

The SUN



A magazine of ideas

GENEEN ROTH

No Matter What We Eat

Ever since anchorwoman Katie Couric received a colonoscopy on the *Today* show, my mother has been pressuring me to have one, too. We'll be deep in conversation about sofa tables, and she'll say, "If you measure correctly, mistakes can be avoided. . . . Colon cancer can be avoided, too."

Last week, our conversation reached an all-time low when she told me that colorectal cancer is a terrible way to die. Thinking that a colonoscopy couldn't possibly be worse than hearing her say "colorectal cancer" a hundred times more, I hung up the phone, called the doctor's office, and made an appointment.

The procedure is scheduled for tomorrow at 10 A.M., and I am worried — deeply worried — that the doctor will have too much to drink tonight, and his hand will slip tomorrow, and I will be walking around with a colostomy bag on my side for the rest of my life. Matt, my husband, tells me that even if the doctor does mess up, this won't happen. I don't believe him. And as if those worries weren't enough, in preparation for the colonoscopy, I have to endure an entire day without food. It's only nine in the morning, and the long, parched day stretches before me — endless, torturous, exhausting.

Fasting is not my friend. As a kid, I was supposed to fast on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, but my parents were lenient, and I was allowed to eat pizza on the way to temple. At twenty-two, I went to India and met an eighty-year-old American man named Stanley Rosenbush who believed that people were destroying their vital life force by eating solid food; he insisted that the most perfectly balanced diet a person could eat was actually a drink made of lemon juice, water, cayenne pepper, and maple syrup. He told me his magic potion would clean out my liver (until then, I'd never considered that mine might be dirty), give me energy, balance my brain chemistry, and — this was definitely the hook — help me lose weight.

I met Stanley in the first week of my four-month trip. Still convinced that just being in India would melt the pounds away (everyone I knew who'd been to India had come home skinny from either dysentery or malaria), I merely made a note of his drink, stuck the note in my journal, and didn't think of it again. Three months later, I'd gained eight pounds on my new Indian diet: the honey-sweetened *chai* tea that I drank every day; the little nut-and-sugar candies called "chickees" that women sold on the street corners for a few pennies; the mangoes and papayas that I ate by the truckful; the daily rice-and-bread feedings. Even my saris, made from six yards of material, grew tight on me. The prospect of being the only one in my group of friends to go to India and gain weight distressed me, so I decided to try Stanley's elixir. He maintained that a person could live her entire life on his concoction, so I figured four weeks was a modest goal.

When I began to gather my supplies, I discovered that maple syrup was not available in Bangalore, but "jaggery" — a cross between brown sugar and maple syrup — was. It was sold by the pound in big light brown balls that not only looked like rocks, but were just as hard. Harder. By the third day of my fast, I was so hungry that I began smashing a ball of jaggery against my cement floor in an attempt to break off chunks I could crunch between my teeth. When that didn't work, I asked the landlady for a hammer and began whacking at it. Drinking, I'd learned, was not the same as chewing. Despite the fact that I was probably consuming more than fifteen hundred calories a day, I felt as if something essential, something satisfying, something irreplaceable was missing. And I was right. Something was: food.

Nevertheless, being a consummate dieter, I stayed on the fast (if you can call chewing on broken chunks of jaggery fasting) for four weeks and left for New York thinner than when I'd arrived.

A few weeks after my return, a friend gave me a book called *Survival into the Twenty-first Century*, which recommended training the body to exist on simple foods, beginning with vegetables and fruits, and proceeding to just juices, with the goal of eventually living so lightly on the earth that you become a "breatharian" — someone who drinks light and eats silence; someone whose body is so cleansed, so holy, so efficient at metabolizing sunshine and oxygen

that it doesn't need food.

Great idea, I thought, not because I was concerned about surviving into the twenty-first century (it was only 1975), nor because I wanted to be holy, but because light and silence had no calories and would, I was certain, keep me thin. At the age of twenty-four, after thirteen years of dieting, I'd already lost more than seven hundred pounds, but I'd gained them all back — and more. I believed that my every problem stemmed from being fat, and that only if I lost weight and kept it off would my suffering be ended.

Although people with emotional eating problems don't appear to have tremendous willpower, the fact is, we are strong as steel. We can deprive ourselves for weeks at a time, which is exactly what I did as I began my prebreatharian training. I took my inspiration from the only living breatharian I'd heard about — a man in Santa Cruz whom no one had actually seen, but who'd given telephone interviews in which he claimed that he'd eaten nothing but light for six years. To begin my training, I limited myself to 150 calories a day (half an apple, alfalfa sprouts, half a pear) and jogged four miles each morning. But that wasn't the worst of it. I also began to fast one day a week, and at each change of season, I fasted for three weeks at a time. During the first week, I ate only fruits and vegetables. The second week, I drank only fruit juice. The third week, I drank water.

For a year and a half, I ate lightly. I breathed sunshine. I fasted on silence. I got very, very skinny (though I still thought I was fat). And my suffering did not end. I followed up each three-week privation with a dozen doughnuts and a gallon of coffee ice cream. And fasting was so torturous that, except for one miserable Yom Kippur five years ago, I have never fasted again. Until today.

The sheet of instructions from the endoscopy center says to drink clear liquids only. They give grape juice as an example. I can't quite understand how something purple could be clear, but it gives me hope. If grape juice is clear, can melted chocolate be bouillon?

I feel like a distraught two-year-old. I whine. I complain. I drink hot apple juice with lemon. I switch to cherry cider. I make strawberry Jell-O, which I haven't eaten since my college friend Rita Maloney told me it was made of calves' hooves. In my present state, however, hooves do not sound so bad. At least they are crunchy.

At 4 P.M., I have to drink a bottle of Fleet's Phospho-Soda to begin the "bowel evacuation." Within half an hour, I experience shooting chest pains so intense that I'm certain I am dying of a heart attack and must rush to the emergency room. I call the doctor, who tells me not to worry, that my esophagus is spasming and I won't die. While I am on the phone, I ask him if they have the same regulations for colonoscopists as they have for airline pilots: get enough sleep, don't drink alcohol for thirty-six hours prior to taking people's lives in their hands, and so on. He laughs. This response does not reassure me, but I do not want to press him, since the balance of power is clearly in his favor.

The night that follows is very, very long — twelve hours longer than most nights — so I have plenty of time to read between running to the bathroom and having mini heart attacks. As I wait for another spasm in either my chest or my colon, I notice an article in *Harper's Bazaar* about a new eating disorder called "orthorexia nervosa," the prefix *ortho-* being derived from the Greek word meaning "straight or correct." The article describes what many psychologists are calling an unhealthy obsession with health food: going hungry rather than eating sprayed lettuce; bringing one's own food to a dinner party; refusing to drink tap water; driving three hours to get an organic meal; and, of course, fasting to purify the body.

I see myself fifteen years ago, always a trendsetter when it comes to food obsessions, bringing baggies of organic carrots, tofu, and sprouts to my friend Eliza's catered thirtieth-birthday party, where I refused to eat the mushroom puffs, beef Wellington, and garlic mashed potatoes. I'd been reading about antibiotics and steroids in red meat and the toxic sprays that farmers used to grow vegetables, especially mushrooms. As I watched the others throwing poison down their throats, I felt separate, smug, healthy. As if, by not eating mushrooms, I could stave off illness — and not just my own. I also lectured everyone I loved about what they ate, believing I could seduce death into leaving us alone.

Each time my father ordered rice pudding, I would nag him about the cream, the sugar, the fat, the cholesterol. I was convinced he was going to die of a heart attack and that I could prevent it by being a sentinel at the food gate. When he lay emaciated and dying of lymphoma last year, I begged him to eat rice pudding. I would leave his apartment every day, go to the diner down the street, and buy a large container of rice pudding. I'd walk in the door, get a spoon, sit in front of him, and say, "Please, Dad, it's your favorite. Just a bite."

In 1978, when I was eating 150 calories a day and weighed eighty pounds, no one knew to call it anorexia. Later, when I began eating twenty thousand calories a day and ballooned up to 160 pounds, no one knew to call it compulsive eating. We didn't have those labels then, and, though they are helpful, the names themselves — even this new one, orthorexia nervosa — give us the illusion that we can get the upper hand; that we can deal with it. But perhaps this illusion itself is an illness, and everyone's got it. It's called believing we can control the future by what we eat, or weigh, or accomplish now. The alternative — understanding that we are not in charge — is utterly humbling and leaves us unbearably vulnerable.

A month ago, my car was the last vehicle in a nine-car pileup on the freeway. Though I wasn't hurt, I was shaken up for weeks. I'd been cruising along in the left lane with my usual feeling of immortality, on my way to a meeting, making plans for dinner, and tomorrow, and next week, when suddenly the car in front of me came to a dead halt. One moment I knew how the day was going to unfold,

and the next I didn't. I saw that, no matter what I ate for breakfast or how kind or thin or generous I was, I could die at any moment.

Coming up against that edge is terrifying, which is why most of us don't do it until an accident, an illness, a death, or some other disaster wakes us up from the dreamy haze of believing that we're in charge. But the fragility that follows our awakening is so tender and so contrary to the cultural myth that we cover it quickly with vigorous new exercise programs, new strategies to purify ourselves, and lifestyle changes that foster the illusion of once again being in control of our fate.

During those years — twenty altogether — when I lost weight and then gained it and then lost it again; the years I spent fasting and eating macrobiotic and vegan diets; the years I brought baggies of food with me to parties, restaurants, and hotels, only to soon set them aside and eat everything that didn't eat me first — during that time, I appeared to be obsessed with food and weight, being healthy and being thin. And, on the most external level, I was. But that's not the whole story. Deep down, I wanted order. I wanted certainty. In the crazy symphony of life, I wanted to believe that I was the conductor, and that food was my baton. If I ate healthy foods, I would be healthy. If I distanced myself from the ignorant masses who drank tap water and ate Big Macs, I would live a long life. I was better. I was smarter. I carried bottled water. I ate unsprayed lettuce. I was in control.

It's a tricky balance between being in charge and trusting to fate. The truth is, I am in control of what I put in my mouth, and whether I get a colonoscopy, and how fast I drive, and with whom I choose to be in relationship. But it's also true that I am not in control of whether I live to the end of this day, and that I am part of something much larger than I can comprehend. Living on the edge of what I can and cannot control, I feel my own power — and my own helplessness. I do what I can to occupy every inch of my life while not shielding myself from the fact that something devastating can happen to me at any time, or that it is pure grace that I am here at all.

This way of being is like the burnt sugar crust of *crème brûlée*: hard at first, but one layer down, endlessly exhilarating. Because if it's true that Jim Fixx, the man who made running famous, died of a heart attack, and that Adele Davis, the popular nutritionist, died of cancer, and that my father, deprived of rice pudding for twenty years, died of lymphoma, then driving myself to be good-better-best will not necessarily extend my life. When the stakes are not life-and-death, I don't have to do the impossible. I can just do my part, like one finger on a hand. For someone like me, who has been playing God for most of my forty-nine years, this is a revolutionary concept. It's letting go of the illusion of control. It's also understanding that deprivation does not lead to long life, and pleasure to early death. Even the famed Santa Cruz breatharian, another God wannabe, was finally caught in the 7-Eleven at 2 A.M. eating potato chips and Milky Ways. ■