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# A N ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH MYSELF

ANDREW ZEPPA

*“From the outside looking in, you can’t understand it. From the inside looking out, you can’t explain it” (Anonymous).*

Ravenous, insatiable hunger. A hunger for relief, numbness, and escape—a high. My mind is spinning. Spinning and spinning around a warped mirror that reflects a physical reality awash with shame and judgment: spinning so fast that it fails to comprehend or even sense that which is distinct from the tangible.

The depression, the anxiety, the rage, the guilt, the lust, all exist as visceral sensations occupying a locus not on my mind, but on my body. Quench it. With anything and everything and as fast as possible. Fill the void. Cathartically eliminate the squalor. Just another serving of my sordid burden, drenched in self-loathing, a cherry on top.

I am a twenty-one-year-old man, and I have been in an abusive relationship with an eating disorder for the last decade of my life. Ten years of *you’re fat* and *not good enough*, of starving for perfection, of addiction and compulsion. But it wasn’t all one-sided. While I provided him with a body and mind to control, he provided me with a relief mechanism, a method of avoidance, and a measure of self-worth. For ten years, he assuaged my depression and anxiety, but made me feel guilt and shame. Ten years of desperately trying to feel in control, no matter how out of control things might have actually been.

In my Italian family, food is central to the expression of emotions. Celebration, gratitude, and mourning alike are marked by an excess of edible sentiments, passed from hand to hand, plate to plate, in a ritual exchange of affection. Unsurprisingly, it was from an early age that I began to forge associations between food and feelings.

*My dad and I are preparing peanut butter cookies. He shows me how to create crisscross fork marks on the dough before placing them in the oven. The sweet smell of freshly baked love and togetherness permeates my mind.* I can still taste the memory if I concentrate hard enough. Unfortunately it is a memory never to be recreated.

When I was eight years old, my dad died from multiple myeloma, a cancer of the bone marrow. His funeral was on a warm June day, the sun shining behind just a few innocent wispy clouds. I remember playing on the church playground with my cousins that afternoon during the reception. Children are remarkably resilient. But lurking within the carefree, seemingly unfazed child was a scared and emotionally stunted spirit.

As only death can do with such potency, the tragedy brought together my extended family, and my mom, brother, and I

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spent the summer in the cradle of our kin’s warmth and support. My family’s connections tightened in the following years, a blessing to my and my brother’s childhoods. Likewise, our Catholic faith flowed between us more strongly than ever. Catholicism meant that my dad was in heaven. It also meant that I was fundamentally incompatible with the system in which I was living.

Puberty came in junior high, as did the comparisons that followed. *Why are you so tall and big? You are different. Different is bad. You are bad.* My belief (and the fact) that I was overweight meant that I could protect myself from the emotions and sensations associated with intimacy. If I’m fat, nobody will question my lack of romantic relationships. In my traditional Catholic family, it was imperative that nobody ever found out I was gay. Being close to someone and being real with myself were terrifying to me, so I entered into a relationship, abusive as it was, with my saving grace: the eating disorder. I protected myself with a very physical barrier of excess weight. I became comfortable in isolation, eating away my emotions. Food filled me up, made me whole, and left me fat and unattractive. But it was the protection that I sought.

Things took a turn in high school when, realizing that I no longer enjoyed being alone and isolated, I decided to lose weight. This was a victory for the eating disorder. He had complete control over our intertwined life: *No breakfast. No lunch. Too fat. Unworthy. No breakfast. No lunch. Pathetic. Loser. No. No. No.* But day after day, 4:00 would roll around. School was out, choir practice over, and I hadn’t eaten anything all day. As if the biology of it wasn’t enough, the psychological distress wafting over my adolescent mind created a monstrous force of hunger. A hunger not only for food, but for relief, numbness, and escape. *Binge. Eat until you’re so full you feel like you may burst. Fill the void. Numb out. Be outrageous and bad. Slowly kill yourself, you disgusting, worthless monster.*

Restrict. Binge. Purge. Rinse and repeat.

The cycle was vicious and seemingly unstoppable. Like any addiction, it quickly became much more compulsive than reactionary (something done merely to deal with emotions). I needed him. Thrived on him. When my mom noticed that my behaviors were quite out of the ordinary, she sent me to therapy. But I wasn’t ready to break up with my eating disorder. *You don’t have a mental health disorder. You just lack self-control and willpower. You’re weak and gluttonous and you just need to stop eating so much.* Everything in my life began to revolve around the idea of being thin. Every one of my problems could be traced back to my weight.

Then I realized that food was not the problem. It was merely a symptom. The real problem was that I never grieved. Never grieved the loss of my dad to cancer. Never grieved the loss of a life planned out for me in which I married a Catholic woman and had three children. Never shook the feeling that I am fundamentally wrong and shameful for being gay, that it’s my fault and I’m going to hell for it. Never grieved for all the pain, suffering, and trauma of life. Instead, I ate. And starved. And ate again. Geneen Roth says it best:

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Compulsive eating is a symbolic reenactment of the way in which we distorted our feelings when we began eating compulsively: we swallowed our feelings; we blamed ourselves; we felt out of control; we believed we couldn't get enough. If we allow ourselves to get sidetracked into believing that food is our problem, we will never heal the wounds that we became compulsive to express.<sup>1</sup>

Eating disorders are not about losing weight. They are not about vanity.

In November of 2015, I decided, with the support of friends and family, to take a medical leave from my studies at Boston College. Home in California, I was admitted to a forty-hour-per-week partial hospitalization program at a comprehensive eating disorder recovery center. In this program, I was afforded the opportunity to empathize with a wide range of other clients' experiences with eating disorders.

The cast of characters was diverse and dynamic. There were recent college graduates—an accountant, a wildlife ecologist, and a social science researcher. A student on leave from Boston University; a fifty-something biochemistry PhD and chief science officer of a biotech firm. A man. A child. LGBTQ and straight. Varying socioeconomic backgrounds, beliefs, and cultures. So what is the common thread between eating disorder patients? I believe that it is, broadly speaking, trauma—whether developmental or acute. In group therapy, we bonded over shared experiences of trauma and loss. From sexual assault to suicide in the family, from bipolar parents to trans-generational shame, we all struggled chronically to deal with overwhelming emotions during which time the eating disorders took over.

Hence the abusive relationship. The disorder offers many things in a time of need, but ultimately proves disastrous when it lingers long after its purpose has been served. Like with all addictions, the cycle drones on, and breaking up the abusive relationship is a time for grieving in and of itself. I've spent half my life with my eating disorder, and it's not easy to let go. But I am blessed with loving friends and family. It is that love—that intimacy—that allows me to break free and strive down my journey of recovery. I am a twenty-one-year-old man, and I am *recovering* from an eating disorder.

There are many things I've learned from my experiences, but chief among them is this: Love is the answer. Only intimacy that stems from authenticity and the present moment can bloom into this kind of love. Whether recovering from an eating disorder or dealing with death and trauma, knowing that someone truly understands the real you and loves you all the same not in spite of your experiences (your "faults"), but because of them—is what allows you to go on. This essay is a stride in that direction. I am here as I am.

**ENDNOTE**

1. Geneen Roth, *When Food is Love: Exploring the Relationship between Eating and Intimacy* (New York, N.Y.: Plume, 1992), 125.

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# THE CLINIC

KATERINA IVANOV

we're hanging off your bed. you—longer lately, hair brushing at the carpet  
me—thick tongued after your mother's wine. you turn—I'm struck by how  
eye contact is the same, upside down. *punch me in the stomach*, you say.

we do that exchange girls do with their eyes—*are you sure?*  
*how far? you weren't safe?*— all at once. you crinkle me into a fist—  
piano fingers, weak wristed, palms cut with thick fault lines.

*please*, you say. we stand and gravity does this thing to your eyes that nighttime  
does to the neighbors lawns. in the aisle of a drugstore you wash it down  
with diet desperation. we aren't quite sure if there's anything

to grieve that day, so we smart like fresh cuts at the sounds  
of The Smiths on the way home, and I dig half moons into my palms  
while I pretend you are only hiccupping from the soda.

when you do it for real, I stay tightlipped and unlicensed and you don't  
cry in the front seat like you did in ninth grade and I run my fingers through  
my eyelashes like heart strings, mourning the things we should have mourned, then.