

GENEEN ROTH



EATING GUIDELINES ONLINE RETREAT

Part Four / Week Four:

Eating Guideline #4:

“Eat What Your Body Wants”

Eating Guideline #5:

“Eat With Enjoyment, Gusto and Plesure”

Part Four / Week Four Summary

Presented by

Geneen Roth

Moderated by

Sil Reynolds

PART FOUR / WEEK FOUR SUMMARY

“Eat What Your Body Wants”

“Eat With Enjoyment, Gusto and Pleasure”

Summary / Edited / Design by Judy Ross

INTRODUCTION

Sil Reynolds: Geneen, welcome. I’m excited about tonight’s session and I know our students are as well.

NOTES:

Geneen Roth: Thank you Sil. Thank you everybody for joining us. As Sil mentioned, make sure you are in a quiet place, where you won’t be disturbed. A place where you can be alert and relaxed at the same time.

It’s best not to be lying down as that signals the body that it’s “sleep time.” Although there is nothing wrong with falling asleep, it’s not the very best way to hear, absorb, and take in what we’re going to be talking about.

Be aware that hundreds and hundreds of people from all over the United States and all over the world are joining us to listen live. And also many people from all over the world will be downloading and listening to this session at another time. I bring that up so that you can be aware that you are not alone, that we really are a community, all brought together in this moment, because we want to use our relationship with food as a doorway, as a portal, as a way into the depths and promise of our lives.

SESSION INTENTION

Geneen: People follow many different ways and paths, but those of us who are listening to this are listening because our relationship with food has to some degree caused us discomfort, pain or suffering. It’s a raw nerve, so to speak, that gets our attention. And often it’s the way that we block our attention, to numb or distract ourselves. But for whatever reason, it’s brought us to this place, here, right now.

It has gotten our attention – through suffering or discomfort or hurt or pain or uneasiness or just a true, deep and abiding curiosity about why we’re doing what we’re doing. It’s that curiosity to know who we are and the love of this life. You wouldn’t be here right now, listening to these words, if you didn’t have love for your own life. Even for those who have given up hope. If you had truly given up hope, you wouldn’t be listening to this now.

What do you really want for yourself?

Honor that in yourself. Take a moment to name what brought you here. It’s good to do this at the beginning of every part of this Online Retreat, and it’s good in the morning, the beginning of every day. I do this at the beginning of every workday, at the beginning of every retreat and workshop that I teach. Anytime I embark on something that will take me into new territory, I name why I am there.

Why did you come? What do you want? State that to yourself now. What do you really, really want for yourself? By working with and unwinding your relationship with food, what do you glimpse that process can give you?

Your relationship with food is just an out-picturing of your beliefs about what is possible. It’s an out-picturing of your relationship with yourself, just like your relationship with money, or your relationship with your spouse, your children, your work, your colleagues.

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We are always expressing what we believe is possible through everything we do or say. We are expressing our old beliefs, the limitations that we are convinced exist. The wonderful thing about this Online Retreat is that during every session, we get to be in touch with, glimpse and experience what is possible. And once you taste that, you can never go back to not knowing that it exists. Once that is in your direct experience, it's yours.

NOTES:

So name what you want, what you really want, and what your heart's desire is, for yourself and your life. And name it here and now at the beginning of this session.

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MEDITATION PRACTICE

Geneen: Notice where and how you are sitting. Become aware of yourself in this physical location that you call your body. Become aware of your feet. Wiggle your feet around a couple of times, becoming aware of them. What’s it like inside those feet?

NOTES:

The orienting part of bringing yourself here is implicit, but in case some of you might not have oriented yourself in terms of where you are sitting in the room, do that now. Make sure that you have a sense of where you are, your location.

As you become aware of your feet, become aware of the ground that they are stepping on, sitting on, touching. Become aware of the ground, the Earth that supports you without having to ask. So much is given that we don’t have to ask for – the support of the Earth, the ground itself.

Become aware of the inside of your body, the sensations moving from your feet all the way up through both of your legs, as if you were shining an inner flashlight on the sensations in your legs, your shins, your calves. Become aware if there is any contraction there, any pulsing, vibrating, coolness or warmth.

Move your awareness gently up through your knees. If there is aching or pain there, notice that. We’re not judging or having a commentary about what is going on or the contributing cause – the story of what we are discovering. We are just witnessing and noticing, allowing you to really become aware of your body, to become aware of the sensations in your body without having to react to them or do something about them.

*Notice the tendency
to leave yourself.*

Moving that inner flashlight up through your hips to your hands, become aware of your hands, your fingers, your wrists. Move through the lower arm and elbow, all the way up your arms to your biceps and triceps to your shoulders.

Notice as I speak if you have gone away or gotten bored; if you are impatient, frustrated or not interested in your body. Become aware of that. Just notice. “I’m not so interested in these sensations in my body. I don’t care so much. This bores me. Think I’ll check my email right now and wait for the good stuff to come. Think I’ll go on Facebook. Think I’ll read the *Huffington Post*.” Notice that tendency to leave yourself, to go away, to think that you really aren’t that interesting after all, unless there’s some big hoopla happening. Notice if you’re not so interested in the quietness, not so interested in your body. Just notice that, again without judgment.

Taking some breaths, notice your belly, your energetic center. Place your right palm on top of your navel and your left palm on top of your right palm. Feel that movement, the way that breath comes into your body.

Feel your belly. We hardly ever allow ourselves to feel our belly without judgment. This sweet body that has carried for you and schlepped for you, that is the housing for your spirit, for your heart, for your mind. Without this body, you couldn’t exist. Take a moment to acknowledge your sweet body. It’s taken you this far.

Then, if your eyes are closed, open your eyes. Notice what it feels like to have your eyes open. Look around. What’s it like to take some time with yourself?

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THE IMPORTANCE OF KINDNESS

Geneen: I don’t know if you are on our email list, but today we sent out a quote from *Women Food and God*. I also put it on my Facebook page. And I have been thinking about this quote all day long, so I’m going to read it and talk about its relevance to this session:

Can you imagine how your life would have been different if each time you were feeling sad or angry as a kid, an adult said to you, “Come here, sweetheart, tell me about it?” If when you were overcome with grief at your best friend’s rejection, someone said to you, “Oh, darling, tell me more. Tell me where you feel those feelings. Tell me how your belly feels, your chest. I want to know every little thing. I’m here to listen to you, hold you, be with you.”

What would that have been like? But more importantly, because we can’t go back, what would it be like to treat yourself with that kind of kindness now?

I’ve talked about the Eating Guidelines being the “if love could speak instructions.” If love could speak to you, this is what it would say about food: “Eat when you’re hungry, sweetheart. Stop when you have had enough. Eat what your body wants, your sweet body, because it does carry you everywhere.”

The kindness that is implicit in this approach is something that’s really important to speak about, because so much of what we do, so much of our relationship with food is based on a lack of kindness.

But it’s not limited to just our relationship with food, because as I said a few minutes ago, our relationship with food is only an out-picturing of our relationship with ourselves. As we treat ourselves, so we treat ourselves with food. As kind as we are to ourselves, that’s how kind we are – or are not – in our relationship with food. It can’t really be any other way. If we feel that we deserve to sit down and eat without distractions or we don’t, that’s a reflection of the kindness that we show ourselves.

Choosing What Is Important

Question: Gail wrote:

I find that I use my meals to catch up on my reading, such as reading the morning paper with breakfast, or reading a book at lunch. Now that I am trying to eat without distraction, I am getting behind on my reading, since I don’t have a lot of other time to read. If I eat breakfast without reading, I don’t have time to finish the paper before going to work, and I am frustrated by that. It takes extra time to eat without distraction, although I definitely recognize the benefit.

Geneen: Right. So what do you choose here? Is it more important to get the newspaper read, or is it more important to actually sit down, take a breath, see what you’re eating, enjoy what you’re eating and take in what you’re eating. What’s more important? Where do you put the kindness that you do have? Is it kinder to yourself to eat while reading the newspaper or not?

NOTES:

*So much of our relationship
with food is based on
a lack of kindness.*

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That’s actually a question that I cannot answer for you. I can’t answer that question if you believe that getting things done is more important than unwinding your relationship with food. That’s what you believe. That’s where you put your priority. That’s what you value.

NOTES:

Every choice has its own consequences and it’s own benefits. But where do you make the choice? Where do you show the kindness to yourself? Is getting things done more important than unwinding the pain or discomfort or suffering around food? Does it matter how many things you get done at the end of the day?

As some of you know – and some may not know – I was really sick these past couple of weeks. Before I got sick, I had quite a long list of things to do. When I got sick and as I got sicker and sicker, the to-do list didn’t matter at all. It completely fell by the wayside. My body was in pain. I was coughing. I couldn’t breathe very well. I couldn’t sleep very well. And it occurred to me – as it always does when I either get very sick or something big happens – that when I start putting my energy into getting things done and forget about myself in the process, that’s not kind. At the end of the day, what matters is how you feel inside your skin.

*Can you be kind
to yourself?*

I was reading an interview today with Roseanne Barr. The interviewer was commenting about how, when she was doing *The Roseanne Show*, she was making a million dollars a week, and how great was that. Her response was, “Yes, of course, a million dollars a week is great. But when you are unstable – [or another way of saying that is when you are unhappy, when you feel fragmented inside, when you are suffering] – a million dollars doesn’t mean that much.”

Because what it gets down to always is your relationship to yourself. Can you be kind with yourself?

The Eating Guidelines are based on kindness. They are how you would eat if you absolutely cherished yourself. If you loved yourself, you wouldn’t want to eat any other way, you wouldn’t consider eating any other way. There might be a day when you had to get something done and it was urgent, so reading the newspaper in that moment might be more important than focusing on the food you are eating. But if you are suffering about your relationship with food, what matters here?

I want to keep bringing it back to kindness, because I think most of us keep forgetting about the kindness part.

Love and Kindness Are Not Rules

Question: Jenn said: *Really not a question. Just a comment. Rules number 2 and 3 have changed my life.*

Geneen: I just want to comment for a second that the Guidelines can get turned into “rules” very quickly, without noticing. And love and kindness aren’t rules.

We have gotten so far from treating ourselves with kindness and love, so far from cherishing ourselves, that the thought of loving ourselves, being kind to ourselves around food via the Eating Guidelines feels way out in left field. It feels foreign, like a rule.

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A rule is something that has been imposed on you from the outside. That’s why it doesn’t come naturally. It is something someone else has told you to do, that is made up. It’s always stunning to me that most of us turn treating ourselves with love and kindness into rules and have-tos.

NOTES:

So Jenn continues:

As a stay at home mom to two small boys, I am shocked to realize how much I actually was eating while doing other things (almost EVERYthing at the end of the day). Also, for all of the years and years I have obsessed and thought about food, it NEVER OCCURRED to me to actually really and truly pay attention to the food I was eating as I was eating it. What a revelation! You have given me a gift that I am so grateful for. Even more exciting is that I know I am just scratching the surface here. For the first time of my life, I’m feeling that a healthy relationship with food IS POSSIBLE FOR ME!”

To the degree that you are willing to take these Guidelines on as a practice in kindness, to the degree that you can see that they are a way of turning things upside down and inside out – but only because you are so used to treating yourself with harshness, with force, with a lack of kindness, with some degree of self-hatred, deprivation, guilt and shame – to the degree that these are hard or difficult or rules, that is an exact equivalent of the degree to which you treat yourself with a lack of kindness.

*Love and kindness
are not rules or have-tos.*

We all do it. You aren’t alone here. How much kindness can you show yourself? And what does that mean? It means of course different things at different times. It’s not the same thing.

Consider the Alternatives

Question: One more about kindness. Lisa writes:

I have been struggling to follow the Eating Guidelines off and on for several months now. I will have several days or a couple weeks where things go well and then I start working long hours or some shift happens in my mood and they fall by the wayside for weeks. I find it difficult to summon any enthusiasm for this approach or any other.... In many ways I eat much healthier than I did 15 or 20 years ago, but I binge incredibly frequently, and overeat much of the time when not bingeing.

I suppose I would really like to know if this program can really help a 55 year old woman who weighs 310 pounds and has terrible knees that cause me a lot of pain and adrenal problems. I say those things because they are really relevant to my state of mind. I ask myself, “What does my body want?” If I happen to know, there are times when I am in too much pain to even spend 10 minutes standing in the kitchen fixing the vegetables or whatever that my body wants.

I am very fatigued much of the time and many of the things I loved to do, like cook and garden, etc., just seem like too much work and sometimes cause a lot of pain. I used to horse back ride and hike and I am still active in the water and some biking, but they are not the physical activities that I truly loved.

I am physically very limited in what I can do and it makes me sad and depressed much of the time. When I try and come up with ways to take care of myself that do not involve food, it just seems to make me sadder, because I cannot even do simple things like stroll the streets in a small town.

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It is just very hard for me to believe that this can work for me. I feel so much internal pressure to lose weight because I know my knees would be more comfortable and it would also make the recovery after knee replacement (which will probably be in the Spring) so much easier on me. Yet this pressure does not make weight loss easier. If anything, it makes my rebellion worse. I have been at this weight plus or minus 30 pounds for about 22 years now and it just feels like such a lost cause. I am just looking for some real hope that this can guide me out of this horrible place that I have been in for so long.

NOTES:

Geneen: Many people probably feel shades of what Lisa wrote. “Does this work? What about that fact that I have had this weight for so long? If I weigh 300 pounds, can it work? If I’m in pain, can it work? Is there any hope, really?”

My first response to this question is, what’s the alternative? Is the alternative that you just give up? That nothing works? That unwinding this relationship with food is impossible? Is the alternative that you just collapse in a heap and feel like you’re doomed? That true transformation is possible for everybody else but not you? “Other people can get this, but I can’t. Why can others get it but I can’t? Should I just give up on myself now instead of listening to the next couple of sessions of the Online Retreat? Is this just like everything else that doesn’t work?”

*Any situation, no matter
what it looks like,
can be worked through.*

It’s good to note, to hear and to name that we have that part in ourselves that believes that it’s not possible for us. Believes that we can’t do it. And we use our history and what’s happening to us as a way to validate that hopelessness. I know that sounds a little odd: validating our hopelessness. But that’s what many of us do.

What I want to say is, on the most objective level, I believe this is possible no matter what, no matter where, no matter how long. I would have thrown in the towel a long time ago if I didn’t believe that any situation, no matter what it looks like, could be worked through.

So what’s the alternative? Just give up and say, “It’s not possible for me. I can’t do it. Everybody else can, but I can’t.” And when you say that -- and each of us does in our own way -- my question is, how old are you when you feel that? What was truly not possible when you were growing up? What really wasn’t there? What couldn’t you do no matter how hard you tried?

Loving Your Inner Frog

Each of us has that one inside. Each of us has a part like that which is frozen in time and didn’t get what we needed, wasn’t cherished, wasn’t seen. As I said at the beginning of the session with the quote from *Women Food and God*, the question is: can you imagine what life would have been like and would be like now, if you can be kind to that part of you that’s saying or feeling, “I can’t do that. It’s not possible for me. I’ve given up hope.”

What happens to Lisa and all of us if we make room for that part when it comes up? “I can’t. I won’t. It’s not going to happen for me. I’m too messed up. There’s too much water under the bridge. It’s not possible.” What happens when you’re overcome with grief or sadness and you make room for those feelings, saying to yourself: “Sweetheart, tell me more. Where do you feel those feelings?” I don’t mean standing up and saying “hip, hip, hooray,” but make room for those feelings, for that part of you that is frozen, rather than reject it, react to it or completely identify with it.

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Can you be kind to what seems like the most hopeless, the ugliest parts of you? Like in the fairy tale where the princess kisses the frog, can you kiss those inner frogs? Can you be kind to them?

NOTES:

What happens when you are kind? Something immediately relaxes inside of you. Something in you gets what it never got, what it needed, what it's never known. Once you feel, know, touch and listen to that part, to those inner frogs, they relax. They are kissed by kindness. They are kissed by love. They open up.

There's a beautiful Rilke quote about frogs and princesses in which he says, could it be that all those parts of our psyche are really just waiting to be kissed by us so that they can be freed. Once we turn around and show kindness to these frozen parts that we're judging and wanting to get rid of, they relax, they open, they reveal their hearts. But it's not going to happen unless we show them kindness.

That's a challenge. I know that this isn't an easy practice, because we are usually in the same relationship with ourselves that we were with our caretakers – our mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. When a part of ourselves needs help, when this inner frog needs help and comfort, who usually shows up is the mother we had, the father we had, that we have internalized. Unless we were deeply cherished, kindness to ourselves is something that we need to learn.

Treating ourselves with kindness is something that we need to learn.

When you are feeling like this – hopeless, in complete despair, and can't do it – stop for a moment. Ask yourself, who is talking, how old are you, what does that part need? If that part is frozen, if this inner frog-ette needed something that you didn't get, what would that be?

In many ways if you master this, treating yourself with kindness, the Eating Guidelines are a snap. They are absolutely intuitive. You would be able to follow them all the time, every day. We could end this right now, because you wouldn't treat yourself with food any other way but with kindness.

When you don't want food or are not hungry, there are other ways of soothing yourself. Lauren, who is a colleague and an assistant teacher at the retreats, points out that we all need different things at those times. In terms of soothing, some of us might need to take a bath. But for others taking a bath may not do the trick, because it's just a way to get lost in more stuff. Some may need to be more active, to go outside, take a walk or call a friend.

Ask yourself, “What is the kindest thing I can do for myself?” You'll come up with some answers.

Decide to Work the Eating Guidelines

I also want to address the beginning of Lisa's question:

I have been struggling to follow the Eating Guidelines off and on for several months now. I will have several days or a couple weeks where things go well and then I start working long hours or some shift happens in my mood and they fall by the wayside for weeks.

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Geneen: And she stops following the Eating Guidelines. This is more of an adult part of her question. The younger part, the frozen part, the inner frog-ette part, is the despair. The adult part is that this is not working, because she is not working it.

NOTES:

Having this “work” is not magic. It’s not that it suddenly starts working. It’s not a pill that you take. It works because you work with it. It works because you make a decision to prioritize yourself.

Lisa says, “I will have several days or a couple of weeks where things go well and then I start working long hours ... and they fall by the wayside for weeks.” I remember once saying to my own teacher, at a particularly busy time in my life: “I feel like I’m drinking from a fire hose.” And she said to me, “You can turn that fire hose off anytime you want. It’s not out of your control.”

*The Eating Guidelines
work because you make a
decision to prioritize yourself.*

If you find that you are working long hours, running around multi-tasking, being breathless and frantic, not having time for yourself, that’s you doing that to yourself, with yourself. No one else is doing that. And if the Eating Guidelines are not working, it’s because your attention is somewhere else.

This will never work if you don’t pay attention to it, if you don’t value your own sanity, your own health, your own well being more than a consistent diet of working long hours and not taking care of yourself.

This is your choice. You get to decide what you do and how you spend your time. Because how you spend your days, according to the writer Annie Dillard, is how you spend your life.

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EAT WHAT YOUR BODY WANTS
EAT WITH ENJOYMENT, GUSTO AND PLEASURE

Geneen: I’ve partly addressed “eating what you want” in the kindness factor, because that is also about kindness.

NOTES:

Question: Marjorie says,

I certainly have a lot to learn about food my body wants and how to tell the difference between that and what I think it “should” want or what my mind wants. I am trying to pay attention to how my body feels after I eat, but I often forget to ask myself how I feel because I go straight back into my life.

Geneen: She goes straight back into her life and forgets herself. I would like all of you to notice how often you forget yourself. There is nothing magical about following these Eating Guidelines. When you forget yourself and as Marjorie says, “go straight back into my life,” then you are not paying attention to how that Guideline or eating according to that Guideline is affecting you. Marjorie goes on to say,

When I do get information, it is because I have a slightly unpleasant feeling, maybe too full or somewhat bloated. My question is about my reaction to those negative feelings. My hope would be that when I recognize a negative result, I would be motivated to not eat that food or so much of that food again. But in fact, that’s not always happening. I think I have had that somewhat unpleasant feeling for so long that it’s like no big deal, like a price I am willing to pay to get to eat how I want to eat. Change or doing without that food feels harder than putting up with any negative signals from my body. Any suggestions?

*When you forget yourself,
you are not paying
attention to how the
Guideline is affecting you.*

This is just what we are talking about tonight. This is about cherishing yourself, being kind to yourself, treating yourself with tenderness. When you feel that getting to eat the food that you want, that your mind wants, is a bigger payoff than feeling well, then that’s the choice that you are making.

Marjorie points out that she has been feeling these negative feelings for so long that it’s hard to believe in feeling good. The payoff of still getting to eat what she thinks she wants and having those negative feelings is bigger than the unknown.

So how do you get to see what it is that you really, really want? Marjorie’s question points to making that decision about what you want. What she’s doing is deciding that eating what her mind wants is more exciting than eating what her body wants.

Discovering What Foods Your Body Wants

Last week, I asked you to do a practice making lists of foods:

- One is a list of the foods you believe you shouldn’t eat. The ones you feel guilty about, the ones that are in the “only when I binge” category.
- Next a list of the foods you believe you should eat or are supposed to eat. The ones you believe are good for you.
- Then make one last list of the foods that your body really likes.

If you made lists of foods that make you happy or radiant, you have a sense of the foods that your body wants.

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Hummers and Beckoners

I want to talk about “hummers” and “beckoners” in terms of what your mind wants and what your body wants. Hummers and beckoners come from *The Psychologists Eat-Anything Diet* by Lillian and Leonard Pearson that was published in the 1970s and is now out of print.

NOTES:

What the Pearson’s call hummers and what I call hummers are foods that you know you want, your body knows that it wants, without seeing them, hearing about them, tasting them in that moment or walking by them. They are foods that your body wants when you get hungry. You can’t really tell what your body wants in that moment unless you’re hungry. If you ask yourself what you want to eat when you are not hungry, you’ll come up with what your mind wants to eat, which is a beckoner. A hummer wells up from the inside.

A “hummer” wells up from the inside, from the belly.

It’s important when you ask yourself when you’re hungry – “What do I really, really want?” – that you don’t interpret the answer with your mind. “Oh, that’s boring, that’s what I ate yesterday or last week. That sounds like a diet.” If you interpret the answer and your mind gets involved, you’ll get very confused. This is only about asking what your body wants.

If you don’t know what your body wants, look at pictures or make lists of different kinds of foods, including fats, proteins and carbohydrates. Or go into a grocery store to walk by different foods, to look at them and to see how your belly feels when you look at them. Don’t do this when you are too hungry, or when you are so hungry that you’ll eat anything that doesn’t eat you first. On the hunger scale of 1-10 – “1” being very hungry, “5” comfortable, “10” being full – don’t do this when you are at “1” or “2.” A good time is when you are just starting to get hungry. Imagine eating the foods that you have listed or are looking at and see how you might feel if you ate them. Usually there is an instinctive reaction toward the food or away from the food in your body. A hummer is one that you gravitate toward.

A beckoner is a food that someone else is eating, that you should or shouldn’t be eating, that smells good, that you have seen in an advertisement. It might have been a hummer yesterday, but it is now a beckoner. The stimulus for a beckoner comes from outside of you, not from within your belly, your body. It comes from seeing it, smelling it, watching someone else eat it. Your mind tells you that you want to eat it. Some could argue that your mind isn’t outside of yourself, but it’s not the “inside” that I’m talking about in terms of the body.

A “beckoner” comes from the outside, from the mind.

Most of the foods that we eat are beckoning foods, particularly when people first start working with this Guideline. I first wrote it as “eat what you want,” but I realized that it needed to be more discriminating than that. Because “eat what you want” could be everything you haven’t allowed yourself to eat without guilt for the past ten, twenty, thirty, forty years. That’s not what “eat what your body wants” means.

I want to put a caveat in here. If you you’re very confused and you really don’t know how particular foods feel in your body because you have confused yourself so long with hunger signals and fullness signals, then it is wise to find a nutritionist or healthcare professional who understands this approach and who can help you with the biochemistry of your body. It’s good to have nutritional information for your particular body.

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Being a vegetarian might be fabulous for some people and might not be fabulous for others. You might feel happy when you eat lots of vegetables and complex carbohydrates, but your body isn't so happy, getting weaker, not much energy. You might be aligned with the philosophy of being a vegetarian, but your body needs more dense protein. To find that out, you might need to go to a healthcare professional.

NOTES:

The question we are asking is: what do you want, what do you actually want? This goes beyond eating what you want. Because eating what your body wants allows you to have a life that you want. It allows you to feel well enough so you can have the life you are meant to have. Some of us are afraid not to have this eating issue, not to be struggling and suffering with food. We're afraid that if this was not taking center stage in our lives, what would? We'd be lost. We wouldn't know what to do with our time. Who would we be?

Eating what your body wants allows you to have the life that you want.

When some people hear me say that, they say, “No way.” But if you have been struggling with food for a long time, it's become a constant companion. And this goes back to the five questions about the Eating Guidelines:

1. What scares you about following this Eating Guideline?
2. What would your life be like if you followed this Eating Guideline?
3. How would your life have to change to follow this Guideline?
4. What relationships would have to change to follow this Guideline?
5. What's the benefit of NOT following this Guideline?

For many of us, a benefit of not following the Guideline is that we don't have to get on with our lives. Now that might not seem like a benefit, but if there is any question of what are we going to do when we grow up, even if we are 30, 40, 50 or 60 years old, or if there's some confusion, some pain, then there is benefit in keeping the struggle going.

Experiment To Find Out What Your Body Wants

Question: Jennifer asked,

I am 37 years old and have struggled with compulsive eating, bingeing and restricting my whole life. I started dieting in the eighth grade and the fight officially began. Seven years ago I started the “programs” part of the war and have spent the last seven years in three different programs for “food addiction/compulsive eating.” Each one with a weighed and measured food plan. In the last and most restrictive program, I ate yogurt, oatmeal, protein and vegetables and nothing else for 10 months....

In each of these programs, I still struggled with bingeing on “abstinent” food (i.e., fruit and yogurt) and developed extreme food phobias. I left the last program one year ago and have been struggling to find my way back to some kind of peace, normalcy and freedom.... Up until three months ago I had not eaten any sugar or flour in five years. I have just started eating sprouted bread and even have guilt and fear around that.

My question is, when I ask myself what my body wants, I hear salmon, quinoa, kale, veggies, blueberries and green apples, Seriously that's it. I am so tired of salmon and kale I could scream. What I really want is rice cakes with peanut butter, sprouted toast with almond butter and honey, bananas, mangoes, granola, artichokes, sweet potatoes, Amy's rice crust pizza, homemade tacos made with artisan corn tortillas, and whole wheat lasagna.

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Is it my head that wants these foods or could my body actually want them? How am I ever going to find my way out of 37 years of programming? If I were truly eating only what the body wants, it would look something like the salmon and quinoa, which is close to what we ate before being introduced to modern food production. I feel like that is what it feels like to be on a very restrictive food plan.

NOTES:

Geneen: To Jennifer I would say: you won't know until you start experimenting. Does your body really want whole wheat lasagna, mangoes and artichokes? Does it want sweet potatoes? Usually our bodies want variety. Eating the same two things every day might not answer that need for variety.

If you are used to intense restriction, then this Guideline – “eat what your body wants” – is the most challenging. For a Restrictor – and I wrote about Restrictors and Permitters in *Women Food and God* – “eat what your body wants” is the most difficult Guideline, and a Restrictor needs to experiment to find out.

That said, often when we are eating just what our body wants, it can look like some kind of “diet.” But if you are eating it because it sings to your body, then you don't have any feeling of deprivation. Because that's the difference between having a diet imposed on you and knowing from your body what food it wants.

For a Permitter, the hardest Guidelines are “stop when you've had enough” -- knowing when your body is satisfied -- and “eat when you are hungry.” Because a Permitter uses food to distance herself from her feelings. Food is used as a drug in that case.

I know that when some look at the way I eat, they sometimes think that I am on a diet. I don't eat a lot of sugar or simple carbohydrates. I eat a lot of protein, a lot of fat and some complex carbohydrates. And I love the way I eat and the way I feel. It took me quite a while of experimenting with many different kinds of foods and how my body felt when I ate them, consulting different healthcare professionals over many years, to figure out what my particular body needed and wanted.

Giving your body what it doesn't want and not feeling well is punishing yourself.

What Your Heart Desires

The spiritual and psychological dimension of the Guidelines is what your heart desires. It's letting yourself truly, truly want what it actually wants that isn't food. Even if it is not possible to get that, it doesn't mean that you cut yourself off from your wanting. What many of us do with this Guideline is decide that we can't get what we really want in our lives, so we'll just eat the foods that we think we want. We'll eat what our mind wants because that is better than not having anything.

I don't believe that. I don't believe that giving your body what it doesn't want, and not feeling well as a result, is better than not having anything. You punish yourself when you do that. You deprive yourself.

There are different kinds of deprivation. There is deprivation of not eating what your body wants and not feeling well. You deprive yourself of feeling well when you eat what your mind wants. If you are not depriving yourself of the foods that your mind wants, that might feel like freedom to you. But remember that rebellion is not freedom. When you eat the foods that your mind wants – the “shouldn't eat foods” – there is some kind of rebellion going on. That is not freedom no matter how it feels in the moment.

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What we want is to be in touch with and let ourselves have the most freedom of movement that is possible for a human life to have. And that means wanting what our heart wants that isn't food. Allowing yourself to know that, to touch that, to name that. To feel your heart. To feel the depth of the desire of your heart.

NOTES:

What first comes up might be, “I want a relationship. I want a partner.” And if you don't have a partner, it might seem that you want something that you don't have. If you let yourself go all the way with that heart's desire and see what it is that you want, what it is that a relationship will give you, there might be parts that you can discover and have without that one significant relationship. But you will never find that out unless you let yourself go to the depths of your wanting, to the depths of your heart's desire, to the depths of your longing.

Eating what your body wants and while paying attention to the food – which we discussed last week – leads to the enjoyment of that food. Attention is a clear form of love. I know that “eat with enjoyment, gusto and pleasure” is a very important Guideline and I will talk more about that during the next session of the Online Retreat.

But for now what I hope that you'll see is that attention, engagement of the heart, and what your body truly wants is itself pleasure. Knowing yourself and feeling the freedom of movement – both in terms of choosing to eat what your body actually wants and to allow yourself to know the depth of what your heart wants – that allows you to be comfortable in your own skin, physically and in knowing yourself. Not being frightened by yourself. Not eating to get what you want because you don't believe that you can have what you really want.

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THIS WEEK’S PRACTICES

NOTES:

Ask yourself what it is that you really, truly want. What is your heart’s desire for this lifetime? Because that has everything to do with your relationship to food.

Notice when you eat what your body wants and it feels good in your body. And notice when you eat and it feels, as one student wrote, “unpleasant” in your body.

Practice the art of staying with yourself during the pleasant and unpleasant times, so that you don’t feel the need to run to food when anything becomes uncomfortable.

That brings me back to what we talked about earlier, and another practice to do this week. When you are feeling hopeless or in despair, or when you are feeling a familiar feeling that you’ve had about nine thousand sixty-seven million times in your life, you can assume that there is an inner frog-ette that’s been activated. That frozen part of you needs your attention and to say, “Come here sweetheart. Tell me all about it. Tell me how it feels in your belly, in your chest.” Practice that. If you don’t practice that once or twice or three times before we meet again, know that you are not treating yourself with the kindness that you deserve.

CLOSING

Finally, I want to thank all of you for choosing to spend your time here. And I want to offer all of the longing, all of love and all of the glimpses of truth, understanding, clarity and tenderness to everybody everywhere who might need it.

Now let’s say goodnight to everybody!