



## Living in the Now

I started my eating disorder at age 13 the moment that I noticed a little pocket of fat at my bikini line. I will never forget that moment. I was wearing a turquoise swimsuit with a ruffle—a swimsuit that I loved and felt so feminine in—but with that negative thought that “fat is bad,” my happiness with that swimsuit began to dissipate. It was in that moment I decided to eat less. Little did I know that experiencing a slight weight gain was normal in becoming a woman.

Until the age of 5, I was outgoing without a shy bone in my body. I loved life. I would independently introduce myself to everyone at the grocery store as “E-beth Tolbert Showers.” I was free and uninhibited.

Then through exposure to outside influences at about age 5: strict teachers, two extremely outgoing personalities—my mom and my older sister, and through watching arguing between my dad and sister about typical teenager stuff, I became scared and timid, would go into my room, shut the door, and check out by playing and daydreaming—my room became my safe haven—I could be whatever I wanted to be in there. But outside that door especially outside my home, I became shy and fearful.

It was the summer after 8<sup>th</sup> grade when I noticed that little pocket of fat at my bikini line and the dieting began. I heard my mom mention dieting for herself, and weight-loss diets were scattered throughout the media. Very quickly, my entire self-worth became wrapped up in my body size. I became obsessed with thin models in magazines.

I could sit through first period fairly present, but by the 2<sup>nd</sup> period in school, my body was hungry and I became obsessed with the food that I wanted to eat...I was incapable of being present in class...I missed so much of my education...by the period right before lunch, I was starving, so much so that my mind was only full of the future and the little bit that I was planning to eat at lunch. One to two hours after lunch, I would be starving again, and by last period, all I could think about was getting home to eat because I had starved myself.

I would get home, exercise, eat a Lean Cuisine and be hungry again 2 hours later. I became isolated from friends and family with this routine. I became rigid about what I could and couldn't eat. After a few weeks of doing this, I had unnecessarily lost weight.

I felt so in control while restricting my food intake and losing weight, but then so out of control when my body became so hungry that I would eat everything I could—to the point of my stomach being painfully full. After several days of restricting, all I could think about was how I wanted ice cream, pizza, pancakes, and other comfort foods like these. We rarely had these types of food at home, so I would have to go buy them. My parents stayed fairly busy, so I had a lot of time to myself. When they were there, I would sneak food at night or during their naps. My addiction was very secretive, sneaky and dishonest.

During all of this time, I felt an overwhelming insecurity. I felt alone and not a “part of” the group. I was judgmental of every thing I did and said. I did care about my friends and family, but because of my insecurities resulting in self-obsession with my appearance and “being perfect,” I had no room to truly consider others unless thinking of another was going to impact me.

At age 14, I got drunk for the first time, but I actually started drinking alcoholically at seventeen. I experienced my first alcoholic blackout then. These blackouts were joy to me—I would feel like the life of the party during the first few drinks, and then I would wake up the next morning not remembering anything, but hearing all kinds of stories about what happened. I found my blackouts hilarious and fun at first, but starting the second semester of my college freshman year, I felt shame, regret, and loss of self-respect. I began to question if I was alcoholic.

During all of these years of my addictions, my mother and I were codependent. This relationship combined with my addictions served me well to “fill in” where I didn’t feel confident enough to make decisions by myself. I also dated a man who was into image and appearance, which fed perfectly into my anorexia.

I studied abroad in Spain my junior year. My plan was to get away and “grow up.” I dove into my anorexia and became so thin that my teeth chipped, skin broke out and hair became brittle and started falling out. I spiraled into a suicidal depression, and attempted to hide it, thus isolating myself more from everyone. My addictions quit serving their purpose of helping me feel better. I called my mom and sister and said I wanted to kill myself. My parents made arrangements for me to get back to the states quickly.

At age 20, I went to treatment for an eating disorder. My parents were supportive, although still somewhat in denial that my problem was so severe. But they listened to me and took me to treatment, where I stayed 47 days. I suppose my goal to “grow up” with my trip to Spain came true in a sense. I began growing up on June 10, 1992, the day I entered treatment, and also my new birthday of a healthier life.

I also got sober in treatment. My alcoholism and eating disorder worked hand-in-hand, and had I not addressed the alcoholism, I would have easily relapsed into my eating disorder the minute I started drinking again.

I entered treatment spiritually dead. It was as if life had been sucked out of me by some external source, and there was nothing left except the wheels turning in my head telling me how horrible I was. Between eating regularly and sobriety, the cobwebs in my brain began to clear, and I could be present enough to think clearly. I started working the 12 steps.

I was (and sometimes still am) a very literal person. The concept of God was confusing to me. I had never understood religion. I was God-fearing, and I didn’t understand Him. When we were given plastic boxes to turn into “God-boxes” or “Higher Power boxes”, I became fascinated with mine. I wrote on it, “Insert your worries and frustrations.” I

wrote down on tiny papers everything that I was obsessing over, and put it into that box—and then I imagined each paper floating into the sky and taken away from me. This helped me learn the first 3 steps, and the meaning of the Serenity Prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” To this day, this prayer’s simplicity helps me to let go of that which is not mine to figure out, and just be present. Although I am not religious, I consider myself a spiritual woman, who believes that there is a Power greater than me who will handle everything as long as I do the footwork and get out of the way.

And most importantly, I have developed a sense of humor. I previously was SO SERIOUS that a therapist said to me in my early recovery, “Elizabeth, whenever you speak, I just want to say, ‘come on everyone, let’s heavy-down,’” of which she was right—I didn’t understand what it meant to lighten-up—my being serious and “heavy” in my thinking was just the way I had always lived. It has taken me years to lighten up, and hopefully I will keep on getting lighter (of course, only in the spiritual sense!).

In my seventeenth year of being recovered, I mentor girls and women with eating disorders. When I compare my journey of recovery to theirs, I feel fortunate and grateful for my suicidal depression, because I believe that I held onto (for dear life) the food plan that I was put on in treatment—I was able to see how my crazy thinking of suicide disappeared after about 30 days of eating normally and staying sober. Thank God those thoughts have never returned. I believe that we have to fuel our bodies by being fed enough food in order to live a sane, clear and present life. The infrequent times now when I don’t get a meal on-time, I usually feel out of sorts, and do not make decisions as well as I do when I listen to my body and eat when it tells me I am hungry. When I overeat, I definitely feel less clear as well. I had to be on a regular meal plan for about 2 straight months before my body would start signaling hunger. My eating disorder stripped away any form of consistent hunger pangs and left me clueless about when I was physically hungry.

While in my addictions, I had been “hungry” all of the time for love, attention and validation. I learned how to give these things to myself when I entered recovery. But I first had to let go of the addictions to form a strong foundation of clarity and peace to understand that I needed to love myself. I had not liked myself since about age 14, thus I pretended to love myself until I finally did. In 12-step programs, we call this “acting as if” until we can feel it for ourselves. This also included loving my body as it was—not waiting until one day when it’s “perfect,” which was the way I had lived my life during my addictions—always waiting for the day things were perfect before I could start living.

If there is one gift that I could give others, it’s to start living now—not later today, not tomorrow, but now—it seems to me that most of our society is waiting to “start their lives when...” a particular thing happens—for me, it was when I became that perfect size. And I have learned that the “perfect size” (or rather my healthy weight) is where my body weight naturally is when I am taking care of it by eating regularly and getting moderate exercise. Occasionally now I catch myself “waiting to live” until my life is perfect—I will do it with other desires such as when I am in the right relationship and when my

business is “perfect”—but the fabulous thing is that I catch myself “waiting to live” and am able to let go and be present. The past is over and the future has not yet arrived. This moment is all I have.

I am heading back to Europe this summer for a 3-week trip in Italy and Spain (which will be my first time back to Spain since my severe depression). I am excited to really “see” Spain with my healthier perspective on life.

Writing my story has shown me how far I have come in my life. I still encounter moments of anxiety and insecurity. But I know what to do when these occur: meditate more, go to more 12-step meetings, participate more in service work by mentoring others with eating disorders, reach out to friends and family (yes, I have a healthy relationship with my family now!), and speak up honestly as to how I feel. This personal awareness helps me to simply surrender to the moment and trust myself. As I hear in 12-step meetings often, it’s a process—growth is like “peeling layers off of an onion”—and thank God—life is a fun adventure into the unknown of which when truly lived, there are always more layers to peel.

**Elizabeth Showers.**

*Empowering all Women to Feel Beautiful.*