

Geneen Roth, Food, and Weight

by Elizabeth Pavka, PhD, RD, LD/N, Wholistic Nutritionist

I initially heard Geneen Roth speak in 1983 when her first book, *Feeding the Hungry Heart: The Experience of Compulsive Eating*, was published. As a newly graduated nutritionist I found her description of her experiences with foods fascinating and disturbing. She talked about the year she only ate chocolate chip cookie dough, either raw or cooked. I wondered how she could be healthy doing that. She couldn't of course, and fortunately the human body is very resilient, especially a young one.

Periodically I noticed that Geneen had written yet another book. In total she has penned 10 books in 27 years. Each one shares some of her own experiences with eating disorders from anorexia to binge/purge to compulsive overeating, as well as what she has learned about herself. Some of the books I read, some I didn't. Recently a friend told me about an article published in the April, 2010 issue of "O" magazine where Oprah Winfrey herself recommended Geneen's newest book, *Women, Food, and God: An Unexpected Path to Almost Everything*. After reading both the article and the book, I want to give you a "taste" of her new book and then share a few thoughts.

Geneen writes about two kinds of compulsive eaters, what she calls Restrictors and Permitters. Restrictors believe in control in all areas of their lives, especially their food intake. "Restrictors operate on the conviction that chaos is imminent and steps need to be taken *now* to minimize its impact. . . . Deprivation is comforting because it provides a sense of control. If I limit my food intake, I limit my body size. If I limit my body size I (believe I can) limit my suffering. If I limit my suffering, I can control my life. I make sure that bad things don't happen. That chaos stays away" (p.148).

On the other hand, Permitters find any type of rules abhorrent. Weight loss through dieting creates pure suffering, abject misery. And they're suspicious of all programs, eating guidelines, or guaranteed weight loss. Permitters merge with chaos. They prefer going through life in a daze in order not to feel their pain.

To help you determine whether you're a restrictor or a permitter, ask yourself: What would you do if the richest, most delicious chocolate cake sat six inches away from you? Would you restrict because of your fear of being out of control? Or would you desire to melt into it? Restrictors

control. Permitters numb. Both approaches are lifesaving strategies of managing our pain when we're young and totally dependent on other people. However they are not effective or functional when we're adults.

Over the past 27 years I've led both educational and support groups for very thin people and very overweight people. There seems to be a sense of discomfort on everyone's part. It's almost as if they have nothing in common, no similar base of issues, nothing really to talk about. I've also learned that, despite the effects on the body of weight loss or weight gain, the underlying issues may be very similar. If a person spends five, ten, twenty, thirty years or more obsessing about the same ten or twenty pounds, consider the real possibility that something else is going on. Something that has nothing to do with weight.

I have learned that some people eat more, while others eat less in response to a wide variety of situations, a starving or stuffing habitual pattern. For example, eating much more when they are angry at someone close or have just lost their job. Or totally losing their appetite when a parent dies or in the midst of a separation and divorce. Some people can see their pattern between foods and feelings, but don't understand the connection. Therapists trained in eating disorders can be very helpful in exploring those relationships, and in finding more healthful ways of handling the underlying emotions.

The bottom line is, whether you are a Restrictor or a Permitter, you are using foods as a way of grappling with boredom or illness or loss or grief or emptiness or loneliness or rejection or fill-in-the-blank for your life. Food is only a way of coping with your emotions, of making yourself numb to life's hurt and pain, of creating a secondary problem when the original problem becomes too uncomfortable.

Oprah writes that "this book could have been called *Women, Shopping and God* or *Women, Meth, and God* or *Women, Gambling, and God*" (p.163). My additions: *Women, Alcohol, and God* or *Women, Depression, and God* or *Women, Sex and God*.

If you're a man with similar issues or if food is not your coping tool for your life and emotions, you could still benefit from reading this book. I urge you to read it as an "unexpected path to almost anything".

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