. This doesn't excuse anything or anyone, but it has allowed me to begin practicing forgiveness, and this means with myself as well.

My recovery is about being kind to myself and allowing myself to feel. Connecting to my Higher Power has literally saved my life. I realize that I am a tiny speck in the universe, and that our world consists of billions of other little specks. I try to not let this make me feel insignificant. Instead, I use it as inspiration to overcome my circumstances, because in the grand scheme of things my issues are so small. The size of my soul matters more than the size of my belly, and the weight of my impact on this world is more important than my actual weight.

As I have become more comfortable with myself, I have seen that my passion for authenticity allows others to feel more comfortable with themselves as well. I am by no means perfect, and admitting that validates me more than any degree, job, size, or relationship ever could.

Acceptance to me means feeling my feelings, good and bad. The depths of the lows that I feel are in exact correlation with the intensity of joy and passion that I can also feel. This gives me appreciation and gratitude for my

tougher emotions. I try to see them as a gift. And although living—truly living and feeling—is hard, it is also radiant and beautiful. Exploring myself as I go through life is the most overwhelming, daunting, playful, exciting, and exhilarating thing that I have ever done. Recovery has given me the blessing of this journey, and I have so much hope that I, and others, will make it through and achieve our purposes in life. Recovery from my eating disorder has allowed me to begin to see mine: advocating for self-love and helping others bridge the gap from the person they think they are supposed to be...to finding their authentic selves.

## FAITH IN THE FELLOWSHIP

*In her first meeting, she was amazed at the beautiful kindness and openness of the people who recovered; then, through working the Steps, she became one of them.*

Before coming to EDA, I didn't know how I could stop my obsession with food; all I was trying to do was control my weight and body image. I spent days and nights bingeing and purging in the bathroom or into trash bags in my bedroom, which later I would throw away in hopes that my dad would not find them. I exercised constantly and starved myself on the days following a binge. I was introduced to EDA by a friend who was in another Twelve-Step program. I didn't know then my life was about to change and the obsession and craving—the “allergy” which we speak of—was to be lifted. I was amazed by how much I related to these beautiful people who had recovered from their eating disorders. They shared their experiences of having worked the Twelve Steps of EDA with a sponsor, someone who has knowledge and experience with the Twelve Steps and has recovered from an eating disorder.

I sat and listened during my first meeting. In my second meeting, I heard a young woman speak who shared so much experience that I felt I had to ask her to sponsor me. She did become my sponsor, and far more, my spiritual advisor. Her struggles were so similar to mine, but there was something she had I could hardly conceive of back then.

She had hope, a practice of healthy eating, a sound body image, and a relationship with God. After starting the Steps in EDA, I didn't stop acting out, but there was something different this time: I had someone to call who understood what I was going through and who helped me reach out to God instead of the eating disorder. By the time we got to Step Three, I was very acquainted with how the "allergy" was both a mental and physical obsession. My sponsor received my 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Steps with grace. She listened to all my angry rants about fast-food restaurants and Hollywood's model perfection image—resentments I had harbored and been obsessed with since I was eleven years old. I still remember the feeling of sitting with her that day, and after leaving, finding so much relief from these emotions that I had held in for years. *My secrets had been brought out into the open and shared with someone who understood.*

It was the season of the Girl Scouts. I decided to buy some things, thinking this time would be different. Once again, I was down on my knees and called my sponsor for help. But something different happened this time: I didn't purge. She reminded me that in EDA "We eat what we want, when we want it. We don't try to control—that is not our method. Pray. Ask God to help you. You can rely on Him every time," she said. And so I did. I began my relationship with Him that day and I haven't binged or purged since. In working my 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Steps, I had to admit the truth to family and friends, and to people from whom I had stolen food; my secrets had to come out to the open. I offered money to make amends for the food I stole and shared the exact nature of my condition with my family. I didn't have to do this alone. I had a fellowship of people, and God's love and support the whole way through.



Today, I have a new sponsor whose faith in God restores me in my darkest moments when I want to binge or restrict, or my false body image ideas start to creep in. I am always redirected to a Higher Power and commitment to not binge for the next hour. It will always be “One Day at a Time” for me and countless others who have recovered from their malady.

I am grateful for my journey through EDA. By working the Steps with a sponsor and with the fellowship and community of Eating Disorders Anonymous, having faith in God, and taking part in service work with others who are struggling, I was able to recover from this deadly disorder. I hope all who are reading this will stay committed to their program and give back to others what was given to them. I have a brand new life, and each morning I awaken excited to live in this world thanks to the fellowship and program of EDA.

## FREEDOM BEYOND MEASURE

*When her obsession with numbers lifted and she became mindful of her inherent worth, she was inspired to help others...and became a clinical psychologist.*

My life has been ruled by numbers. From an early age, I used numerical values of all sorts to measure my worth as a person.

I was a high achiever—this is where my perfectionism developed. Working hard in school and being recognized for my academic accomplishments (through high test scores and grade-point averages) were the defining markers of my identity.

Meanwhile, growing up, I was often teased about my weight. I was a chubbier child and vividly remember negative comments from others about my body: “Be careful not to get fat,” a teacher once told me. Yet, I was part of a culture that revolved around extravagant dishes and desserts—if my grandparents offered me something to eat, I could not decline it or I would be looked at with disappointment and shame. I became a “refuse-not” eater.

If I wasn't feeling great about my body or appearance, I'd fall back on the fact that I was smart; this validated my self-worth. My academic performance became a reflection of my value and a concrete measure of my identity. I put everything I had into enhancing these numbers, fearing I would lose approval and become insignificant were I to get

a lower grade on an exam, or if my GPA dropped—even a little bit.

Living in a toxic environment further reinforced my need for perfection. My parents' marriage has been chaotic for as long as I can remember, and my dad has struggled with depression for decades. In addition, the cultural community I have been a part of values privacy and focuses on keeping up appearances to avoid judgment. Looking back, I can see that the powerlessness I felt within my family and community dynamics motivated me to pay even more attention to what I could control at the time: the numerical values that supposedly measured my intelligence and value.

Around the time I started college, my own depression started to creep in. I was burnt out and felt rather unmotivated regarding my studies. I was no longer the perfect, top student, and so my sense of self-worth diminished. *If I'm not the smartest, I would ask myself, then what do I have to offer? What good am I?* I began using relationships as the next way to prove my worth. On and off through almost all of college, I was in a psychologically abusive relationship. When my boyfriend ended it against my pleas, efforts, and bargains, I again felt utterly powerless and worthless. I felt I had nothing validating that I had worth.

My emotions post-breakup were highly unstable. Now that I was single, I was spending more time with my girlfriends and naturally I compared my body to theirs, feeling inferior that most of them were thinner than me. I combined these two uncomfortable experiences to cope with my breakup and overwhelming emotions. I decided I was going to take “control” of my life and “work” on myself by getting into shape; this would solve all of my problems. Thus, I put myself on a very unrealistic, restrictive diet

that eliminated complete food groups. I began exercising. I lost weight and received a ton of positive feedback. I felt incredibly accomplished and actually liked what I saw in the mirror. I had never experienced the sensation of liking my body, nor had I heard such positive comments about my figure, so this was a new and very exciting feeling for me. I was hooked. I felt powerful and in control. I was confident. My relationship grief diminished. I felt like my depression had lifted, and my new body was now my positive identifying feature. I had worth again.

I took a year off after college graduation to apply for graduate school. Without academics or relationships to absorb my energy, I felt severely empty and depressed. Subsequently, I found solace in a new “friend,” which at the time I didn’t realize was an eating disorder.

My diet and exercise habits were my new “project” that gradually became an obsession. I started weighing myself and noticed the number slowly creeping back up again. I equated this shift with failure and a lack of willpower. I realized I had no idea how or what to eat to be “healthy,” so I went to a nutritionist with the intention of losing weight. When she gave me a low-calorie meal plan to follow, I took it and ran with it. I became obsessed. I followed the meal plan compulsively, precisely measuring and recording everything I ate. I was glued to my phone, constantly searching online for nutrition facts to determine what I could give myself permission to eat. I allotted myself a certain number of calories per day, so if I went over this limit, I would keep track of how many I would have to subtract from the following day(s) to compensate for eating too much. I forbade myself from eating “bad” foods and constantly made ridiculous substitutions when I would go out to eat. As I continued losing weight, I was still receiving

positive feedback about my body, “healthy” eating habits, unwavering willpower, and commitment to fitness. These labels substantiated my significance as a human being, so I had to keep them going to maintain my identity and sense of self.

My family and friends constantly had to accommodate my new “healthy” lifestyle. My so-called life, once again, was dictated by numbers: calories consumed, calories burned, serving sizes, hours spent exercising, the speed and intensity at which I would exercise on machines, miles ran, grams of macronutrients, clothing sizes, and most significantly, the number on the scale. This number, which is merely a measure of the force of gravity, became the sole determinant of my self-worth, confidence, happiness, actions, and goals. This single value, which I measured multiple times a day, dictated whether or not I would have a good day, socialize with certain people, or feel worthy of love and attention. I was a slave to this number.

I was never at an unhealthy weight, so I didn’t think I had a problem. I was used to having an obsessive, perfectionist personality and living my life rigidly. I just thought I was being health conscious. When people asked how I had kept the weight off, I would tell them that I had adopted a new lifestyle.

My behaviors and obsessions weren’t really getting “in the way” of my functioning or responsibilities—or so I thought. But in order to make more space for them, I started sacrificing different parts of my life. I began to isolate to avoid stressful situations around food and to hide when I was facing intense body insecurity. When I did have intimate relationships, I was barely present and constantly worried about what I was eating on a date, or if the other person was judging my body. I also exercised excessively, multiple

times a day. The few times I actually took a step back to feel my feelings, I was definitely aware that I was very depressed. I was seeing a therapist and psychiatrist, but didn't feel the need to divulge my eating and exercise habits, thinking they were healthy, normal, and even respectable. Although I did start discussing some underlying issues, I would still use these behaviors to control my body, and subsequently and unknowingly try to control what I was feeling.

A few months before I started graduate school, I started overeating regularly. At the time, I strongly believed it was a matter of willpower—and not a result of the low-calorie diet and excessive exercise I was taking part in—that was leaving me ravenous. My weight began to fluctuate; I felt incredibly out of control. I also felt like a failure for not being able to successfully monitor and manipulate my body in the way I wanted. I was miserable. I took a month to travel abroad and spent my vacation time looking up calories online, trying to keep track of my food, taking only stairs instead of escalators, and feeling anxious about whether or not the amount of walking I was doing counted as “exercise” to help me lose weight. The worst part was I didn't have access to a scale to decide if I was “okay.” This madness continued into graduate school, which is when my downward spiral really took place.

Being a full-time graduate student, I was nervous about how I would lose or maintain my weight while in school. I wouldn't have the same amount of time to devote to exercise, and I wouldn't be home as much to “control” my eating. I was also living away from my family for the first time and felt loneliness. Looking back, I realize I subconsciously used my disordered habits to deal with all of this change, which included a graduate program that I wasn't passionate about.

Every weekend, my classmates would prepare for an intense few days of lecture and clinical work, while I would plan a new, restrictive diet and exercise regimen for the upcoming week. I had started plugging my food intake and exercise into online fitness trackers and obsessively counted calories. I did many juice cleanses and took diet pills. I put so much time and effort (and money!) into losing weight. However, my efforts would backfire, because I would end up bingeing at the end of the day. I was constantly at war with myself, trying to compensate for what I ate. I was consumed by this vicious binge-shame-restrict cycle.

As my clothes got tighter and tighter, school inevitably became a lower and lower priority, and my body became my main focus. I would leave class to exercise, obsessively look up nutritional facts during lecture, isolate from my peers, and have a hard time participating in school events that involved food. I didn't want anyone to see me, notice my weight gain, or make a negative body comment that would devastate me to my core.

My perceived sense of control was slipping away and I was in despair. I loathed myself. I couldn't look at myself in the mirror and would shower in the dark so I wouldn't have to see what I had done to my body (which in retrospect wasn't that drastic of a change). When I would catch a glimpse of myself, I would sob and scream in agony and blame myself for "ruining" my body. I told myself that I would never resort to purging, but I attempted it many, many times.

After a night of bingeing, I would feel so much shame, guilt, disgust, and sadness that I wouldn't attend school that day. One day absent would turn into three. This went on for months. My grades suffered to the point that my class evaluator met with me to express her concern.

I analyzed my life and realized I could not function: my obsession with food and weight had made my life unmanageable. I had lost everything that was once important to me. My only goal in life was to be thin.

I knew something was definitely not working, but couldn't convince myself I had an eating disorder. I remembered first learning about eating disorders in high school health class, seeing pictures of emaciated girls, or reading about people who would run to the bathroom after each meal to throw up. I wasn't emaciated, I thought. In fact, I kept gaining weight. I did eat—a lot. I wasn't fainting. Since I was now struggling with overeating, I definitely didn't think I fit the classic definition of having an eating disorder. I tried to intellectualize things—looking at facts, online checklists used to diagnose individuals, pictures of people with eating disorders—to see whether I actually had an issue. I really felt I had to have a certain body type, medical consequences, or be on the verge of death to be diagnosed with an eating disorder.

But then I looked at the condition my life was in. I had truly checked out for the past couple of years. I was no longer a participant. I really had to take a good look at how I was living and feeling, and how unhealthy and unmanageable my life had become, to admit to myself that I might have an eating disorder. I thought about how I would pray at night to die or had urges to hurt myself, all because I felt out of control around food and hated my body. These were definitely not healthy reactions. Oddly enough, my motivation for seeking help was eating disorder related—I wanted to stop bingeing...so I could lose weight.

After going to a couple of ED support groups and being more open with my therapist and psychiatrist about my



distress around food and my body, I was introduced to a local eating disorder treatment center.

Looking back at this one defining moment, I wonder how my life would have played out were I not introduced to this recovery center, and didn't make the decision to go. I had a couple of weeks off for summer and decided to enroll in the treatment program to gain some skills and insight about my ED, and then leave, cured and ready to begin my fall semester at school. But it turned out that my eating disorder was much more complex and needed further unraveling before I could go back into the real world as a functioning human being. Long story short, I took a leave of absence from graduate school and continued treatment for a total of ten months. It was during treatment that I was introduced to EDA meetings and started attending regularly.

In both treatment and EDA, I became familiar with the concept of "It's not about the food." I had convinced myself that the source of my problems—and misery—was my obsession with my body and what I was eating or not eating. In meetings, I was often surprised and found it odd that EDA members didn't focus on their weight, food patterns, and exercise regimen in their group shares—they discussed their relationships, trauma, mental health issues, important life decisions, work and school challenges, and anything else that was distressing in their lives.

From these experiences and upon thorough self-examination, I soon learned the behaviors and obsessions of my eating disorder were symptoms of similar challenges going on in my life: depression, family turmoil, low self-worth and self-esteem, relationship grief, perfectionism, and dependence on external validation. I used

these behaviors to cope with whatever I was struggling with internally.

Until I resolved my inner turmoil, my eating disorder would not go away. I began to speak my truth through EDA meetings, therapy, and other support groups. It felt like a relief to not have to suffer alone and in silence anymore. However, I definitely could not ignore the fact that I did have to look at “the food” in order to recover. I wasn’t eating to nourish my body. I wasn’t exercising to gain strength and uplift my mood. With the help of a dietician and therapist, I gradually learned how to eat intuitively by being in tune with my body’s physical—not emotional—needs, and exercise because I love—rather than hate—my body.

I began envisioning the ED thoughts and voices to be a separate entity from the true self that I wanted to reconnect with. When faced with a thought or urge, I practiced taking a moment to analyze whether my ED voice or recovery voice was trying to dictate my actions and decisions, and I would act in accordance with the latter.

I have also been working the steps with an EDA sponsor. My perfectionist self could look at this process as another opportunity to obsess over numbers—the higher the Step I was working on, the more worthy I was. However, my work in recovery helped me reframe these thoughts. First off, working the Steps would not be a one-time task. I would not be “done” and recovered once I finished Step Twelve. These Steps (including surrendering to a Higher Power, making amends, and being of service) would have to be ongoing processes in my life. I would have to continually incorporate them into my life to keep strengthening my recovery. Sometimes they will overlap, or I may work through them in a different order. The point is, EDA and recovery are not about the “quantity” of the Steps I work

through. They are about the quality of the time, effort, and willingness I put into the program in order to recover, and then help others on the same journey.

One day, I came to the realization that there is no such thing as a “perfect recovery.” In fact, recovery must be imperfect to last. My eating disorder (and life in general) has been about rigidity and perfection. But, what I eat will never be “perfect.” My weight and size can never be “perfect.” The way I feel or express my feelings will never be “perfect.” For me, there is no “perfect” number that can reflect how I am doing in recovery, which is exactly what I need. This is why I cherish EDA: this program is not about keeping track of numbers as reflections of my progress in recovery. It is about being mindful of the quality of my life—my health, relationships, passions, hobbies, and service to others.

Having my own experience with an ED and recovery, I have decided to attend a different graduate program to pursue becoming an eating disorder clinical psychologist. Recovery has helped me uncover my own worth, which inspires me to help others find their inherent value—one that no number could ever measure.

(6)

## FREEDOM THROUGH WORKING THE STEPS

*The Steps transformed her life, and now she feels beauty not as something to be found in a mirror, but from the light she sees in and shares with others.*

My story starts when I was a young girl, around seven years old, sitting in church staring at my thighs. I remember thinking, *If I only had skinnier thighs I would like myself.* From that moment on, I pretty much tried everything to change who I was on the outside, thinking it would automatically change how I felt about myself on the inside. How wrong I was.

From then on, when I saw other girls at school or out in public, all I could see was their outer self. I was comparing my insides with their outsides. Nothing about my body was okay with me. I was constantly uncomfortable with myself. I remember desperately praying for God to make me skinnier or taller or other impossible things.

I quickly found drugs and alcohol to mask my feelings of being “insufficient.” That worked for many years—until it did not. My teenage years were filled with treatments, detoxes, and hospitalizations. In my early twenties, I developed diabetes, and the low blood sugars I would experience jolted me into bingeing until I would feel stable. I truly believe that is what set off the physical allergy that

they explain in the “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous. Bingeing literally made me physically okay. It went from happening every once in a while to daily occurrences.

After I could see the significant amount of weight I was putting on, I quickly went back to using drugs, telling myself, *Once I lose the weight, I'll try again to get sober.* When I was using, I had no desire for food and I also wasn't concerned with the way I looked since I knew I was losing weight. This went on for years, with both diseases progressing intensely.

By the time I was twenty-seven, I had lost everything, including my two children. I had no other option but to surrender to a new way of life. I got sober from drugs and alcohol and stayed sober for a year. Through that time I was still very concerned with my weight and body image. I was going on diet after diet, fast after fast, and cleanse after cleanse, thinking I had poor self-control because I couldn't stick to any of them. I believed that if I were down to a certain number then I would be complete.

My eating disorder progressed as time went on—as they always do. Every single day I woke up with a plan to eat three healthy meals, keep them all down, and be active and especially to not binge and purge at night. Every day the time between that commitment and the time I gave in to the obsession got shorter and shorter. I couldn't leave the house without trying on every outfit I owned, making me late anywhere I was going. I couldn't go grocery shopping without spending hours in the store reading labels and going back and forth through the junk food aisles.

I began purging at work, because the guilt and shame of eating breakfast was so intense. I was either stuck looking in a mirror picking out everything wrong with me, or I was avoiding mirrors knowing I would hate the reflection.

One night I was bingeing and purging, leaving the house many times to get more junk food (this had become a regular scenario). Due to my diabetes I began to feel sick from the extreme lows and highs in my blood sugar levels over such short periods of time. I thought about calling 911 a few times, because I was sure I wasn't going to make it. I remember dropping to the floor and begging God for help. That was the last time I purged.

Let me share with you what happened that made such a complete transformation possible. I decided to take the suggestion of my AA sponsor and call a woman she knew in EDA. She invited me to a meeting. It was bittersweet inside that room. I felt as though I was genuinely understood by other people for the first time in my life. I found out they were thinking and feeling the same exact thoughts as me! On the other hand, my ED wanted me to suffer more: I felt completely paralyzed. I felt I couldn't get up or talk or I would be judged. It was all about me and my feelings of being inadequate. After a while that feeling lessened and I asked the woman my AA sponsor knew to be my EDA sponsor. I began my journey, meeting her every week and going through the Twelve Steps with her.

I took my sponsor's suggestions, which included going to all the EDA meetings there were at the time (two a week), eating three balanced meals a day, and staying in constant contact with God. Every day would start with a prayer, "God, please take away this obsession." And when I started getting thoughts to eat when I wasn't hungry, weigh myself, purge, or restrict, I would reach out to my sponsor or someone in EDA. Nine times out of ten, the first thing they told me to do was to get on my knees and pray.

I used prayer before I ate, after, and sometimes during! When I would look in the mirror and start thinking negatively, I would ask, “God, please help me love and accept my body exactly the way it is at this moment.” After reading my Fifth Step to another person, I began to see my part in life and in all the situations that bothered me. In the past, being uncomfortable gave me an excuse to use food or act out to cope with my feelings. Now I could see the truth in those situations and use the tools that were given to me to get through them. In Steps Six and Seven, I learned how to be less selfish and more selfless. I learned my shortcomings were a direct path to God. I did what I could to live in my assets and trust that going to Him—and not food—would fix my character defects. Steps Eight and Nine gave me the gift of forgiving others and myself, taking responsibility for the wrongs I had done.

It was in Step Ten that I really experienced release from the nightly torment. Instead of going home to binge, I used that time to review my day in writing, seeing where I had fallen short and where I had done well, and meditating on what God would have me do tomorrow.

By the time I got to Step Twelve I was on fire! I was so passionate about what this program offered me. The transformation that took place on the inside of me was astounding! I couldn’t wait to share it with others so they could have freedom too! Today, I no longer feel beauty solely from my reflection in the mirror. I feel beauty from the light I see in others, and from feeling loved and wanted by God. I was shown that He can and will restore you to sanity, and free you from the hell of an eating disorder. All I had to do was to believe—and act!

## A LIFE WORTH LIVING

*Once her eating disorder had taken its toll, this accomplished veteran's unhappiness finally drove her to find a solution. Today, she finds joy through living authentically—comfortable in her own skin.*

Looking back, I can say my eating disorder began well before I could have been diagnosed by clinical standards. My parents were both professors, and (as it happened) tenure was hard to come by. So we moved—from Oregon to Washington and then on to Kentucky, Alaska, Hawaii, and eventually Utah. With an ever-rotating scene of classmates, teachers, and friends, I strove to fit in but found it difficult, if not impossible. Early on, I had an instinct to eat to console myself. I remember hiding in pantries and inhaling whole packages of sweets.

It was as though the food and secrecy (the forbiddenness of it) were a bulwark against a world that seemed to reject me—a world I could not understand.

At some point, in about the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, I realized that I was unusual looking—plump, redheaded, and sullen—and began to attribute my unhappiness and social isolation to the form of my body. Whereas other young girls seemed naturally thin and unencumbered by their bodies, I was morbidly self-conscious. I fantasized about slipping into a pair of shorts without having to think of the sweaty width of my thighs. Never did I consider the possibil-



ity that my social difficulties might stem from constantly moving between schools, or that I was unusually bright and somewhat socially awkward. My body became the sole source of unhappiness. Then the thought came, *If I could just make my body look like the bodies of other girls, I would be happy.*

Years passed in an entranced state of self-loathing. I felt desperately out of control, as I continued to medicate myself by bingeing on food, and eventually alcohol and drugs. Then, in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, my parents sent me on a month-long wilderness excursion. The experience taught me the joy of living *in* my body without mirrors, without constantly appraising myself from outside. I felt the burn and ache of my thighs when they carried me up the steep back of a mountain, and I did not care what I looked like as I stood atop a 14,059 ft. peak and soaked in what seemed to be the whole world—all its jagged lines and greens and the sun so clear and bright over my head.

Upon coming home, I learned that I had lost a significant amount of weight. Neighbors and classmates all commented approvingly, and I even began to get some attention from boys. I reveled in this thinner body, but it was not to last. I still did not know how to cope with life on life's terms, and when I felt bored or rejected, I turned again to food to quell my unmanageable feelings. It was still the only means by which I knew how to control the chaos of my inner world.

I began exercising obsessively to get rid of the excess calories I consumed. I was unwilling to sacrifice my “new” body. But management of my food and exercise turned out to be an exhausting, full time job. At seventeen, I decided to join the Army, in part because I thought the enforced exercise and discipline would help me stay in command of

my size. Within a year of joining, I ran my first marathon. My commanders and peers commended my pursuit of athletic excellence and rewarded me with leadership positions. Little did they know, I depended on all those training runs to burn off the loads of sweets I ate secretly in my barracks room. I was caught in a desperate loop of addiction, shame, self-punishment, and social reward.

In short time, I began stealing food and alcohol from my roommate. She was naturally frustrated and reported me to the commander. I was deeply ashamed, but didn't know how to stop. Often I would binge on her food and immediately drive to the commissary to buy replacements. I would then calculate how many calories I had consumed and exercise them off. My knees started giving out, and my body suffered from the constant battering of extremes: high, jolting doses of sugar, followed by long, punishing runs. I willed myself to ignore my body's pleas for rest. The ritual was so grueling that it wasn't long before I couldn't keep up with it.

One night, after inhaling a large quantity food, I knew that I could not endure another run. In a fit of panic, I reached for my black, plastic trash can and did my best to induce vomiting. I was unable to puke that night and was insane with anxiety over the mound of sugar digesting in my stomach. But the next time I binged, I tried it again, and that time it worked—or at least that's what I thought at the time: *this could work*. I was twenty-three, and far from being a solution to my problems, bulimia became a fast road to internal hell.

These were the “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” years. On the one hand, I was good at my job and one of the top athletes in our unit. On the other, I was desperately sick—mentally, physically, and spiritually. I could think of no

one but myself, my pain, my war against myself and my body. Every meal and snack was a battleground of the will. Would I be “good” and eat only “healthy” food? Or would I be weak-willed and eat “less healthy” food, which I would later throw up? And if I was going to throw up anyway, I might as well have “forbidden” food—and so it went. From time to time, I felt as though I had emerged from the chaos and figured out the right diet or formula to control my body and its appetites. But I always sank back into bingeing and purging. The more I restricted as a means of regaining control, the more I actually lost control. I was insane; there’s no other way to describe it.

Over the years, without realizing it, I sacrificed jobs, friendships, romantic relationships, and my health at the altar of my eating disorder. I was so self-obsessed that I was incapable of being a good partner; so filled with shame, I would not, could not, let anyone emotionally near; so totally under the thumb of my eating disorder that I was flakey and irresponsible (canceling on friends at the last minute in order to go for a run or avoid food). And I was often too sick and depressed to get up for work. Then, at the age of twenty-five, I was admitted for the first (but not last) time to a hospital for heart problems related to bulimia.

Although my eating disorder subtly, insidiously worked its life-destroying tendrils into nearly every corner of my life, I still clung to it as to a buoy. I believed that if only I could figure out how to be in control of my food and body, I would be happy. At that point, I reasoned, I would be able to love and be loved; I would be fully human and could walk around the earth without shame.

I went to counselors and psychiatrists. I read self-help and diet books. The message always seemed to be: self-

knowledge will set you free. But none of it worked for me. In fact, I often left my counselor's office feeling more desperate and full of self-pity than when I arrived.

It wasn't until I was twenty-six and nearly homeless from alcoholism that I decided to try AA. Over the course of many years and alcoholic relapses, I began to learn what it might mean to surrender my will and my life over to the care of a Higher Power. I also began to see that as long as I continued to engage in disordered eating behavior—whether bingeing, purging, over-exercising, or restricting—the spiritual life and all its rewards would elude me.

After a few months, I started looking for a Twelve-Step program that would help me with food in the same way AA had helped me with alcohol. There appeared to be an abundance of programs offering different visions of "sobriety." But I knew that, for me, eating sobriety could not be restrictive in any way, because restriction had been a central dimension of my disease. So when I stumbled across EDA's website, I nearly cried with joy. Here was a program that offered an understanding of the disease that matched my experience and a vision of recovery that seemed both real and unimaginable.

I began a small EDA meeting at a church in our town. Only a few men and women from AA attended at first, but eventually it grew to include people outside the AA community. We found a wonderful freedom in speaking openly about our problems and solidarity as we began to stumble towards recovery, hand in hand.

But willpower and camaraderie were not enough. Eventually, I suffered another severe, bulimic relapse and sank even more deeply into despair over the apparent hope-

lessness of my situation. I was at the end of my rope. I felt that I had tried every conventional remedy to no avail. Then one day a thought—one I do not attribute to myself—entered my head: *You say you have tried every available remedy, but have you really? Have you ever been entirely willing to surrender this disease?* Then I realized the truth: I had been unwilling or unable to work the Steps and continued to engage in the same old self-centered thinking and behaviors. I was hoping for something akin to a magical bolt of lightning to zap the insanity out of me. In truth, though I hated the misery of bulimia, I had also been a little in love with my disease and had been unwilling to let it go completely. I wanted to “have my cake and eat it, too.”

With all the humility I could muster, I checked myself into an outpatient treatment program. This time, I knew I would have to do things differently. Clearly, no one could help me without my willing participation, so I did what was suggested: no exercise for as long as my doctor ordered, four meals a day, therapy, and much uncomfortable, honest talk of emotions. I was willing, and this time it worked. Or, I should say, *I* worked. Although the treatment program was the first step along the road of willingness, it certainly could not (and did not) provide me with tools sufficient for enduring sobriety.

Recovery has not been an easy or smooth road. I relapsed many times after that first EDA meeting. Looking back, I can say that early on I was unwilling to completely surrender my body size and shape over to the care of my Higher Power. I still didn't trust that I was essentially, irrevocably loveable—no matter my body fat percentage or the size of my pants. I was afraid and clung (consciously or not) to the belief that I needed to secure my portion of love through demonstrations of self-denial and willpower. But it

turns out that fear was poison to me. Every time I relied on my *own* power to manipulate my body and food, I cut out the sunlight of the spirit—the only power by which I have ever been freed from this disease.

So, on a daily basis, I pray and commit myself to listening to my body's cues. I eat when hungry and stop when moderately full. When I exercise, it's for the pure, animal joy of it, not to undo the food I've consumed or perfect my physique. I don't have rules about when, or where, or how much I'm allowed to eat. I don't have rules about how much I need to exercise. When unmanageable feelings and cravings arise (as they inevitably will), I know that with the help of my Higher Power, I can bear them—and that they will pass. It sounds unbelievable that I get to write this. It sounds almost too good to be true, but it's not. By following the simple guidelines of this program, I have been free of disordered eating for over two years, which is nothing short of a miracle.

Where self-knowledge and will power could not save me, the Twelve Steps of EDA have given me freedom from an obsession so deep and old I thought it was one of the foundational pillars of my personality. I am so grateful today to have learned that it was not. Each day, as I grow in sobriety, I am restored to a state of usefulness to the people around me and to my God. There is no greater satisfaction in life than this. Today, I get to live a life that is rich with love and purpose—a life absolutely worth living. I believe it is what I was meant for all along.

(8)

HE USED TO WORK FOR HIS ED;  
NOW HE WORKS FOR JOY

*His biggest blessing was being ready to change. He worked the Steps and learned self-compassion and understanding.*

I started emotional and binge eating as a child, and it continued through my early twenties. There are probably a number of causes and conditions that brought this on, but in therapy I was able to identify that I used food and the activity of bingeing primarily as a way to soothe and numb myself from a turbulent—and often intoxicated—childhood home environment. This comfort was induced by food and bingeing, and offered an escape from both the instability and aggression going on around me and the fears and vulnerability I felt inside.

I functioned relatively well through my mid-twenties and hadn't turned to any extreme, constant behaviors, but my emotional reliance on food was alive and would come up at times of stress—as well as bingeing. My extreme ED behavior first developed in my late twenties, when I turned to restricting. I had started a new and demanding job and had gotten into a very challenging relationship. I began to feel shame from thoughts that I was too lazy and inadequate for my job, and my emotional reliance on food really began to stand out to me. But rather than work with my

thoughts and emotional patterns, I started restricting as a way to “cure” this reliance on food.

The restricting served many functions. The numbness and high that comes from starving could block out the feelings I associated with laziness—which at that point equaled failure—and it also gave me a sense that I was on the right side of things. I also used it to feel a superiority that I relied on in my relationship to push away my partner and stay in control.

As the years went by, the job and relationship ended and restricting started serving other functions. My weight loss and nutritional deficiency made routine living very hard. I had no energy and getting through the day was a real slog. The emotional abuse I was inflicting on myself by denying basic and natural needs for nourishment, pleasure, joy, and so forth was much heavier than my physical weight; I had become more and more isolating, paranoid, fearful of humiliation, and even fearful of pleasure and happiness itself.

Life was very bleak and strenuous, even though somehow I was still getting great jobs and living in beautiful places. It was a terrible struggle. After a few years, confessional thoughts to myself started bubbling up. These were my first moments of real self-acknowledgement and acceptance that I had a problem. Shortly after, I told my best friend. He said he could see I was obviously suffering and at times wanted to help, but he didn't know what he could do or what was going on with me. I was so sick at the time I actually confessed to him that my problem was eating too much—while I was clearly anorexic and very underweight.

I sought out therapy with someone who was trained in ED recovery. It was my first time in therapy, and I was working through and uncovering a heap of traumas and



emotions that I hadn't faced until then. I later moved to a new town and didn't have the money or insurance for a new therapist, but fortunately there was an EDA group where I was living. I started going and found a kind and generous sponsor who helped me work through the first five Steps.

The first time I did the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Step was very powerful. A huge weight was lifted after I began my inventory and was left with more compassion and understanding towards myself. My demons were feeling like allies in a way. They hadn't killed me, luckily, and by having a more honest and fearless relationship with them, they turned into a source of compassion and courage. I had a deeper sense of how I *didn't* want to behave (after learning the hard way of course), and could better see the process that causes those behaviors in the first place. I could see for myself how we all can fall into these patterns as we search for any way to cope with our pain and confusion.

I made amends to those I had harmed, but didn't continue on through Steps Ten through Twelve, which in hindsight could have helped keep my recovery grounded and actively being lived. Unfortunately, I found myself facing similar external circumstances as when I first started restricting, and my ED symptoms came back. I was again fearful, restricting, anxious, and depressed. I had a new relationship and new job; both were very inconvenient for my ED, and vice versa. The basic things of life that I valued and loved to do when not gripped by my ED, couldn't really happen. Life became hard once again.

The relationship ended, as did the job situation, and I was again in a new city that had EDA. I rejoined the program, but at that point I was so conditioned in my restricting behaviors, that I didn't know how to eat. I knew I couldn't work this out on my own; I had too many fear

foods, deep misconceptions about how much I needed to eat, and a complicated and entrenched set of beliefs and values about eating food that was absolutely crazy. I sought an intensive treatment program to get extra professional support, and my recovery team included a therapist, a dietician that specialized in ED recovery, a psychiatrist, and a process group of struggling peers.

I was very fortunate to find a good EDA group and an amazing treatment center, but I believe the biggest blessing I had was a mind that was really ready to change. I had given up, I was exhausted, and I wanted to get better. I sought help from those who could guide me back into sanity and good physical health. I had trust in the process (though it was very uncomfortable at times) and began creating new habits with eating that would support a healthy and happy body and mind. I had worked hard to create my disorder—it didn't fall out of the sky onto me—and there was no reason I couldn't also work hard to create the causes for sanity.

I found with exposure as well as guidance from professionals that my fears were untrue: Eating an “unhealthy” food wasn't going to ruin me. A small quantity of a binge food was plenty enough to enjoy and feel content. By practicing mindfulness while eating I could overcome compulsiveness and rid myself of the fear of being overtaken by urges. What I ate did not actually matter to my self-worth. Eating was not a real solution to non-food-related issues.

Now when I eat, it is because my body is hungry, or I eat to spend time with friends and share something with others. I eat things I enjoy because that is a normal thing humans do. I trust and value mindful eating and find that the more I am present while eating, the more the compuls-

sions and thoughts die down and lose power. Taste is taste, whether sweet, sour, bland, intense, whatever. Taste doesn't mean anything beyond the sensation and no matter how good it feels at first it's not going to save me or change my life. I'll still be there when the meal is over with my same life. Being present also makes enjoyment much more simple and not a big deal.

I don't eat to avoid my anger, I don't eat to balance my checkbook, I don't eat to get rest. Napping and relaxing is for rest. Balancing my budget needs paper or a spreadsheet, not binge food. A conflict with my partner doesn't go away by eating something; it is resolved with kind and honest communication. It's humbling (and encouraging) to see that sobriety and a happy life is mostly about following common sense.

With a ton of support and willingness and work, I have created new habits of eating in a balanced way, without black-and-white extreme thinking. The high that comes from hunger is not attractive anymore. I am baffled that I valued the pain of starvation as something worthwhile (though I know I used it to try and help myself). The restricting mentality that was once precious to me is repulsive now. If it ever comes up, I look at it and remember it is a cause for pain and trouble. It leads nowhere else!

Even though I don't act destructively with food these days, I recognize the causes of my behaviors were not about the food; they were mental, emotional, and spiritual in nature. I don't want to make the same mistake again by abandoning the Steps and the support of a recovery community. I go to meetings to get a boost, to spend an hour contemplating and discussing the insanity of an ED and the causes for recovery and happiness. I'm working on my second round of amends to others and try to keep myself

grounded with daily inventory, meditation, service, using acronyms like H.A.L.T. (Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired), and reflection.

I do believe that over time I can completely remove the ED from my system, but there is no end to challenges in life. To me, the principles of recovery are just principles of our humanity. I use them to support living my values of love, compassion, and inspiration on a daily basis.

## I AM JOIE DE VIVRE

*When she chose EDA, she found a source of strength that brought the light back to her eyes.*

*I believe I am strong. I believe I am unworthy. I believe I am disgusting. I believe I am resilient. I hate my body. I feel alone. I am in love. I am afraid to lose the people I love. I will never be enough. I am restless. I can't tolerate my body. I want to crawl out of my skin.* These intense thoughts brought up emotions that, at times, seemed to control every decision in my life. At other times, these thoughts triggered responses within me that kept me safe and protected.

I was always the girl smiling. From a young age, I was always outgoing, gregarious, positive, surrounded by friends with a *joie de vivre* that lit up a room. I was always joking and the first to make a silly face or charge headfirst into an embarrassing situation with a brave and unashamed freedom. I would occasionally make disparaging comments about my body or how much I ate, because it was a central part of my comedy routine; however, I never put much weight into these comments, or felt that I really took them to heart, or struggled with body image. This is why I never saw my eating disorder coming. Anorexia is literally the antithesis of everything that I am. My anorexia was about deprivation, punishment, and isolation. My anorexia kept me from singing and dancing. My anorexia stole the light from my eyes. My anorexia tried

to destroy the spirit I carried and the body that acts as the suitcase for my soul.

It all began my junior year of high school, which sometimes I see as a blessing because I am still able to remember a time when food didn't control my life. This was when I couldn't tell you where to find a serving size on a box of food and I certainly didn't understand what the ever-ambiguous and looming "carb" really was. From my perspective carbs could have been a high profile gang the way that society warned us: "Stay away from carbs," "No carbs is the answer," and "No carbs after dark." It wasn't until the summer before my junior year that my life took a 180-degree turn—one that would forever alter my ways of thinking.

The summer before my junior year of high school I had my first real relationship—not one of my previous "group date, give you a hug after school" relationships. When it became physical I didn't appear to be extremely bothered, but I knew that something didn't feel right. I wondered if other girls felt a nauseous feeling deep in the pit of their stomach after their boyfriends left their houses. I slowly distanced myself, which inevitably caused my boyfriend to end things. I was so relieved, and yet for some reason furious at the same time, because not more than two days after we broke up he had a date with another girl. I am an independent person and I was always surrounded by strong friendships, so I tried to put it out of my mind. But the physical triggers and nauseous fear that had been a constant facet of our relationship would not leave me. I didn't think much of it, but after the fall cross-country season started I began to run a little bit—for fun.

Running for fun turned into more exercise, which turned into eating healthier, which snowballed into the

Catholic season of Lent. I decided to give up desserts because, of course, that is what God would want. Fast-forward to the summer and the snowball was officially on the move, collecting speed every day. My friends and family began to comment on my weight change and worried about my isolating behaviors surrounding exercise. I calmed these fears by reminding them that I was always the girl who would take the last serving or be the first to order a dessert. I made excuses, denied my clearly disordered behaviors, and became furious at the mention of an eating disorder. I was not some vain, skinny, mean girl who was crazy about her appearance—which up until this point had been my only perception of someone with an eating disorder. All I knew was what the media had told me, and having always been the girl with “joie de vivre,” I was not about to trade in that title for psychotic, skinny b---.

It wasn't until the first time I tried to explain to the doctor what my behaviors had been over the past year that I suddenly saw how insane my day-to-day life had become. Speaking my reality aloud made me aware of the irrational lengths I was going through to suppress some fear that I couldn't fully explain. At this point I began an outpatient journey that would lead to uncovering a history of trauma and sexual abuse that had subconsciously resurfaced with the physical interactions of my relationship in the summer. I began to feel freedom; the weight of these secret memories lifted when I shared them. My therapist had inquired about any history of sexual abuse, and when I recalled one of my vague memories that I had tried to convince myself was a dream, my therapist informed me that the event I remembered had actually happened. My parents had revealed this to her in confidence, because they thought I had forgotten the incident. The shame that I had carried for years, and my

fears surrounding physical intimacy, suddenly made sense. However, the journey of working through this and other contributing factors led me through what seemed a revolving door of treatment centers.

My freshman year of college lasted all of two months before I was sent to treatment. I tried to restart the following fall and again left for treatment. The following fall I decided to conquer my struggles in outpatient treatment instead of another residential center; and, yet again, I was able to tread water for about a year until I entered a partial hospitalization program (PHP) the spring of my junior year. I felt like nothing worked. I felt like I had uncovered the reasons I needed my eating disorder to protect me, but I also felt like I was making a choice to give in to that false sense of safety, which always led to another relapse. I *knew* I knew better. I knew that it was my choice to manage my disorder, and I knew it would be the hardest journey of my life.

The minute I realized I needed to change was the same minute I realized I couldn't do it alone. The fact that I wanted to fight led me to find the rooms of EDA. If I was going to fight, I needed to see the soldiers who were standing with me. The rooms of EDA have brought a constant strength that I have not found in any other treatment center, support group, or eating disorder workbook.

Today, I know my constant efforts to fight and my conscious decisions to look at the defects in my character that pull me back into my eating disorder will test me every day. It doesn't matter *when* my eating disorder started, it doesn't matter *how* my eating disorder started, it doesn't matter *why* my eating disorder still likes to tell me lies and steal my light. What matters is what I choose to do now;



how I choose to live in the moment now, just now; and how just for today I choose recovery. I didn't cause it, I can't cure it, but I can be sure it will not steal my *joie de vivre* ever again. EDA is a program that involves choice and surrender every day. EDA is a program that provides a guide to change that can be worked every day. EDA is a program that reminds me of the *joie de vivre*—the joy of life.

I am self-conscious. I am a survivor. I am weak. I am strong. I am afraid. I am brave. I have support. I am love. I am powerless. I am the courage to change.

## IN GOD'S HANDS

*As a result of surrendering to the program, she became the woman that she believes God intended her to be, gaining peace, freedom, and an ability to connect with others.*

My eating disorder started out casually: I just wanted to lose a little weight. I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and fourteen years old. I noticed another girl in my middle school was also my height (I'm a tall girl), and she was a little thinner than me. She looked great! I even overheard her say her exact weight in the gym locker room one day, and I realized I was not even that far away from that number. I only needed to lose a few pounds or so. So that's what I set out to do.

I started cutting out a few higher calorie options from my daily food intake and began to see results. I realized quickly that if I cut out even more foods from my diet, then I would achieve more rapid weight loss. I loved getting results and encouraged my friends to also lose weight. They attempted, but no one could cut out or cut down foods as well as I could (I have since realized this was a symptom of my disease that made my life unmanageable—not something to be “proud” of). I had the self-discipline that my friends didn't; it felt powerful.

But it became an obsession. I became very rigid in what I would or wouldn't eat. I had an exercise regimen I made myself stick to. I had little time for doing activities

with friends, because they might try to get me to eat, and that didn't work in with my plans. I was more concerned with exercise and finding ways to avoid eating.

Family dinners were a nightmare as I refused to eat more and more foods. I was so particular. I stopped eating just about everything my mom cooked in order to stick to the foods that I allowed myself to eat. It was only a few months after I started my "diet" that my parents had me start seeing a professional therapist, psychiatrist, and nutritionist, and thus started my struggle to hang on to my eating disorder.

I was angry at everyone for butting into my business. I didn't see the problem with my way of living. I got results! I loved the feeling of being thin. I had gotten to the point that I had no social life, but I didn't care. I felt safe. I abused the knowledge given to me by the nutritionist and restricted even further.

During my 9<sup>th</sup> grade year, my heavy restricting caught up with me; I became extremely sick and ended up in the hospital due to a simple flu. My thin body couldn't handle the illness, and I needed to be given extra nutrients intravenously. I think being in the hospital scared me. I don't know why, but something seemed to switch for me in my eating after that. I got out of the hospital and allowed myself to eat again!

And I mean eat! Somehow the girl that was so afraid of eating any type of variety of foods began to overeat freely. Everyone appeared happy, and I felt somewhat normal again. Yet I was obsessed with eating food. I would come home from school and snack for hours until my parents came home. I didn't care about the weight gain for quite a few months. When I did start to feel somewhat uncomfortable with my body, I made an attempt to purge one of

my binges; but it didn't work, and I quickly moved on. A few months later, I tried it again and found more "success." Thus started my full-fledged bulimic career.

Much like I had prided myself on my ability to restrict, my bulimia also gave me some pride in that I figured I had beaten the game of life. Acting out in bulimia seemed to be the solution to all my problems. I felt deviously accomplished. Finally I could eat all I wanted— participate in social functions if needed (where I would be required to eat)—and not gain weight. Bingeing and purging became my love. I didn't necessarily like the purging part so much, but it came with the territory.

Also like the anorexia, bulimia took me down a dark hole of depression and isolation. My "solution" led me to misery. I pushed away people and things that might have interfered with my acting out process. As much as I didn't want to be, I was constantly obsessed with eating-disordered thinking: planning my next binge, beating myself up in my head, and sizing myself up in comparison to every other body around me.

My parents found out about my bulimia, because my excessive purging ended up causing damage to the plumbing in our home. So I started seeing the mental health professionals again. I hated this. I couldn't see why people didn't just leave me alone; this was my body! I lied and tried to hide the bingeing and purging behavior, becoming even sneakier and going to even stranger lengths to hide what I was doing.

At some point in my high school career, I came to the realization that I was dejected. And I knew it was because of my eating disorder. I hadn't minded being obsessed with food, weight, and body image in the beginning, but I recognized it was costing me any enjoyment in life outside of

the superficial pleasure I received from bingeing. But this “pleasure” was uncomfortable, and I felt out of control and extremely depressed. I had a relationship with God and frequently went to church and youth group activities, but my eating disorder ruled me. I began to wish and pray it away. I claimed a Bible verse for my life: Psalms 142:7a, which states “Set me free from my prison that I may praise Your name.” By “prison” I meant my eating disorder. Even as a seventeen-year-old girl, I knew my life and future would be desolate. My eating disorder was my master. I couldn’t escape.

I had the idea that a change of scenery would help and that going away to college was the solution. I assumed it would be reasonably difficult to find ways to purge in the communal-style living in the dormitory hall. Needless to say, I managed to find ways to continue my eating disorder.

Having always been a pretty good kid and a good student, it was as though my eating disorder was my one black cloud. Not everyone knew about it, so I had become quite accustomed to living a double life. I was the sweet Christian girl on the outside, yet those who knew me knew that I had a monster of an eating disorder. I had gotten used to living one way in private and attempting to portray quite a different picture to the world. That’s why when I got introduced to drugs, I had little problem living the lie that I was the “good Christian girl” attending Christian college—even while secretly adopting a drug habit.

Drugs seemed to be the new solution; they seemed to solve all my problems with food simply because I was rarely hungry! When I ran hard with using drugs, I didn’t eat; but when I wasn’t using, my bulimia was still my “go to.” Regardless, I was relieved to have found at least *some* level of escape from my eating disorder.

My parents found out about the drug use and sent me to eating disorder treatment. It's my belief they chose this instead of drug treatment, because they had difficulty facing that their "sweet girl" was using drugs (and they'd known about the eating disorder for years). While at the inpatient facility, I played along with what they wanted me to do, but I was angry that I was there. I told the staff, "I'm just going to do drugs with my boyfriend when I get out of here." And I did. The treatment wasn't a complete waste, but I just wasn't ready to face my most deep-seated demons at that time. I went home and did drugs—just as I said I would—and my relationship with my family got worse.

The boyfriend I mentioned was also my drug dealer; he was not a good man and I suffered a lot of emotional and some physical pain due to that relationship. We eventually broke up, and I started dating someone new who didn't like that I did drugs. He encouraged me to stop and to drink alcohol instead. I didn't like alcohol at this time, but eventually gave up the drugs and instead picked up the bottle. After all, this was legal! And normal!

There were times during my drinking career I didn't act out in bulimia. This was usually during times I felt I had something "exciting" going on in my life, such as a new boyfriend or some other positive event. During bad times, like break-ups or any other emotional disturbance, bulimia was faithfully there for me.

Again, never having dealt with what was going on inside of me, the alcohol also became a problem. At one point, I tried to stop drinking, but my eating disorder took over at an insane level. I knew I'd rather be drinking while bingeing and purging instead of being solely left with bulimia! Bulimia was a full-time job when I didn't allow myself alcohol.

The magnitude of my drinking increased, and I started to have difficulty functioning in my daily work life due to my hands shaking from withdrawals. This led me to drinking in the morning to still my nerves, and I bowed down before the bottle. I knew this had to stop, so I finally went to substance abuse treatment. It was there that I was finally able to separate from drugs and alcohol. Yet once again, my “friend” the eating disorder remained faithfully there for me.

I attempted to adopt the Twelve-Step way of life, proclaiming rigorous honesty and amazing willingness to change. Yet I continued to live dishonestly by way of stealing my roommates’ food and lying about purging in our apartment. I stayed sober from substances, but it seemed as though my eating disorder had exploded. Taking away the drink and the drug left me with my original vice—my eating disorder. I hated this one most of all. Yes, for many people an eating disorder may not lead to such severe consequences as legal problems, severe relationship issues, financial ruin, and some of the other negative consequences often associated with a substance abuse problem. But my eating disorder has proven to be ten times more shameful and lonely than my drinking/drugging career ever appeared to be.

I had been attending EDA meetings since early in my recovery from other substances, but didn’t fully surrender to the EDA process. I listened to people in meetings, yet wondered whether or not they were going home afterwards to secretly binge and purge. The people that claimed to have recovered from an eating disorder seemed to be happy, but I couldn’t imagine life without one and didn’t believe recovery in this area of my life could happen for me. I had been eating disordered for over half my life. Out of desperation and misery I finally asked an EDA sponsor to take

me through the Twelve Steps. She introduced me to a peace and a freedom I had never known.

Though I was raised in the church and at times prayed incessantly for my eating disorder to be removed, I didn't previously have any action to go along with that. Yes, I'd had therapists, psychiatrists, nutritionists, parents, and others working with me to try to help me get better; but, to be honest, I hadn't surrendered. Though I had been praying to God for years, He did not reach down and miraculously heal my eating disorder. Truthfully, I hadn't totally wanted Him to do so; it was a part of me, and at some level I wanted to hang on to it with full force.

Yet at other times I prayed fervently for God to take away my eating disorder. I would make these prayers as I stuffed my face with binge food, fully intending to purge. I was expecting Him to change my thinking and actions without me doing anything. I do believe that God is fully capable of miraculous healing, yet without my participation I don't think I would have truly found long-term recovery and a way of living more satisfying than any I had ever known. I hadn't been giving God much to work with in order for Him to transform me.

Coming to EDA was the first exposure I had to my need to take action. Prayer was certainly part of it: prayer for the removal of my eating disorder, specifically my obsession with food, weight, and body image. I realized I needed to take certain actions, and EDA was the first time that I was given clear-cut directions and suggestions, as well as the support of others who had gone through the same thing. In EDA, I was introduced to people who had recovered—people who had suffered like me but had gotten better. Historically, my eating disorder had been something I protected, done solely by myself, and I didn't let people in.



Truly being authentic about my eating disorder was a new experience for me. Yet, as it states in the AA “Big Book,” “one (*eating-disordered*) could affect another as no (*non-eating-disordered*) could.”<sup>1</sup> The eating-disordered individual understands the weird twist in the minds of those would steal food, or do all these crazy things, just to support their illness. Furthermore, the AA “Big Book” states, “But the ex-problem (*eating-disordered*) who has found this solution, who is properly armed with facts about himself, can generally win the entire confidence of another (*eating-disordered*) in a few hours.”<sup>2</sup> For me it certainly took more than a few hours, but it still worked!

It was liberating to hear people who had walked in my shoes freely share about the insidious nature of eating disorders. They stated they got better and were willing to show me exactly what they did to recover. They said I needed regular support and suggested I get a sponsor and reach out to people in the rooms of EDA. I needed to develop a healthy relationship with food and see it as a mechanism to nourish my body rather than something to control my weight, feelings, mood, or anything else.

Slowly my actions changed, and it *was* slow! Yet, I had the support of other people in EDA sharing that this is what they had gone through, too—that it can be slow and painful, but recovery is a process. If it wasn't for their continual reassurance, I probably would not have stayed on course. I thank God for the rooms of EDA, for the fellowship, for joining people together with this common disease. Having that revolutionary change in my way of thinking

<sup>1</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., xvi-xvii. Replaced “alcoholic” with “eating-disordered,” as the same concept applies. This was done by early sponsors in EDA.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. Replaced “drinker” and “alcoholic” with “eating-disordered.”

took effort, consistent prayer, and support. At times I didn't think anything was working or any changes were taking place. Looking back, it was more like, *Oh my gosh, I didn't binge or purge today* or *It's been a few days together*, and then much later on it was *Wow! I went through a whole day and I was completely not focusing on my eating disorder.*

Notably, there was a time after having found recovery that I relapsed in my eating disorder. I had the insane thought that I could act out once: that I could have one binge/purge episode and move on from there. Clearly that wasn't well thought out; yet I acted on it, which sent me into some of the most miserable of times with my eating disorder. Having a brief sense of what freedom could be like and then handing that gift back to God was incredibly painful. It took me a long time to come back into the rooms of EDA out of my own stubbornness and pride. I didn't want to admit to a relapse. I didn't want to have to start over in my Steps. I wanted to fix this on my own, yet I had the very real knowledge that I would be unable to do so. After succumbing to enough emotional pain, I asked a woman who worked a very strong program of recovery to sponsor me and I surrendered to God, the program, and finally to my own powerlessness and the unmanageability of living outside of the Twelve-Step way of life.

My recovery the second time was that much stronger. I also felt the disease was much stronger, and it took me quite a while to free myself from the intrusive eating-disordered thoughts. As mentioned, the disease came back with a vengeance; I worked for recovery that much harder the second time. Yet I did learn from the experience. Never again do I want to get even close to a relapse. It's too painful and hard to come back (though not impossible). I hold on to my eating disorder recovery like a precious gift, because

that's what it is. Never in a million years did I expect that one day I would have the freedom from worrying about weight, food, and body image. Today, I eat what I want to eat, and food serves its intended purpose: as a means of fueling my body for life's activities. During my recovery, I earned a master's degree and often thought about how, during the grueling process of school, I never could have been diligent in my responsibilities had the eating disorder still been wreaking havoc on my life. My life is free today. I am free to travel, and my eating disorder no longer holds me back. I am able to be a friend and family member without constant thoughts of myself invading all conversations.

It's a beautiful thing to be so dependent upon God and a Twelve-Step fellowship; my need to have a healthy relationship with food and my body keeps me working with others and active in working my own program of recovery. I notice that if I slack, my thoughts start to get somewhat haywire. I am glad I've learned my lesson. God willing, I will always be an active member of EDA and I will continue to seek God to gain lasting release from the prison of my faulty thinking.

“When we look back, we realize that the things which came to us when we put ourselves in God's hands were better than anything we could have planned.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 100.

## LIFE SENTENCE LIFTED

*She earned her freedom when she stopped trying to be perfect and accepted life on life's terms.*

Surely freedom from restricting, bingeing, or purging behaviors for twenty-four years had made a good life possible: a loving marriage, wide circle of friends and pursuits, meeting serious life challenges of my own and others. Thanks to Twelve-Step rooms, gratefully, I'd been sober for even longer. Yet, eating-disordered thinking and stealth rigidity around eating and food persisted.

I finally decided I'd received all the grace I deserved. The shadow of my eating disorder would be there for life, and I just had to be vigilant and derail any out-of-control anxiety and depression. I cycled through various Twelve-Step programs to address over- or under-eating, but I heard only what was said about abstinence. I had worked the Steps only to curtail behavior.

I believed my number-rules about weight and calories had kept me safe from feelings greater than I could handle. I'd had therapy all along and my psychologist admired what hurdles I had overcome. I told myself, *What's wrong with some preoccupation with numbers? After all, it's typical for middle-aged and older women. It's nothing compared to a gaunt body, exorbitant weight gain or loss, institutions, and fearful self-harm.*

This was so wrong! My dishonesty had led me to construct a functioning façade, which I sternly kept reworking. The authentic joy and sorrow that come with acceptance of life on life's terms were stunted. Relapse remained an unacknowledged option.

Finding EDA on the web has been a turning point. I wept when I read the brochure on Balance. It seemed as though I had finally found a tribe that spoke a language I could understand. The tools, Step-work, and insights I have learned through the years are valuable supports. With EDA, the Twelve Steps, and hearing the hope and experience of others, I am ceasing the attempts to be perfect in a perfectly artificial semblance of recovery, which, in fact, is a prison cell.

I feel I am returning to the eleven-year-old who went to the library and found an insurance table of desirable weights. That was the pivotal year in which I put on a form-fitting mental straight jacket, and sadly, it was so easy.

It has taken many, many years to come home to the truth that living by numbers, judgments, and comparisons is useless and spirit-throttling. At any age, the key of willingness can open the door to the surprise—the fulsome serendipity—of real life.

## RECOVERY AFTER 42 YEARS OF BULIMIA

*Willingness, commitment, and perseverance transformed a tennis pro's resignation—that she would always have an eating disorder—into a durable recovery.*

I remember how important my food was to me as far back as when I was four years old. I would sit in my Dad's big chair in the living room waiting for him to come home, listening to Peter and the Wolf and eating my favorite comfort food. It reminded me of how secure I felt when he was home with us. I was getting my needs met. This feeling became a recurrent theme in my life as I grew into a teenager.

I was part of a family of seven children, and both parents came from good "Southern stock." My dad was a doctor and my mother a nurse. Surely they could be wonderful and take good care of me. But my dad was a sweet and loving man who would turn into a controlling, raging alcoholic. He loved to drink, play tennis with his buddies, and stay out until the wee hours of the morning, only to put the fear of God into me about what he would do when he got home, wanting his dinner on the table at 3:30 am. He also believed his children should excel in one thing, and they should know what it was and be pursuing it by the age of twelve. Mine was tennis, and my dad was my coach. I was molded into his clone and the prodigy he wished he had been as a young boy. I was "like a son" to him, because

I was very athletic and he lived vicariously through me; my brothers were artists and didn't fit the bill.

On the other hand, my mother was a stay-at-home mom who was quite subservient and weak. She was intelligent, but an emotionally unavailable, depressed woman who spent her time either trying to take care of us, painting, or hiding in her closet crying. I often wondered how she could take care of her children when she struggled to take care of herself. She never stood up to my father and never protected me from him. She allowed emotional and verbal abuse, both of which can be worse than any other kind. She and I would wait up together at night for my father to come home, terrified of what he would do when he arrived. One night I stood in the kitchen with my mother while my father pulled a knife on my Mom; I stepped in front of her.

I thought that if he hurt me I could handle it, while my mother could not. She was close to the artists and dancers in the family. I was the family scapegoat and spoke my mind when I could, until I realized that I still had to be the perfect child. My mother studied the Eastern philosophies when I was a teenager and became a vegetarian to keep her body in its best health. She also developed an eating disorder and probably died early as a result (she was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver, although she was not a drinker). She became an Episcopal priest, and to the world she was a saint. To me she was cold and devoid of emotion.

When I was fifteen, I was a very angry and controlled teenager and developed an eating disorder one day after a guy I had a crush on told me I looked pregnant. This comment hit me like a dagger in my heart. To me, I was not okay being who I was, and this struck a chord in me. Now, two men, my teenage crush and my father had given me the

message that I was not good enough. At least this was my interpretation. I decided to go on a diet and become someone I could accept. No one would ever control me again.

During this time my sister taught me about bulimia, and I thought I had found a secret I could have to myself that no one could take away from me. Two months later, when she died in a car accident, I found out she had been drinking. I blamed myself because I knew she drank and I never told anyone about it. I believe I held onto my eating disorder for so long because I thought it kept me connected to her.

With my eating disorder firmly entrenched, I felt I was finally in charge of my life. *No one was going to tell me what to do!* As sick as I was, no one knew. I hid my secret and still spent endless hours on the court with my father. I played a lot of tournaments and secured national ranking. When I graduated from high school at seventeen, I left home to tour on the Women's Pro Circuit. There was no discussion of college; I didn't want to go anyway, because I didn't know how to handle my eating disorder in a dorm. I thought I was finally free, but my eating disorder followed me. My childhood felt like a lie. The family secrets were no more than a dysfunctional family hiding behind a façade of over-achieving puppets. It was all about how it looked on the outside.

My anorexia and bulimia controlled my life for the next thirty-eight years.

To further cut ties with my father, I ran away and got married at nineteen to a pro tennis player. I lost a lot of weight, and when my parents sent me for some tests on my stomach they found nothing. Then they sent me to a psychiatrist, and it was suggested that I move as far away from my father as possible, so I could find out who I was. So my



husband and I moved to Vermont to teach tennis. I went into therapy for the first time and continued playing tennis even though I was burned out and wanted to quit. I never told a soul about my eating disorder, but I believed others knew something was going on. I kept thinking I could beat it if I just used more willpower. I had so much shame and guilt that I could not face the truth. I was living a life of denial. No one questioned me and no one showed any concern, so I kept at it in hope that someone would care enough to notice something was wrong. I even told my husband and he said nothing. I began to think I was crazy. I suffered from depression, went on antidepressants, and then had two children.

I wanted to get help so badly, but no one really knew about eating disorders back then. Nothing changed. I was miserable in a marriage that was devoid of intimacy because of my eating disorder. I thought it was his fault, so I decided to get a divorce.

I quickly found a new love and moved to Montreal six months later to be with him. He had four children and I had two: six kids total. This set me off on a roller coaster ride, but we decided to get married anyway. I was convinced having two more kids would be the cure. But at thirty years of age, with two more children, I felt smothered and controlled and began drinking heavily. I felt I had married my father and after eleven years of marriage wanted out. He threatened to take my children from me if I didn't get my eating disorder and drinking under control. I had a better idea: I would leave him, but not until we moved to Florida where my family lived—he was retiring and we thought Florida was the place to do that.

I got sober from alcohol, but the real issue was my eating disorder, and I needed help because I was still hiding

it. I decided to go into treatment, which gave me a good break. However, my eating disorder told me to get out of my marriage, because the control I felt under my husband was killing me.

What I didn't realize was that I would never begin to heal until I stopped acting out. Again, I didn't have the tools to change my behaviors and felt I needed to be out of my marriage in order to work on myself. I got a divorce, leaving me alone with my four children. At this time I stopped drinking and stopped the eating-disordered behaviors. This was the toughest year of my life...getting a divorce, getting sober, and trying to use the 12-Steps of AA to relieve me of my eating disorder. I took that time to really *be* with my children while working on myself. I was not in a committed relationship for the next ten years; I wanted to focus on my children and my recovery. I stayed sober, but my eating disorder had become active again. I realized I could not beat it on my own, but still wouldn't be honest with myself about how it kept me sick and out of intimate relationships.

By the time my two oldest kids were in college and my two younger boys were eleven and thirteen, I had met a wonderful man who loved me unconditionally. My children adored him and he was great to them. I began to feel so much better about myself, yet my eating disorder continued. I had never really had any consequences from my behaviors, so nothing scared me enough to stop. I had resigned myself to this being my life. After a year, my new husband realized my eating behaviors were strange. He couldn't understand and felt as though I were cheating on him. He felt my first love was my disorder. I had been found out and felt more guilt and shame than ever. *How could I do this while he was so wonderful to my family and me?* He

didn't deserve that. I was so entitled and felt I couldn't stop. My disease had such a strong hold on me that I continued to ignore the truth and hid it even more. When was all of this denial going to have some consequences for me?

I felt a lot of pressure and knew I would have to stop if I wanted to be in a healthy relationship with my husband. When all of my children were gone, we moved into a new house to downsize. It was great to be alone with him, but there was so much focus on us I got really scared about his catching me as I acted out. My husband is British and takes baths. He later told me that when he would go take a bath, he knew I would go in and take a barf. He confronted me about it, but I always lied. This would enrage him; he felt cheated on and no longer trusted me. Then he began to wonder what else I lied about and felt very distant to me. He is such an honest and loyal person that he was very disappointed in me and he thought our relationship was failing. We argued about my behaviors, but I loved him so much that I knew that I had to change.

A year later, I was losing a lot of weight due to the stress of my eating disorder and my fears around my failing relationship. I was also stressed about my job and how miserable I was there. A good friend from AA approached me and my husband and told me I was really sick and in bad shape. At this time I was fifty-seven and finally ready to truly deal with my eating disorder. My husband had been doing research online and found EDA. He told me that there were local meetings and that he would go with me to my first one. I felt so supported. We went on a Tuesday night and I saw someone I knew. This was even more comforting. I loved the meeting and felt I had finally found home, a place where I could feel unconditional love—no

judgment and people who understood me. I didn't share, I just listened. I wanted to take it all in. After a few meetings I shared and let the others know I had had an eating disorder for forty-two years. This was crazy to me. I made a decision to do whatever it took to beat this. There were people there who had recovered, and I thought this was amazing! I had resigned myself to the fact that I would be acting out until the day I died. I found hope and began to believe that I could recover as I had with my alcoholism. I committed to getting a sponsor and working the Steps. I was so happy and excited that I saw a possibility. I felt happy to be alive!

I immediately stopped purging and worked as hard as I could to learn as much as I could. This was the beginning of a life I had never dreamed of. The last time I felt this good was when I was fifteen, before my eating disorder began. I had my whole life ahead of me then, and I realized I was at that same place now. At fifteen, my eating disorder began, and when I found EDA, I felt I was back home with the support I never had. My EDA supports were like sisters to me.

Today, my life is awesome! I have great relationships and have healed the relationships with my children. I can be with them today in a way I was not able to while they were growing up. They are healthy, happy, successful adults, and I am very proud of them. I have gone back to school to study addiction and have a job working in the recovery field. I feel so blessed to give back to the community that has nurtured me back to health. I can now pursue hobbies and dreams I never believed possible while I was in my eating disorder. I work the Steps, and have a sponsor and strong sober supports. I also sponsor others in order to help those that are still suffering with this disease. This is so rewarding to me and helps keep me focused and happy in recovery, remembering where I come from.

Today, I take care of my mind, body, and spirit by exercising, praying, meditating, doing yoga, and nurturing myself in other ways. I know I am no good to others if I don't first take care of myself. I feel a quality of peace and happiness I never knew in my eating disorder. I have been able to give up the many unproductive ways I used to cope with life. I have found new and healthier ways to comfort myself, deal with my problems, and no longer hold secrets because I live an honest life. I no longer live in the problems of my eating disorder; I live in the solution. I use the Steps and tools I have learned in the program of EDA. They remind me to live my life with integrity and practice the principles in all of my affairs.

I feel a responsibility to share my experience, strength and hope to carry the message that it is possible to recover from an eating disorder, and to thank those who have been a powerful example to me, those who gave me hope and the belief I could recover and my Higher Power, for making my recovery possible. I really believe anyone can recover from an eating disorder. The promises can come true for you too. Willingness, commitment, and perseverance have been the keys to my freedom!

## RECOVERY OPENED A WHOLE NEW WORLD

*When she began to trust people, she discovered her voice and experienced the joy of sharing with others on a deep and meaningful level.*

The history of my eating disorder begins around age seven. My parents had divorced, and my mom had a new boyfriend. We would sit together and eat dinner with my older sister. There were a lot of rules at the table such as how to eat, what noises not to make, finishing all your food, and more. If we didn't like the food or eat all of it, we would be having it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner again until it was all gone. There were a lot of meals I disliked but knew I had to force down, somehow doing my best to not taste what I was eating. If we made certain sounds at the table (the fork scratching the plate, chewing too loudly, or teeth touching the fork) or didn't say "Sir" or Ma'am" we would be punished. I vividly remember the night when I was informed that I was swallowing too loudly. My mom's boyfriend said since I was eating like a dog, then I might as well eat with them. I had to take my dinner plate and eat my food on the floor of the kitchen next to the dog's food while my family ate at the table. I was humiliated. My fear of eating "wrong" in front of others became deeply ingrained in my head.

I would continue to avoid eating in front of other people, or I would eat very little in fear of criticism for how I was doing it. I feared the humiliation of eating “wrong” and felt like everyone around me could surely see how bad I was. I became concerned about my body from a young age. I received criticism from my mom’s boyfriend about my body: he said my butt was too big, my stomach stuck out, and I was chubby. My sister added criticism about my appearance. I was called “ugly,” “fat,” and “disgusting” more times than I could count, and at an after-school program, a peer called me similar names. This experience was the first time someone outside my family called me fat. I decided to tell the leader, and her response was, “Well you are kinda chubby.” I never told anyone about this experience, because I was too humiliated.

I learned a lot about body image and dieting from my mom. I witnessed her calling herself “fat,” putting herself down, asking us if she was as big as someone else and always criticizing her body. I thought she was beautiful. She was perfect in my eyes when I was a little girl. *If she saw those things were wrong with her, did she notice those same flaws in me?* She would talk about the times when she was very skinny and how she would eat almost nothing for dinner. I saw pictures of her at an unhealthy weight with her bones protruding. If that was beauty, I wanted to strive for that. My mom tried numerous fad diets and her weight fluctuated up and down. As I began to get older, I became concerned that if I didn’t lose the weight now I would be in a constant struggle with weight later on, or end up overweight like my mom.

I was a very sensitive child and adult; I had a lot of anxiety and fear. I experienced physical, emotional, and sexual abuse during my life. I didn’t express how I was feeling and

was a people pleaser, always trying to do things “right.” I developed a protective shell around me, so I could keep people away from my inner feelings and thoughts and prevent them from connecting with me. Movement was the one outlet for expression where I felt safe. I started dance at age four and continued dancing competitively through high school. I spent four years on my high school cheer squad and dance team, and also danced outside of school. Practices and performances gave me an opportunity to express myself. Dance and cheerleading focused a lot on our bodies and sizes. During measurement days for costumes, I wanted mine to be smaller than those of the other girls. I would cringe if a number that sounded “large” was shouted to the person writing down our measurements. I felt self-conscious and was always comparing my body to those of the better dancers. They were skinnier, taller, and had longer lines. In high school, I was shorter, had no long lines, and was more stout than slender. I was extremely critical of myself and always strived to be “good enough.”

At age fifteen, I started to diet. I began by eating less and being cautious of the foods I was consuming. Later it progressed into restricting certain foods, drinking meal supplements instead of eating, and recording how much I ate daily. By my senior year in high school I was eating so little that I was passing out during classes and after performances. I was sent to the school nurse who asked about my eating patterns. This was the first time anyone had ever asked me about them. She wanted me to keep a record of what I ate for three days and bring it back to her. Instead, I avoided her the rest of the year and didn't let other people know what happened.

In college, I continued to go in and out of my eating disorder. It had become my “go to” when things were



stressful. I would overeat at times, mostly when I was sad, and then try to compensate later on. I tried several different diet plans and fitness regimes over the years. I delved into calorie counting, daily weighing, graphing my progress, using laxatives, and purging. In my mind, I was engaging in all of this to get the ideal body—the body that would make me smarter, prettier, more popular, more successful. What I didn't realize was that I was focusing on my outer appearance because I had so much pain and anguish on the inside.

Straight from college, I went into teaching, which had always been a dream of mine. My eating disorder followed me, and not far behind it were new ways I'd come across to help me cope. I found drinking was the magic cure to turn me from that shy girl into a social butterfly at parties or clubs. After a few drinks, I could forget about any of my emotions that had come up—and push them further down inside. Unfortunately, my emotions started sneaking out through panic attacks and severe anxiety.

At age twenty-six, I finally sought treatment, because although I could teach without eating much, I couldn't manage the panic attacks. Having to talk to a therapist about what was going on was nearly impossible for me. I didn't express myself openly or say what was going on inside to anyone. During sessions, I would have panic attacks that led the therapist to refer me to a psychiatrist. I was prescribed medications for both depression and anxiety. By taking the anxiety medication prior to an appointment, I could begin to share a little bit more in sessions. Weekly therapy does not stay at a surface level for very long. Soon we were delving into deeper issues, and the past was brought up. This led to nightmares between sessions, more anxiety attacks, an increase in my eating disorder behaviors, drinking, pill abuse, and self-injury.

It wasn't until I was really involved in therapy that I realized how much of life I had been missing. While other people were able to be present in the moment and enjoy normal events, I was stuck in my head worrying about everything from body image to peoples' thoughts, so much that I could barely remember details from key life experiences. I had become so closed off that I could not talk to my closest friends about my struggles. I was exhausted from always putting on a facade that everything was okay. Instead of building connections, I felt lonelier every day. Instead of starting to climb out of this and open up, I developed yet another coping mechanism, which was to overwork.

I focused all my energy on my job both while I was at work and during my time off. I was always creating things, talking about classroom experiences, writing lesson plans and reports. When I did take time to go out with friends, I would panic. I worried I wouldn't know what to say; that I'd be judged, not fit in, not be talkative enough, and, of course, worried about my body image, too. There were countless times I canceled, making up some excuse, because I felt I looked too fat after tearing up my closet. I would end up on the floor crying; I thought I never had a chance of having that "normal," "happy" life other people seemed to have. Other times, when I did follow through and go out with my friends, I would first stress about what to wear, and then worry about what I ate, how much I ate, and how I ate. I would be in my head the whole night while trying to engage in small conversation. I would come home completely exhausted from the experience, immediately want to purge because I felt fat, and then self-injure to punish myself for not being good enough.

On the outside, my life as a thirty-year-old woman looked ideal. I had a successful teaching job, a new car, a

small house on the bay, friends, and a cute dog, to top it all off. It was inside—the part nobody saw—that was completely crashing down. I was exhausted with life. I had lost hope that things would ever get better. I was discouraged, confused, and ready to give up. There was that determined part of me, though, that held on to hope that I could find even a glimpse of something better. I turned in an application to an eating disorder treatment center, truly feeling this was my last chance. I knew I had come to a breaking point and if I wanted anything to get better I would have to give it my all. With the tiny bit of hopefulness I had for a better life, I quit my job, packed up my classroom, ended my lease early, and moved all my stuff into storage.

I entered treatment completely terrified and having no idea what to expect. I was out of my comfort zone. I didn't have my work to hide behind, my behaviors to comfort me, or my house to hide in. I felt exposed, raw, and overwhelmed with fear. From being a fully independent woman, I now had to follow house rules, was being served food, had to ask to go to the bathroom, and couldn't flush or take medication without observation. I was very guarded and unsure of everyone around me. These people wanted to know me and help me, but my wall had been built up over so many years that allowing even one person in (besides my previous therapist) was an enormous struggle. The treatment team remained patient with me. I continued trying to open up and allow them to help me explore the "purpose" of my eating disorder, but this task was far from easy. In fact, it was a very painful time for me. Slowly, layer upon layer was being torn off and exposed to the light. Things I had never talked about or dealt with were coming up. I would panic and resort to using familiar behaviors to cope. I began to see that my eating disorder

was the way I handled the difficulties of life, but it was only a temporary fix. Just like a drink, pill, or self-injury, it only masks the pain until you stop using it.

I was at the same treatment center for a year and a half between residential care, partial hospitalization, and intensive outpatient. I learned how much of my eating disorder was not really about the food. I learned how to cope with life in a healthy way, how to create boundaries, and how to use my voice. For the first time, I found I actually *had* a voice to use. We were taught about nutrition, healthy exercise, portions, and how to fuel our bodies appropriately. The phrase that will always stick with me is “All food is good in variety, balance, and moderation.” My beliefs about “good” foods and “bad” foods were challenged. I learned to sit with the feeling of fullness, as uncomfortable as that was.

The biggest hurdle I had was learning to trust, and luckily, my treatment team gave me no reason to not trust them. They wanted to help and were always there in a very supportive, non-threatening, and non-judgmental way. Slowly, very slowly, I opened up a little more. I gradually let people into my life in an intimate, authentic way that I had never done before. I allowed them to see the real me—all of me. Eventually, they could see my emotions as I was able to truly feel them. I could cry about things and learned how to tolerate vulnerable feelings. I had to be taught, and personally experience, that they couldn't hurt me. One therapist told me that if you are numbing out one emotion, it isn't truly possible to feel the rest. By numbing out my sadness and fear, I had never truly experienced happiness, love, or joy at the level I now do. It took over twenty-three years of food issues and an eating disorder to find that out.

Life in recovery is better than anything I could have ever imagined. Today, I have courage, I have a voice, and I

have an array of emotions that I feel and express in healthy ways. I also have people that I truly trust in life. I allow them to see the real me. Connecting with people at this new level allows me to experience what love really feels like. I have a new freedom. My days aren't focused around food, calories, body image, and worrying about being good enough. I can see beyond myself and relate to other people in a way that lets me be helpful. During treatment I was introduced to the Twelve Steps and I continue to work through them. I have the help of a sponsor and I attend meetings. Working through the Twelve Steps, with the guidance of both my sponsor and therapist, has helped me stay grounded in my recovery and has become my foundation and way of life. I connect with God, my Higher Power, on a much more intimate level than I ever have. I am able to move away from the driver's seat and give control of my life to Him, where it belongs. No longer am I chained down or burdened with all I let life put upon me. I can give those burdens to God and allow Him to shape me into the person He intends me to be.

Every day is a day in recovery for me. I still have negative thoughts about food, my body, and self-criticism, although they are fading. I can challenge these thoughts much more easily, though, because I have become so accustomed to practicing counteracting them. I have a toolbox of ways to handle any life situation that comes my way without using my eating disorder, a substance, or another behavior. I know now that I have a choice to *not* cause myself emotional pain by inflicting physical pain upon my body. I have so much hope for life! I am excited about everything it has to offer. I can be present in special moments with family and friends. I can enjoy life, and I do! Recovery from an eating disorder has opened a whole new world for me, one that is better than I ever imagined.

## WELCOMING LIFE WITH OPEN ARMS

*She graduated college with high honors and helped with multiple social justice campaigns, yet it wasn't until she let go of rigidity that she found her own kind and compassionate heart. Surrender—humility—turned out to be the gateway to freedom.*

*Would it be possible to bring a little bit of compassion to yourself right now? Ugh, here we go again. I am trying so hard to dredge up and eradicate all of the horrendously unlovable parts of myself and my therapist is just getting in my way again. The idea of loving myself repulses me. How could I possibly love someone so selfish, so pathetic, so weak, so intrinsically unlovable? What good would it do me anyway? There has to be another way to find freedom from this eating disorder hell. I'll do anything to get out of this cycle of suffering—anything but love myself. I just can't do that...*

That was me three years ago, before I started working the Twelve Steps of EDA. Since then, things have changed dramatically, and I have uncovered something beautiful—a lotus has grown from the dark, murky pond of my suffering. This is my story.

From the time I was a little girl, I believed that in order to survive, I needed other people to love me. I wanted so badly to be seen and held with care, to have my specialness appreciated and celebrated by the caregivers and role models in my life whom I looked up to. They seemed to

have something essential that I lacked, and I needed them to give it to me. Holding tightly to this belief as one would a life raft, I spent my days chasing after the security promised by love, believing that if I just got a little bit more, maybe I would finally be safe and live happily ever after.

All children need love and care to survive, and I was no exception. Unfortunately, my parents usually seemed to fall short of my expectations of them. When I needed emotional connection and understanding, they couldn't give it to me. When I wanted them to empathize with my suffering, they told me I was too much and pushed me away. As someone who believed the love I needed to survive would come from outside of me, these refusals threatened my very existence. I needed to come up with some other strategy to take care of myself, to feel I was in control of my world, that I could keep my head above water when all other measures failed.

When I turned eighteen and went away to college, all of my strategies for finding love began to slip through my fingers. Suddenly I was lonely, afraid, disconnected, and depressed—desperate to find a way to cope with how difficult my inner life had become. Relief finally came when one night when I found myself curled up on the floor of my apartment gulping down spoonful after spoonful of sweet oblivion, unable to stop. Finally, I had found something that reliably provided a momentary reprieve from the struggle of being human. Each bite promised the love and sweetness I had yet been unable to find inside myself. And I could have as much as I wanted, whenever I wanted it. This fantasy did not last but a few brief minutes; it was immediately followed by a belly full of ache and a mind full of shame and regret. With swift determination, I began hatching elaborate plans to fix my new problem, and thus I

entered into a seven-year binge-starve-compulsive exercise cycle that nearly cost me my life.

I binged to indulge in self-pity and victimhood, starved to feel powerful and in control, and exercised to reprimand my body for putting on weight. When I was starving, I obsessed about what vegetables I could get from the farmers market to make the perfect dinner. When I was planning a binge, I wandered about the grocery store in an unconscious haze searching for the right combination of desserts that might soothe whatever pain was in my heart. Whenever I was not thinking about food, I felt overwhelmingly imprisoned in a body that refused to cooperate with my desires for “perfection” and thinness. Given that I spent so much time thinking about myself and my food, there was not a whole lot of bandwidth remaining to consider other people. I kept a few close friends, but was constantly plagued by a sense of alternating deficiency and superiority that separated me from everyone. I dated, fell in love, and had many exciting experiences, but all of my relationships were plagued by co-dependence and self-centeredness. Outwardly, I accomplished many things: I graduated from college with high honors, helped win multiple social justice campaigns, started a local non-profit, and lived in a radical cooperative community. But on the inside, I was exhausted from the constant struggle of manipulating everything around me to be exactly as I wanted it to be—so I could feel ok.

Though I was starting to realize that what I was doing wasn't working, I didn't hit bottom until several years later. Before finally coming to Eating Disorders Anonymous, I tried EVERYTHING else I possibly could to get rid of my eating disorder, once and for all. I tried cutting out



certain foods, following special diets, drinking more water, exercising on my lunch breaks at work to avoid eating too much, and all kinds of other misguided strategies. Eventually, after a lot of group and individual therapy geared specifically toward addressing the underlying causes of my eating disorder, I started to become willing to heal. I also started meditating regularly which allowed me to become more intimate with both the simple pleasures of being alive and bring sincere compassion to the direct experience of despair that plagued my mind, body and heart. However, after a while, it became clear I needed something much greater than this hodgepodge of support systems to help me recover what I had lost to the eating disorder.

A few months after I started attending EDA meetings and working the Steps with a sponsor, I entered an intensive outpatient treatment program, determined to turn my life and my will over to the care of the treatment team. I humbly realized I did not know how to recover and required the guidance of people whose job it was to help people like me. It wasn't fun, it wasn't easy, but it was exactly what I needed. I let myself feel angry with them for limiting my access to disordered eating behaviors. I let myself express my discontent and irritation without shame. I just let my experience be exactly as it was, period. I reached out to fellow EDA's who had been through treatment themselves and asked for their advice; they all said the same exact thing—just surrender and do everything they tell you to do. Surrender your will completely, and if by the end of the program you want to go back to doing things the way you did them before, go ahead. To my surprise, by the end of the program, I had begun to relax into humility—there was something comforting about not knowing how to solve my eating disorder. I did not have to force it into submission

or do anything to push it away. When I came to terms with my powerlessness over it, believed something greater than myself could restore me to sanity, and surrendered to the process of recovery, it began to let go of me.

Now each time there is a sense of rigidity—be it a tightness in my mind around an idea of how I think things should be or a contraction in my body from stress or fear—I trust that if I let go, I will be ok. Through my experience, I have found surrender is the most consistent and reliable gateway to love and freedom. In working the Steps, I have had the opportunity to become intimate with my fears, shortcomings, and the impact of my actions not only on myself, but also on other people. I am more in touch with myself and how challenging it is to be alive, which has naturally awoken a sincere compassion for myself and everyone around me.

When I first began this life-long journey of recovery, I did not have any interest in being kind or compassionate to myself. But through this process of touching the most tender parts of my heart with patience, acceptance and openness, these have arisen on their own. Even after all this time of being free from eating-disordered behaviors, I still have to face the myriad challenges life inevitably brings. The difference is that now I am willing to learn and grow from the full spectrum of experiences on this path, from the 10,000 joys to the 10,000 sorrows. I welcome life with open arms, unconditionally. May courage and curiosity in the face of difficulty serve to awaken us all to our own compassionate hearts, and may we all find the love we long for. It is already right here.

## WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU...

*Through perseverance and research, she discovered a residential program where she learned priceless lessons. She is now aware of her worth and mindful of her many blessings.*

*What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.* I believe in that old saying (pretty good song, too!). For me, the “what” was a twenty-five-year-old eating disorder, but with the help of my faith, an amazing family, supportive friends, treatment, and EDA, I’m alive and getting stronger.

Since the age of seventeen, I’ve been through constant bouts of anorexia, binge eating, food restriction, over-exercise, and orthorexia. Maybe you or someone you know is also suffering from one of these disorders. While they do include a genetic component, anyone who is predisposed can develop an eating disorder. Young or old, male or female, rich or poor, no category is excluded. My eating disorder, which I now un-affectionately refer to as “Ed,” took on many faces. I found you don’t have to be skin and bones or overweight to have an eating disorder.

I can remember being seven years old and telling a friend of my parents that my thighs were too big (who sets that standard, anyway?). I remember thinking if I didn’t make all A’s, it wasn’t good enough. I remember feeling very self-conscious. I remember my grandmother dying. And I remember discovering among all these fears and out-of-control feelings that there was something I could

control: how much I ate and how much I exercised. Body manipulation became my comfort.

What followed was years of mind games, getting up at obscene hours to exercise, entire days with little to no food, and the deterioration of not only a body, but also the spirit of a girl and a woman with much to give.

Miraculously enough, amidst the chaos in my mind and body, I got married to the smartest, most fantastic husband ever; adopted two amazing, beautiful kids; started a business; built close friendships; and gave back to my community. But it was only by the grace of God that any of that happened, because with all these wonderful life events comes stress, and my perfectionist, people-pleasing personality created inner confusion, over-functioning, and fear. In my journal, I described it like this: “It feels like I’m standing in the middle of a circle with my life—work, home, community, kids, husband, activities—swirling around me, and I’m just grabbing at them, hoping nothing falls and breaks.”

The only things that seemed to give me relief were controlling my food intake and isolating myself through exercise. As can only be expected, the years of unhealthy behaviors were catching up, destroying not only my physical health, but also the health of my family relationships.

One evening in March I got up the guts to take myself to an eating disorder conference. I heard the same ideas I had heard before, but this time something was different. This time something hit me like a ton of bricks—what I now consider to be the Holy Spirit moving me to take action. The next week, my very supportive husband (who, by the way, spent many years trying to help me) and I consulted a trusted therapist in the field who shared

some scary, but necessary news. "You have to go away, and for a long while. You need to be somewhere you can get comprehensive, 24-hour treatment. This can't be done at home," she said. "If you had cancer or diabetes, you wouldn't question the need for treatment, and this disease is no different."

After researching facilities around the country, I found a residential program right in my own backyard. I got intensive therapy and nutrition education. I learned to enjoy food again and how to plan meals. I learned I am worthy. And I learned to live again. My time there was indescribable; what I discovered there was priceless. The people, staff, and fellow residents, they were my lifesavers. After seven weeks of residential and five weeks of day program, I came home ready to face the real world.

About a year ago, I was introduced to EDA. A close friend of mine who also struggles wanted to get a group started in our community. I was very excited about it, because I really wanted a Twelve-Step program, one that encouraged faith, hope, and trust in God. Since we started, I have developed an even deeper understanding of myself and God, who is there for me always, ready to make my recovery process easier. When I am having a tough week, my EDA meeting centers me and helps me deal with the issues at hand. Having the support of the EDA program and the people in my group has added tremendously to my recovery journey, and I am forever grateful.

Don't get me wrong, none of the life stressors are gone: the housework still waits, as does my job and a society where diets and competitive exercise are the norm. But today, I am different. I am healthy, not just in my body, but in my mind. I have an outpatient team behind me, coping skills, EDA, and most importantly, I have a family that

loves me, friends that support me, and my spirit—the one that was buried so many years ago.

Please let me be clear that I am no poster child for recovery. This is a struggle every day. Lapses happen, but I no longer beat myself up. All I can do—all any of us can do—is take it one day at a time, mindful of our blessings and aware of our own worth.

So whatever type of eating disorder keeps your spirit from coming alive, don't let it kill you. Use it to make you stronger. In the end, it is worth the fight.