

# WOMEN FOOD AND GOD



An Unexpected Path to  
Almost Everything

"A hugely important work, a life-changer, one that will free untold women  
from the tyranny of fear and hopelessness around their bodies."

—ANNIE LAMOTT, author of *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*

# GENEEN ROTH

AUTHOR OF *WHEN FOOD IS LOVE*

## CHAPTER FOUR



### It's Not About the Weight but It's Not Not About the Weight

A few years ago, I received a letter from someone who'd included a Weight Watchers Ribbon on which was embossed I LOST TEN POUNDS. Underneath the gold writing, the letter writer added: "And I Still Feel Like Crap."

We think we're miserable because of what we weigh. And to the extent that our joints hurt and our knees ache and we can't walk three blocks without losing our breath, we probably are physically miserable. But if we've spent the last five, twenty, fifty years obsessing about the same ten or twenty pounds, something else is going on. Something that has nothing to do with weight.

My friend Sally went to a wedding in Finland a few years ago and met a distant cousin of hers who was furious with me. The cousin said she'd read my books, followed my approach and gained a hundred pounds. She thought I was a charlatan, a fake, a louse. I didn't blame her. If I'd gained a hundred pounds while believing I was following an expert's advice, I'd be furious, too. A hundred pounds! My response to Sally's cousin was to say as kindly as I could—and with the safety of thousands of miles between us—that I realize she thought she was listening to me but I don't advocate eating compulsively. And gaining a hundred pounds is nothing but.

Most people are so glad to read about, hear about and then begin any approach that doesn't focus on weight loss as its main agenda that they take it to be license to eat without restraint. "Aha," they say. "Someone finally understands that it's not about the weight." It's never been about the weight. It's not even about food. "Great," they say, "let's eat. A lot. Let's not stop."

And the truth is that it's not about the weight. It's never been about the weight. When a pill is discovered that allows people to eat whatever they want and not gain weight, the feelings and situations they turned to food to avoid will still be there, and they will find other more inventive ways to numb themselves. In *Groundhog Day*, when he realized he wasn't going to gain weight by eating a thousand cherry pies, Bill Murray ate like there was no tomorrow (since, in the movie, there wasn't). But the charge dissipated as soon as he realized he could have as much food as he wanted without the usual consequences. When you take the charge away, all that's left is a no-big-deal piece of cherry pie. And when you finish the pie, the thing that had nothing to do with the pie—that drove you to it—is still there.

In the last month, I've gotten letters or worked with students who have:

- mortgaged their houses to pay for a gastric bypass operation and then gained back the weight they lost.
- borrowed money—a lot of it—from a relative for liposuction and then discovered that they still hated their thighs.
- lost a hundred pounds and were so disappointed that it didn't fix what was broken that they gained back the weight.

Either you want to wake up or you want to go to sleep. You either want to live or you want to die.

It's not about the weight.

But it's also not not about the weight.

The reality of sheer poundage and its physical consequences cannot be denied. Some people at my retreats can't sit in a chair comfortably. They can't walk up a slight incline without feeling pain. Their doctors tell them their lives are in danger unless they lose weight. They need knee replacements, hip replacements, LAP-BAND surgeries. The pressure on their hearts, their kidneys, their joints is too much for their body to tolerate and still function well. So it is about the weight to the extent that weight gets in the way of basic function: of feeling, of doing, of moving, of being fully alive.

The in-your-face-reality of the obesity epidemic—the fact that 75 percent of Americans are overweight—gets endless news coverage. Statistics about weight, the new drugs that are being discovered, the possibility of an obesity gene—all are discussed ad infinitum in the media. No one can argue that being a hundred pounds overweight is physically challenging.

Yet.

The bottom line, whether you weigh 340 pounds or 150 pounds, is that when you eat when you are not hungry, you are using food as a drug, grappling with boredom or illnesses or loss or grief or emptiness or loneliness or rejection. Food is only the middleman, the means to the end. Of altering your emotions. Of making yourself numb. Of creating a secondary problem when the original problem becomes too uncomfortable. Of dying slowly rather than coming to terms with your messy, magnificent and very, very short—even at a hundred years old—life. The means to these ends happens to be food, but it could be alcohol, it could be work, it could be sex, it could be cocaine. Surfing the Internet. Talking on the phone.

For a variety of reasons we don't fully understand (genetics, temperament, environment), those of us who are compulsive eaters choose food. Not because of its taste. Not because of its texture or its color. We want quantity, volume, bulk. We need it—a lot of it—to go unconscious. To wipe out what's going on. The unconsciousness is what's important, not the food.

Sometimes people will say, "But I just like the taste of food. In fact, I love the taste! Why can't it be that simple? I overeat because I like food."

But.

When you like something, you pay attention to it. When you love something—love something—you take time with it. You want to be present for every second of the rapture.

Overeating does not lead to rapture. It leads to burping and farting and being so sick that you can't think of anything but how full you are. That's not love; that's suffering.

Weight (too much or too little) is a by-product. Weight is what happens when you use food to flatten your life. Even with aching joints, it's not about food. Even with arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure. It's about your desire to flatten your life. It's about the fact that you've given up without saying so. It's about your belief that it's not possible to live any other way—and you're using food to act that out without ever having to admit it.

This morning I received this letter:

*Each time I start trying to follow what you say, I get afraid and then go running back to the security of the Weight Watchers point system. And every time I try points, I inevitably fail a week later and spiral into a new rash of binges and beating myself up.*

*My main concern is that I don't know how to solve the actual deficiency in the rest of my life. I am a first-year associate at a large, prestigious law firm in New York. By all accounts I am Going Places and will Be Something someday, but for now it's a lot of "skill-building" like managing nitty gritty tasks and doing document review and never being able to sink my teeth into anything. I can manage my eating pretty well during the day, but at night I return home unsatisfied, and a binge results.*

*I can easily see the direct connection between this emptiness and my eating habits. Your books capture it perfectly. And I do just need to stare my frustration with my job and my career in the face instead of distracting myself from it with food. I just don't know how to deal with this when I have to be in this job, at a minimum, another eight months (to get my bonus) and likely another twelve months, until my boyfriend completes his stint and we can think about moving somewhere else. Intellectually, I can reconcile being in this job with an overall career arc, but on a day-to-day basis, it's just aggravating.*

*I guess I'm writing this more so I can disabuse these binges of their power, but even with this clarity I am not sure I can really make paying attention to hunger a sustainable pattern if this job continues to sap me of my energy.*

So what's a girl to do when she is destined to be Someone but in the meantime feels as if she is No One Special? How does she face what she doesn't want to face without eating? That's really the dilemma.

“I don’t want to be where I am and so I am eating to wipe out the ‘aggravation.’ How can I feel the aggravation without eating to make myself feel better?”

Let’s suppose that she keeps eating. Every night she comes home and binges. Soon she gains weight, then more weight. Perhaps she gains so much weight that her joints ache, her back hurts, the pressure on her knees becomes painful and then excruciating. Instead of worrying about being No One, she is now worried about getting her knees replaced. She has joined the ranks of the obese and it looks to her and all the world that the problem is her weight. That if only she could lose weight, her body would function well (this is probably true) and she would be happy (this is not true). But her problem is not about the food she consumes. Her problem, though it eventually would become excess weight, is not weight. It’s that she doesn’t know—no one ever taught her—how to “face” (as she calls it) her “deficiency.” The emptiness. The dissatisfaction.

I see four choices. The first is to keep doing what she is doing. That’s the choice that most of us make most of the time. Caught in a conundrum, in a paradox—“I need to stay here but I don’t want to. Staying here makes me unhappy. Being unhappy makes me eat”—we usually make a hoopla out of compulsive eating and call that The Problem. Our lack of willpower, our nightly binges, our expanding body sizes. And while, with enough weight gain, it really does become a problem that needs to be addressed, it’s a problem we’ve manufactured so we don’t have to deal with the unknown.

Her second choice is to leave her job and find something she wants to do now. A more difficult choice, especially if being an attorney is her passion, which, at the beginning, requires working at tasks that don’t thrill her.

And her third choice—the one with which she is grappling—is to untangle the knot she is calling “deficiency.” To demystify the emptiness she runs away from night after night. If the nighttime feelings were no longer frightening, there’d be no need to turn to a drug to numb them.

Deficiency. Emptiness. They’re just words, names that evoke scary thoughts, which then evoke scary feelings. And both the thoughts and the feelings are based on her idea of what was supposed to be happening that isn’t: “I’m supposed to be Someone Special and here I am doing grunt work and reviewing other people’s documents. This isn’t what I dreamed about. I’m never going to amount to anything. My life is a waste. What if it’s always like this? What if my dreams are just pipe dreams? I should have known this was going to happen. I should have listened to my eighth-grade teacher, Mrs. Simpkinson, when she told me I’d never amount to anything. Oh, I feel so empty. I feel deficient, flawed, like I am and never will be enough. I need to eat.”

Deficiency sounds awful, but is it? What does it actually feel like? Is it a big hole in her stomach? Her chest? Does it feel like everything has dropped away and she’s holding on to the edge of a huge abyss about to fall in? If she stops trying to hold on and lets herself fall, what would happen? (Remember that all of these are images in her mind. She’s not really holding onto the edge of an abyss, she’s probably sitting in a chair. She wouldn’t actually fall anywhere, in her mind, if she let herself “fall.”) Is emptiness the experience of space or is it something else? If it’s space and she feels it directly—in her body where it resides—she might notice if there was anything that is actually scary about it or if it’s just a story she is telling herself.

There is a whole universe to discover between “I’m feeling empty” and turning to food to make it go away. The problem of weight is

predictable. We know what to do when we have that problem. Beat ourselves up. Make ourselves wrong. Eat fewer donuts. But staying with the emptiness—entering it, welcoming it, using it to get to know ourselves better, being able to distinguish the stories we tell ourselves about it from the actual feeling itself—that’s radical.

Imagine not being frightened by any feeling. Imagine knowing that nothing will destroy you. That you are beyond any feeling, any state. Bigger than. Vaster than. That there is no reason to use drugs because anything a drug could do would pale in comparison to knowing who you are. To what you can understand, live, be, just by being with what presents itself to you in the form of the feelings you have when you get home from work at night.

Her fourth choice: accepting the situation. Dropping the resistance to doing grunt work. Understanding that this is the way things are for now and being vigilant about bringing her attention to the present moment again and again.

Acceptance represents the basic challenge of compulsive eating. The reason why it’s not about the weight. Why people Lose Ten Pounds and Still Feel Like Crap.

The lack of acceptance and the lawyer’s unhappiness are synonymous. She is assuming—absolutely counting on the fact—that when she gets to be Someone Special, she will no longer feel deficient and no longer be haunted by emptiness. I’ve thought that, too. About a hundred million times. It’s called the “When I Get Thin (Change Jobs, Move, Find a Relationship, Leave this Relationship, Have Money) Blues.” It’s called the “If Only” refrain. It’s called postponing your life and your ability to be happy to a future date when then, oh then, you will finally get what you want and life will be good. In my books *Feeding the Hungry Heart* and *When Food Is Love*, I’ve written about

the stories of people who lost weight and were still miserable. Who got what they thought they wanted most and found that joy still eluded them. Because—and yes, I know this is a cliché but it’s a cliché because it’s actually true—miserable and happy are not functions of what you have, what you look like or what you achieve. I’m not exactly proud to say that I have been miserable anywhere, with anything, with anyone. I’ve been miserable standing in a field of a thousand sunflowers in southern France in mid-June. I’ve been miserable weighing eighty pounds and wearing a size 0. And I’ve been happy wearing a size 18, sitting with my dying father. Happy being a switchboard operator.

It’s not about the weight. It’s not about the goal. It’s not about Being Thin or Being Someone Special or Getting There. Those are fantasies in your mind—and they are all in the future, a future that never comes. Because when your goals are reached, they will be reached in the “right now.” And in the “right now,” you will still be you, doing the same things you do now. You will still stand up. Walk around. Get root canals. Open the refrigerator door. Sleep. Feel happy. Feel devastated. Feel lonely. Feel loved. Get Old. Die.

But it’s not not about the weight because if you keep using food as a drug, if you keep distracting yourself by creating a weight problem, then you need to attend to your weight in order to stand up, walk around, open doors, sleep, feel happy, feel devastated, feel loved, get old, die—with any degree of attention, wholeheartedness, presence. If you keep slapping another problem on top of the freshness of life itself, all you see is what you’ve slapped onto it. You cannot ignore a problem just because it’s one you’ve manufactured.

At some point, it becomes about the weight. When you can’t live the rest of your life with ease, the weight itself needs to be addressed.

Not so that you can become super-model thin. No so that you can look like an image in your mind that has nothing to do with your body, your age, your life. You need to address the weight because without addressing it, you don't actually live. You schlep yourself from place to place, out of breath. Sitting is painful. Flying is torturous. Going to the movies is challenging.. You become so burdened with the problem you've created that your life becomes small and your focus becomes narrow. Life become about your limitations. What you can and cannot do. How much you can hide. How ashamed you are of yourself. You close down your senses, you leave the world of sounds, of color, of laughter in favor of a reality you've created yourself. If you keep using food as a drug, if your life becomes about your weight, you miss everything that is not related to your weight problem. You die without ever having lived.

Here is the letter I wrote to No One in Particular who is hoping to be Someone Special and creating a weight problem in the meantime.

*It seems as if you chose this career and therefore, this career arc. Can you accept that? Not as resignation, which is how people define acceptance. Not as a sense of victimhood. "Poor Me, I can't do anything but accept the situation." But as the willingness to stop defining your tasks as a means to an end and instead inhabit what you yourself have chosen. What if this is exactly what you are supposed to be doing because it is what you are doing? What if each nitty-gritty task is perfection itself and you keep missing it because you're looking for something else?*

*It's like washing the dishes. If you focus on getting the dishes done so that your kitchen will be clean, you*

*miss everything that happens between dirty and clean. The warmth of the water, the pop of the bubbles, the movements of your hand. You miss the life that happens in the middle zone—between now and what you think your life should be like. And when you miss those moments because you'd rather be doing something else, you are missing your own life. Those moments are gone. You will never get them back.*

*Even when you become Someone because they were right, you really were Going Places—even when you arrive at being Someone because you are where you were going—your life may not be any better if you haven't learned to be awake, alive, now. To take this moment for what it is. It's just as easy to be miserable when you are Someone Special as when you are No One in Particular. Because even Someone Special still has to live in her own skin and deal with boredom, rejection, loneliness, disappointment. Even Someone Special comes home at night and does what the Nobodies do: falls asleep alone. You might as well learn how to pay attention now. How to inhabit the life you've chosen. How to take up every inch of your skin. Occupy the space in this body you were given. It's your place. Only yours.*

*The writer Annie Dillard says, "How you spend your days is how you spend your life." Be unquiveringly honest. Ask yourself how you want to spend your days. Since you're going to be reviewing documents anyway, why not be aware of your breath and the ticking clock while you are doing it?*

*Whatever it offers, the reality of your day-to-day life has to be better than the self-inflicted misery you are creating through the stories you are telling yourself. It has to be better than the nightly binges and throwing yourself into the cycle of self-loathing and promises to stop eating so much.*

*Come back. Break the trance. Pay attention to your breath. Your arms. Your legs. Listen to sounds. The scrape of a chair. The whirr of the copy machine. Notice colors. The royal blue of a coworker's dress. The coffee stain on your boss' tie. Wake up to the riot of life around you every second. The singer Pearl Bailey said, "People see God every day; they just don't recognize Him." What if what you needed was right in front of you and you were not recognizing it?*

*You already have everything you need to be content. Your real work, despite the corporate ladder you are climbing, is to do whatever it takes to realize that. And then it won't matter if you're Someone Special or No One in Particular because you'll be fully alive in every moment—which is, I imagine, all you ever wanted from *Going Places to be Someone*.*

Or from being thin.

## *Women Food and God: An Unexpected Path to Almost Everything*

By Geneen Roth

For more information about  
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