



Digesting the Truth

When I look back at my years trapped in the bowels of my eating disorder I still find my recovery nothing short of a miracle. I can hit the rewind button and identify my earliest issues with food. At five years old I began to refuse to eat my mother's cooking. As a single mother, she worked full time and barely had enough time to think about the dinners she prepared but I couldn't see that. I only noticed the lack of attention paid to her dishes and the lack of seasonings. Each night the dinner table became our battlefield, with me refusing to eat even though I knew food for us was a luxury not to be taken for granted. She insisted rather strongly that I eat while I stubbornly held my ground and refused to take one bite. This was the only time in my life that I could summon the courage to stand up to my powerful mother. It was also the one time I was able to emerge victorious.

I grew up in the Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn, the youngest of three girls with an unwed single mother barely out of her teens. We were fatherless, poor but educated. Books were a passport to a world far away from the limitations of our lives and my mother ate up their storylines and passed this love on to her girls. But books couldn't take the place of the things I needed. I remember feeling a deeper hunger that had little to do with food and more to do with my emotional and physical need that went unmet.

Even though I hated my mother's cooking I still had a relatively average relationship with food. It wasn't until a childhood trauma at twelve caused me to shut down emotionally that I started having real issues with food. Suddenly I was either hungry or dieting. I knew I couldn't control the events in my life so I started playing games with my food. I played this game and separating emotionally from everyone in my life. Even though I felt vulnerable and needy, and I needed to talk to someone about my problems I felt this unnatural pressure to live up to the strong Black female archetype. I was raised to believe I needed to be strong and so I suffered in silence.

In my early twenties the breakups of my first two important romantic relationships traumatized me. I physically, mentally and emotionally shut off from wanting or needing anyone. My self-esteem plummeted. Feelings of shame from the childhood trauma came roaring back reminding me of how little I deserved to be loved. It sent me into the food. One day around this time, an article caught my eye: "Bulimia the New Diet." A normal person reading this exposé about the dangers of bulimia would have been jarred or disgusted by the practices of this disease. But for someone in my fragile mental state, in need of control, the inclusion of that word "diet" made this an educational how-to. I was off and running, desperate for this miracle diet to work its magic. I shoved my fingers down and quickly lost control, no longer able to choose when, where, or even if I would binge and purge. I was quickly caught up in the grasp of this bulimic hell, doing it day and night, and nothing could free me of its hold on my life. Anytime I felt ashamed or a burden on others my emotions, fears, and insecurities would well up to the surface, and before I could stop myself I'd be off and running into the next binge.

In a short time, I had become a professional bulimic, practicing my behavior day and night, shutting out all people and events that did not include food. I would close the blinds and spend hours upon hours, bingeing and purging. I thought about food 24-7, whether I wanted to or not.

Life became about getting food, avoiding food, starving, overeating, exercising, downing laxatives, and purging around the clock.

Because I was a black girl with natural hair who had grown up below the poverty line, no one ever suspected I could be bulimic. Only I seemed aware that melanin content did not guarantee me an eating-disorder free life. My color became the perfect shield against suspicion. No one questioned why I ate three or four helpings per meal, why food went missing, why I never had any money or motivation, and why I never gained weight. I couldn't have food in my stomach. I would be seized by great anxiety over finding myself stuck with anything except air and water inside my body. I'd excuse myself from gatherings, restaurants, dinner parties, my friends, my dates, in order to seek a safe refuge to purge. Like a heroin addict, after every session I grew anxious trying to figure out how to get the next binge and purge started.

As hard as I tried I couldn't become abstinent on my own. I needed help. Eventually, on my knees, emotionally, physically and mentally crippled I sought help. I tried a few different places, even church but that was only treating one part of my addiction. Because I was a struggling writer with no health insurance my options were limited. I found a fellowship of people who like me, were bulimic, anorexics and compulsive overeaters. Once I took that first important step of admitting that I could not free myself of bulimia it saved my life. This went against everything that I had been raised to believe. I had thought that needing help or support was a sign of weakness. That therapy or support groups were something that only white people did. That all I needed to do in order to get over my issues with food was to have some control. For years I believed these lies and they kept me isolated and in pain. Therapy, I was told was for crazy people. It wasn't what sane rational strong Black women did. The level of shame I felt at not being 'normal' around food overwhelmed me. Through the work I was able to do to heal my eating disorder I learned that 'bulimia was not just me trying to control my food. That's an oversimplification of a complex issue.

When I went into recovery it was as if a light came on and I had been living in the dark. The friends I made in recovery became my lifeline. I no longer felt like a burden because they depended on me as much as I depended on them. And together we safeguarded each others abstinence because we knew that we were no longer alone. And that it was okay to be scared or mad or angry. I totally checked out of my life substituting addiction for recovery. In the beginning there didn't seem to be any way to do this part-time. One of the first lessons I learned was the beauty of feeling my feelings, something I had stuffed down or starved for years.

At first I rebelled and tried desperately to hold on to control and toughness while maintaining my abstinence, but it didn't work. It almost led me back into the toilet. I wanted to be emotionally removed, tough, and independent like the other women in my family, forgetting how many of them had suffered from depression and suicidal thoughts at one time or another.

One day, early in my recovery, I went out to eat with my "normal" friends. In a crowd, I always pretended that food was not an issue. I hadn't yet told any of them that I had an eating disorder or that I was finally seeking help. Everything they did and said after that first bite became a fog as I drifted in and out of consciousness and the conversation. Pretending to be normal led to self-loathing, which led to overeating, which led to extreme discomfort, and all I

wanted was to be facedown in the toilet puking out my guts. But I had come so far. I had already logged thirty consecutive days of abstinence from throwing up. Did I really want to start over? To tell my program friends that I had slipped and fallen back into the food because of my ego? I sat there stuck between the two realities, the food and my friends, and I felt so scared and helpless that I got up, went into the bathroom. This time instead of flipping up the toilet seat, to purge I dropped down on my knees, and began to pray.

I said the twelve-step prayer over and over: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things that I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Even as I questioned the God part I kneeled there for what felt like an eternity, time enough to purge a bunch of times, but instead I just prayed. A new stillness washed over me, replacing my anxiety and fear. Suddenly I knew I would be OK. I would survive this disease. My sponsor explained that I didn't need to believe in a specific God to achieve abstinence; some people made their "higher power" the ocean or the trees or the sky or the sun, while others even referred to their "higher power" as the absence of God. Suddenly I was exposing all my feelings, failings, and vulnerabilities. I was tired of hiding. I came to believe in God in a way I never had before. I had always thought God existed only for those who led a righteous life and were perfect.

I took another huge step toward health and away from addiction when, against my family's vocal protests that "only crazy people go to head shrinkers," I began therapy. I especially needed to be heard. The first thing my therapist pointed out to me was my inability to live in the gray area of life. Everything was either black or white for me, good or bad, happy or depressed. I was starting to see that when I couldn't pay my rent, considering a suicide attempt was not exactly a normal response. I also had to learn to give up my belief that I needed to be happy all the time or that I was unlovable unless I was perfect. She taught me healthy coping skills.

I began to do regular volunteer work. I had always felt sorry for myself when looking back at my past, resenting the lack and limitations, always diving into one pity party after another. But I learned that the best way to stay abstinent is by helping others. I found an unexpected bonus: helping others made me feel worthy that I had something of value to offer in the world. As a consequence of loving myself I began to love my family, to accept them for who they are, and to understand that most of them had always loved me in their own way.

Today my life feels as if it has come full circle because now I am the mother. I am surrounded by loving supportive friends and family. I am comfortable in my body and my relationship with food is recovered. I am normal. I've learned that I cannot isolate myself or allow shame to pull me backwards. Along the way I've also been freed of the belief that I need to be perfect. The pursuit of perfection took me into a very dark place that I almost didn't come back from. For a long time I believed in silence and suffering not understanding that one fed the other. I thought that airing my dirty laundry would humiliate me but in a safe environment it wound up setting me free.

I am happily married, working at a career that I love and living a full productive life. I don't know what I would have done without support. I know for a fact that eating disorders are curable and that there is definitely a bright light at the end of that dark tunnel if you are willing to take that first step. If there is one thing I would like people to take from my story it's that I spent so

many years using my differences as a way to stay isolated and alone. Once I sought help I came to see that we are all so much alike and that we all deserve to recover and to live happy lives.

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