

# Addiction and recovery

## Conversion from dependency to transformation

*What follows are three very different personal accounts. For obvious reasons they are anonymous and the editors are grateful to the authors for their willingness to share their experiences with such honesty and clarity. Each of them has an important insight to offer, not just into the complex process of compulsive behaviour behind different addictions, but also into the healing process. None of them can be said to be 'typical' or well-known addictions. Indeed the editors felt it might actually be helpful in understanding the 'spiritual' significance of addiction to cast the net fairly wide. However, each account in its own way works a variation on a theme which emerges in the other articles in this collection. Somewhere between dependency and transformation comes a moment of conversion and a decision. But, as our first story tellingly underlines, even a religious conversion can become addictive. The lesson is clear: a healthy spirituality takes time to achieve and will, if it is to lead to that sense of physical, psychological and emotional well-being which the great spiritual traditions of the world promise, contain its own correctives and processes of discernment.*

## Spiritual addiction

I HAD A MAJOR CRISIS WHEN I WAS THIRTY. I collapsed in a busy road with my tiny son and daughter to hand. I later found myself back at home in bed with pleurisy and pneumonia. My husband, a surgeon, was away in Russia and not contactable. For days I cried my heart out. My life felt as if it was spiralling out of control. Even when my husband returned from his travels I felt absolutely alone and bereft. Although I was not able to articulate my unhappiness – after all, we were the 'perfect' family – I knew life was not right, and recovery from my bed took months. With hindsight I must surely have been having a nervous breakdown, but this was never mentioned, despite numerous visits from the doctor.

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During this period of ill health and debilitation the local parish priest happened to come and visit me. Despite being a Roman Catholic, I had abandoned all religious practice some years previously when the Vatican's rules on morality were in conflict with the way I chose to live my life prior to my marriage. Added to this, my husband was an agnostic moving towards atheism and I was under his intellectual influence. By the time of this crisis we had been married for five years. Our wedding had been 'outside the Church' much to the chagrin of my Italian father and our whole family. During these years of absence I sometimes felt guilty enough to creep into an empty church to light a candle. There was within me a certain sense of longing for the familiar and the much-loved. Alongside this I could daily hear the Angelus bell intoning at 12 noon and 6 p.m. But Vatican II had been and gone and I was oblivious to the changes.

Thus, the arrival of the priest at my house felt embarrassing and uncomfortable. But it changed the course of my life. Something very profound happened. I cannot even remember in what context the situation that led to my 'conversion experience' occurred. All I can say is that whatever it was that happened left me in a trance-like state for many hours. My desire and longing for God was greater than life itself. Everything that surrounded me was bathed in a brilliance of light and beauty and God was both immanent and transcendent. I felt loved as never before.

At first I thought I was plainly mad. Then I didn't know who to tell or what to do. I started to see the elderly priest for instruction, and gradually I went back to mass and the sacraments. Nothing stopped my fervour. I needed to learn and to learn fast. I devoured books, went to daily mass and began to teach myself the 'art' of prayer. The more I prayed the more I wanted to pray. Prayer became essential to my needs. It wasn't long before I made my first silent retreat in the Ignatian tradition. My director and I then entered into a 'spiritual' friendship that was overwhelming in its intensity and far reaching in its consequences.

Meanwhile the parish had gathered me into its fold and I was a popular and hard-working member of its various groups and organizations. It wasn't long before the diocese gave me some jobs to do, and more and more came my way. Within two years of my initial conversion experience I was fully occupied and everywhere on the religious circuit. Fulfilled, satisfied and feeling successful on the one hand, and thoroughly miserable on the other, it was a rare occurrence for me to be at home in the evenings. I had new friends and for the first time in my

life I felt accepted, loved, and liked by a community that had become my family.

But, back at home with my real family, all was not well. I would not face the true reality of my situation. My husband's hospital practice in a demanding speciality had always meant that I was largely alone. Now, with my new activities, our paths ceased to cross. Rather than communicate with my husband, I would disappear into my room and slip into prayer. It was so easy to find God and so comforting. All my remaining energies were put into caring for our children, who by this time were frequent visitors to retreat houses and church services. It wasn't long before the cracks in our relationship, that had only been briefly happy, developed into a serious situation. As a couple we were not well suited. Our emotional needs were individually enormous and neither of us could help the other. Communication ceased and hostility took its place. Not surprisingly, we separated some years later. It wasn't until after I had undergone years of therapy, and indeed become a therapist myself, that I was able to become part of a happy and secure relationship. I feel more reconciled to my past and I now have a healthy respect for my own spirituality. I have come to realize that my spiritual and emotional well-being is intertwined because the two walk hand in hand.

### *Defining addiction*

Let me begin my reflections with a definition of addiction based on my own experience. In the mid 1980s I was studying psychology in the United States when as part of my course I took a placement with an addiction centre in downtown San Francisco. Even though I was not a substance abuser I found myself emotionally relating to much of what I heard.

I became aware that all people suffering from addiction have a low sense of self-esteem. Our self-esteem relates to how we think the world sees us and how we view ourselves in return. If, as children, we were either ignored, or trivialized, felt constantly criticized, or neglected, there is a good chance that we will grow into insecure adults. It is often the case too, that those of us who were either overtly or covertly abused in our childhood will suffer the far-reaching effects of a sense of non-being. If we take these factors into consideration it is hardly surprising that a number of us will look for a panacea to numb our pain. But if our sense of well-being is constantly depleted, the 'hole' of neediness within us can ever deepen and may lead to an addictive craving for

destructive and self-abusive practices. 'I am – but only if I have ...' might become our cry for help. The substance or practice to which we are addicted can only supply a temporary sense of well-being which disguises itself as satisfaction or love or fullness. This powerful and destructive cycle can only temporarily assuage the real desire for some sense of true peace and happiness.

How can I be so sure that such a phenomenon as spiritual addiction exists? And how can I be certain that something apparently as wholesome as prayer, study and good works might in fact have been an unhealthy substitute for a family life that was not as happy as I tried to pretend? At the time of my great crisis I was desperate. I didn't understand why, because I was numb. All appeared well in our household. We were an attractive, successful and wealthy couple with beautiful young children. But underneath the veneer there was a deep-felt unhappiness, which stemmed, for both of us, from an emotionally deprived and neglected childhood.

For years I had been torn with migraines and unidentified depression. I took various medications to dull the pain but the root cause was unquestionably repressed anger. I was terribly insecure and frightened. But I had known security. As a child and through my formative years I had loved going to mass, and the convent schools that I attended had been happier and safer places than home. It is not surprising that the arrival of the elderly priest on my doorstep represented not only a father figure, but also acted as an unconscious reminder of happy and secure childhood memories. Something had to happen. So, to the Church I turned my gaze.

At the time of my crisis I was ripe for the conversion experience that so overwhelmed me. I was needy, empty and unwell. The visit from the priest came at the right moment. It was a mysterious, genuine and life-giving experience for which I shall always be grateful. I believe that conversion experiences, such as the one that I had, can have long-lasting and life-changing effects, but they can also be on a borderline between the healthy and the addictive. A deep-seated emotional need can often accompany them. I became self-absorbed with the development of my spiritual life. This life became my only real interest and I avoided anything else that got in its way. Perhaps the predominant reason was the desire to recreate the intensity of God's presence that I had felt so keenly that 'wonderful day' when I had felt so loved and accepted. I was desperate not to lose this gift. Consequently my prayer life prevented me from acknowledging the issues that I should have been facing, or, in other words, put me into a state of denial. My

relationship with God gave me the excuse to shut down on the reality that my marriage was a disaster, and for my own psychological well-being something needed to be done. The true understanding of my situation took another seven years for me to admit to, and that was whilst I was making the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. What I have come to realize is that I was addicted to God, at least to the things of God or, more accurately, to the idea of God.

### *Discerning a way*

Within a very short time of my conversion I made a retreat. It was another profound and gifted experience. Straightaway my retreat director and I became 'spiritual friends'. I was under a spiritual spell. I was under her spell. The attachment we had for each other was such that we became inseparable. She became my most important adult relationship. I would do nothing without her advice. To be with her was the most essential thing in my life. I lived for the retreat house experience and without it I pined and fantasized for the life that I wished I had. I was dependent on her for her religious guidance and she was dependent on me for my worldly sophistication. It was an unhealthy relationship. Other people also felt that she held a powerful influence over me and disapproved of our relationship. Not surprisingly, the relationship with my 'spiritual friend' ended painfully.

Dependency exists in the religious world and is part of the addictive condition. The priest or the spiritual director, the guru or the wise person, the bishop or the superior, can all abuse their power in unintentional and subtle ways, creating power structures which are destructive and subvert true pastoral care.

This issue of dependency also relates to the sort of unhealthy theology which projects a fantasy God, a God who exists *only* in some other realm. Therefore we think that, whether we like it or not, our destiny is *not* in our hands. However, the truth is that we are asked to be dependent on God not in a passive way but by the proper use of our free will. God desires that our human potential is fully realized. If that potential is diminished in any way by our dependency on another then our relationship with God will be unbalanced and, possibly, addictive.

I had long desired to make the full thirty-day Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. I found the opportunity to do so some seven years after 'the crisis'. The retreat house that I had chosen was in an idyllic setting. I thought that I knew what to expect, but I could never have predicted the outcome. The outcome was that I made a decision to end my marriage

and to take whatever steps I needed to re-order my life. It proved, in many ways, to be a second conversion experience and the beginning of my recovery. The main element of the Exercises for me was my absolute desire for God. I realized with clarity, for the first time, how unhealthy my own life had been and how much I wanted to change it. Praying the Principle and Foundation was a time of great consolation. I felt my own brokenness and fragmentation and that of the world around me, but I also sensed a deep peace and harmony. As the Exercises progressed, I began to appreciate fully the chaos in my life and how disordered attachments – not only to people, but also to my prayer life – had been destructive and harmful. In the Exercises there are two sets of Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. At the heart of each set of rules lies the belief that it is through people that God communicates his ideas and feelings and that we are easily open to deception. The Fourth Rule for the Discernment of Spirits for the Second Week (Exx 332) explains to us how these deceptions can come about:

It is characteristic of the bad angel, who takes on the appearance of an angel of light, to enter by going along with the devout soul, then to come out by his own way with success for himself. That is, he brings good and holy thoughts attractive to such an upright person and then strives little by little to get his own way, by enticing the soul over to his own hidden deceits and evil intentions.

In other words, Ignatius warns us that even people desiring to be virtuous can be tempted under the guise of good by *the bad angel*. With reference to the Third Rule for Discernment of Spirits for the Second Week (Exx 331), Michael Ivens (*Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* [Gracewing, 1998], p 231) comments:

Consolation can be given by the bad angel, i.e. by playing on a person's love for God, their values and aspirations, their emotional capacity. The same process forms part of the dynamics of rationalization and through it, too, the manipulative leader, preacher, teacher, or indeed spiritual director arouse consolation for their own purposes.<sup>1</sup>

The full implications of the Exercises are radical and far-reaching. They are not for the faint-hearted. They challenge us to be independent and autonomous, chasten us to recognize and admit our faults, and teach us to make good choices. Their intention is outwards to the service of God in the world, not inwards to the service of self.

Removing the cause of an addiction can relieve the symptoms. But addictions are subtle. A recurrence of the same symptoms can cause a shift from one addiction to another. The addictive tendency or weakness never goes away. In some shape or form, it is there in all of us. And just because religion promises conversion and healing and reconciliation it does not follow that supposedly 'religious' people are not prone to the subtleties of self-delusion. As I have discovered, constant discernment is essential.

## Abuse and the twelve-step programme

I WAS ABUSED AT A YOUNG AGE by a very powerful authority figure. I didn't tell anyone. I repressed the abuse and crawled into myself, raising the drawbridge behind, turning off the inner lights, and effectively burying my secret under a hastily fabricated veneer of smiles and supposed normality. Outwardly most people saw me as a happy person, possessing wonderful social skills. But in reality, it was all a front – a desperate attempt to strike from the record my inner hurt, an attempt to whitewash or conceal the turmoil of my past which was now finding expression in a life of sexual addiction.

This fantasy of everything being all right assumed the persona of reality: nothing ever happened; I was chaste, honest, compassionate, willing to spend my life for others. This untruth became my truth. As a consequence I never admitted to my underlying sexual addiction. I lived a life that was dedicated to helping the poor and needy. I channelled my life's energies into improving the lives of people whose world was one of pure desperation. I was a local hero, doing the impossible, giving my all, seeking no monetary enrichment. I was good. I looked good. I felt good too, because others told me how good I was. But it was all a sham.

I do not deny the reality of all the good I did accomplish. Tremendous good was being done because of my efforts. But the energy that fuelled my outreach to the poor and needy was that of sexual addiction. Unbeknown to myself (translate: not allowing myself to know the truth) I used my platform of benevolence to launch a secret life of sexual addiction and abuse. People needed me, wanted to be with me, responded in turn and in kind to my love for them. But my love was an errant and addictive love. Because of their great need they would prostitute themselves in order to gain a better life.

Also under the guise of my total dedication to the poor, I was dissociating myself from my peers, abandoning the communal living arrangements, living and sleeping near and on behalf of the poor to whom I was giving my life. In my own eyes I was a knight in shining armour. The reality was that my life was a whitewashed bag of lies, contradictions and rampant sexual addiction.

### *Sharing the truth*

*You are as sick as your secrets* – a slogan heard in the twelve-step rooms. But the converse of this slogan is also true: recovery, or wellness, returns to the degree that sharing skills are developed and incorporated. Twelve-step is a place where honest sharing can be learned and can, in turn, take place. Sharing became the vehicle that would move me towards recovery. It would happen when I finally became able to summon up from the depths of my inner hell the truth of my sexual addiction. The bondage to silence would then be broken. The darkness of addiction would dissolve under the glare of transparency. Darkness would indeed be overcome by the light.

Silence, denial and secrecy are what fuel the addictive process. Sharing unravels the addictive process and takes the power out of it. My goals are to know my true self, accept myself as I am in the nakedness of that truth, and to clothe myself in honesty and integrity. For me, these goals can only be achieved and maintained by being true to the sharing and recovery processes best set forth in the twelve-step programmes.

This transition from addiction to recovery didn't come about easily. The process was painfully long, steeped in toxic shame and despair. I was powerless and seemingly helpless in a life that was turned upside down in its entirety. I lost everything I ever held to be dear. It seemed that my life had come to a total standstill, that I had been taken apart and could never be put back together again. My present life was all but empty and my future held no hope at all – or so it seemed.

So what remained? My life, both the interior and exterior, was stripped bare. I had nowhere to go and nothing to lean on other than the recovery process and the recovery tools which were drilled into me. I could opt for a life of self-pity, thinking myself totally destroyed, or for one that twelve step promised me would arise from the ashes if only I stayed with the recovery process. I chose the latter and I am glad I did. It has made all the difference.

Twelve-step meetings, sponsors, fellow addicts, therapists and spiritual directors and even family co-workers stood by me and kept the



flame of hope alive in my heart. They aided me along the rocky path of recovery, helping me live an honest and transparent life, a life that would lead me to value myself for who I am rather than for what I do. This in itself was a novel approach and one that ran 180 degrees opposite to the way I used to live my life.

In this recovery process I learned to become a reflective person. I can now sit in the inner corridors of myself and be comfortable with the silence I find there. In this silence I came to know myself as I am and to value myself for who I am. I see and accept the innate goodness of my being. I separate the good from the not so good. I live with this duality and it is now OK for me to do so. I no longer have to be the 'perfect person' I always strove to be and pretended to be. I can laugh at my foibles and my idiosyncrasies.

A wonderful outcome of this process of self-discovery and self-acceptance is its effect on others. Acceptance of myself for who I am now allows me to accept others for who they are. Others don't have to measure up to my expectations of them either. They don't have to be perfect according to my self-imposed definition of perfection. It is all right for them to be who they are and where they are on their own particular life's journey.

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts of my recovery is the inner peace that it has brought me. I am made aware of this inner peace by the many people in my life who speak to me about it. Those in authority in my life tell me they find me to be at peace. Family and friends, co-workers and even strangers tell me that I exude a deep sense of peace. I chuckle to myself, knowing the price I paid to be stripped of the meaningless, the false and the dishonest in my life in order to enter this place of peace. I also understand now that this peace is a peace that everyone and especially our world at large really longs for. Perhaps I didn't lose everything after all?

Occasionally a deep sense of loss will still well up within me. I understand now that a life dedicated to 'doing' and being in control (actually 'out of control') is never erased in its entirety. In one sense I still miss much of it. But I can also see that the past had to go and that the present is of much greater value. I paid a great price to arrive at this point in time and to achieve sobriety and wellness. When all is said and done I would not return to my former life. To do so would be to lose the peace, serenity, honesty and recovery that I now enjoy. I know in my heart that I have chosen the better part.

I do not know at times where I am going. I have no control over my present life or my future. What I do know is that I have before me the

present moment. In it I find the true meaning of my life. It keeps me grounded in reality and at the same time holds out to me the promise of a new life, one that cannot be weighed in the scales of commerce, business or politics. It is, however, one that is weighed in the scales of eternity where all truth and goodness come from. In this scale my life is not found wanting.

### *Gift*

In February 1999, while on retreat, I wrote the following thoughts. They seemed so powerful to me at the time, and they seem more powerful to me in this present moment. I offer them for reflection:

#### *Gift*

Gifts are boxed and wrapped and foiled and ribboned, evoking feelings of worth, of mirth, even awe.

God gifts me with Himself, his image and likeness, and all I can do is run the other way, squirm and churn, roil and boil – such a fate! So much self-hate!

God stands off to my side, ever so patient; so near and yet so far. How sad he must be to see me – I run; I hide; I deny; I repress – my life such a total mess, I can only now confess, and say yes . . . yes this is so; this is me, let it be!

God gives to me – even mirrors me! My sexual bent – lent, spent, meant, sent – from Him to me! And only now I see. It is OK to be me.

Anger, wrath, judgement, loathing – have me so befuddled and muddled. This awful self-rejection which found wrongful expression did not come from you. You do not imbue your creation with such contempt – not heaven sent – the wheres and whys, the whos and hows – another time, perhaps, but not now, not now.

Especially not now because I am too distracted by your presence so protracted and near and here. You haven't moved, but what has ensued is that I have turned from my within (staying there my only sin), and am free and can at long last see not only me but You – or should I say the Two, because we are one, since from you I have come.

Patient you are; you watched from afar, your heart always ajar –  
your light to dispel my fright.

Friends your love sends – these ‘others’ my true brothers – they  
are one with me – one with you, also askew, but together we  
do – we do. We see. We become free. We are me.

Oh how you smile and laugh tearing off the paper, the foil, the  
ribbons that grace this package, this gift, this me. You the  
giver, the forgiver, the package is me – the gift you give – the  
gift you now unwrap and open and take such delight in!

I am laughing and smiling and delighting in your knowledge and  
surprise, your smile and delight – with all your might – with  
all my past fright and flight. But now the gift becomes giver –  
this me is free as You and I now see!

I am gift and giver and gifted! You are me – We are free – You  
laugh that I can see!

### *Twelve-step programmes*

I refer to the twelve-step process and the twelve-step rooms in this article. Those who have been associated with these programmes will understand very well what I am saying. But for those who are unfamiliar, let me offer the following:

In 1939 a book entitled *Alcoholics anonymous* was published. It presented the flame of hope and recovery to people addicted to alcohol, whose lives and careers and families were on the edge of despair and ruin. *Alcoholics anonymous* held out the hope that there existed a path to recovery. That path was based upon a rigorous study of the proffered twelve steps and adherence to the programme set forth within those same steps.

The steps lead an addict to admit that he or she is an addict and has absolutely no control over the addiction. They are powerless to overcome their addiction by themselves. They are powerless, but they are not doomed. A power greater than themselves, be it God or the group of addicts setting upon a road to recovery, could restore the addict to a life of sanity.

This power does not simply grant a state of recovery. The addict has to enter into a group effort that will take them along a path of hard work that will hopefully result in a life of recovery. This will mean getting a

sponsor or guide. It will also mean regular attendance at group meetings.

Within the context of the group meetings and with the support and guidance of the sponsor, the addict will come to a knowledge of the truth about his or her addiction, the powerlessness, loss of sanity or right mind, character defects, shortcomings, damaging pride, addictive behaviour, the damage done to self and to others, and a host of other insights. Living in the truth of the addiction and learning to reject the former life of secrecy and denial will soften pride and open the heart to a new way of living and interaction with others.

Since 1939 Alcoholics Anonymous groups have spread around the world and sobriety has been achieved by countless numbers of good, but addicted, people. Hurts have been healed, families made new, jobs regained, self-esteem enhanced, and a host of good has come to those who were formerly addicted to alcohol. The addiction remained, but a way of life that would avoid alcohol and achieve a new level of maturity and sanity was possible. Hope was reborn.

Addiction is not limited to alcoholics. It would seem that for every good there is an opposite. In many instances the opposite can take on the form of an addiction. There is sexual addiction, food addiction, gambling addiction, narcotics addiction, spending addiction. There are addictions to bad/sick relationships, to co-dependency, to abusive relationships, etc. Alcoholics Anonymous openly shares its twelve-step programme with all people struggling with any type of addiction or addictive behaviour. The programme applies to all.

Twelve-step programmes led me to acknowledge and admit the truth about my sexual addiction. It allowed me a safe place in which I could actually hear myself speak the awful truth of my abusive life. I could never have done it on my own. The safety, anonymity and non-judgementalism of my fellow addicts allowed me to come to an awareness of my problem and ownership of it. This coming to truth was no easy achievement. It took me into the bowels of hell itself where I had to confront all of my demons and acknowledge the great harm I had done to others. I could never have done this on my own. I am an addict. I will always be an addict. Now, however, I have other options available to me besides my former addictive life. I can choose to live in sobriety. I can choose to grow and mature. I can choose to use the stumbling blocks of my former life as building blocks of a new and healthy and fulfilling life.

## Gluttony's curse

FOR MOST OF MY TEENAGE YEARS, I was enslaved to the act of eating. My consciousness was chained to food. I would go to bed at night thinking about breakfast the next morning, get up and consume several bowls of cereal and several pieces of toast, and then count the hours until my next excuse to eat, at break time. I was full after every meal and always wanted to eat more. I remember one Saturday going round to visit a friend to practise music together. In the middle of the morning, her mother brought us coffee and biscuits, and my friend offered me a biscuit from a loaded plate and took one herself. I took a biscuit, ate it, and expected to be offered another. But instead, my friend carried on our conversation without giving the biscuits another glance. I could not understand her behaviour at all: 'How can she just go on talking like that when there's a plate full of biscuits there?' I thought. Years later, a friend who was a recovering alcoholic said to me, 'I always preferred drinking on my own. After all, someone else will offer you a second or even a third drink – but they won't offer you a fourteenth.' The same pathetic enslavement characterizes the obsessive eater in the presence of food.

During these years at school, I was a practising member of a Protestant denomination. I was deeply interested in religious matters, reading spiritual authors such as William Law, and with a great concern for charitable giving and social justice. But perhaps my religious understanding was one which led me to believe that great demands were being made upon me without my receiving the necessary fortitude that is offered only by God's unconditional love. At any rate, no solace proved to be a substitute for food.

I left school at seventeen and went out to work in an office. I usually had lunch in the works canteen, and would sometimes eat a three-course meal at lunchtime, buy half a pound of chocolate which I would eat at my desk during the afternoon, and then go home to a two-course dinner in the evening.

When I was fourteen, I had a pain in my side and wondered whether it might be appendicitis. So my mother took me to the doctor. Now, this was a doctor who, I discovered, was almost as obsessed with dieting as I was with eating. Whatever was wrong with you, he told you not to eat. So he quickly identified the fact that I was 'overweight' (though who is the arbiter of these matters?) and said I should go on a diet and do daily exercises. He did not make any attempt to discover what my eating

habits actually were, or why I ate as much as I did. And neither did he enquire as to what exercise I already took or what I enjoyed. He recommended that I use a book of physical-jerk-type exercises which, he said, were used by the RAF. Since I was a convinced pacifist and anti-militarist, this information immediately made the little volume repulsive to me, and when I grudgingly began to undertake its regime I quickly discovered the exercises were so boring that there was no way I was going to give fifteen minutes of my day to them.

From a therapeutic point of view, making a compulsive eater go on a diet is the worst possible thing to do. I was already obsessed with food – counting the minutes before the next opportunity for eating, wondering whether I could justify another ‘snack’ – and being given a set of dietary instructions to follow merely increased the obsession. What I needed was something that would take my mind *away* from food, not something that would focus my attention even more intently on the topic of my infatuation.

The diet was supervised by a nurse whose conduct was no more commendable than the doctor’s. To decide what my ‘target weight’ should be, she measured my height and made a judgement about my build. This judgement was based on a cursory glance at my hands, and consisted in the pronouncement ‘medium’. Although I did not then know that my hands are in fact large (as I later established when I worked behind the glove counter of a clothing shop and discovered I needed a glove size considerably larger than that of the majority of our customers), I did know that even when I was not at all fat, I had always weighed more than other children of my height and that I was sturdily built. So when the nurse declared me to be of medium build and pronounced the ‘target weight’ for which I should aim, I mentally absented myself from the whole process. In any case, I knew that I could not by an act of will reduce the amount I ate.

Over the next couple of weeks, I formally observed the diet, but in practice found all sorts of ruses for consuming more food than the rules permitted. Not surprisingly, when I went back to be weighed, I had not lost any pounds. The nurse declared herself puzzled by this occurrence. She said that this was a very good diet which always worked. Fearing that my eating practices might henceforth be observed more closely (by my mother, for example), I decided it was best for the time being to try to stick to the rules. This had the result that I did indeed lose a few pounds in weight, and I felt the pressure was off a bit.

The diet was an exercise in humiliation – firstly, because I was bound to fail at it. But there was more to the humiliation than that. We live in a

culture which demands that women be thin – as though it is an affront to society that a woman should occupy space, that she should have breasts and hips, or that she should take pleasure in good food – and as a teenager I was already a feminist with a firm conviction that the ideology of thinness was oppressive to women and should be combated. Yet I had unavoidably internalized those social pressures to some extent. Also, I did not want to go on being enslaved to food: I'd have liked to have felt fitter and, even if I didn't want to wear fashionable clothes, it would at least have been good to have the option of rejecting them, rather than not being able to get into them. The nurse did nothing to improve my morale – on the contrary, she seemed to regard me as some sort of inferior being – and so I went on eating to console myself, as before.

There were odd occasions on which the addiction seemed to be overcome. For example, I was taken abroad on a holiday that involved a lot of travelling around. The new places and faces, the abandonment of normal routine, and the amount of activity entailed by the whole process, combined to fill my mind with things other than food, and I even reached the point at which I would turn down food that was offered to me, even though I liked it, simply because I was not hungry. But I was not yet reflecting on my condition, and when I returned to Britain I did not try to understand what had changed my habits: I merely returned to the old ones.

### *Insight and recovery*

There was one day when I had a sudden moment of insight. I was getting some food or crockery (to put food on) out of a cupboard, and I suddenly thought, 'I've only got one body. If I don't look after it, I won't have another. I must take care of it.' But the moment passed, and although I remembered the thought, I lost the conviction that had accompanied it.

Because I suffered from mild depression, I went for a while for sessions of psychotherapy with a psychiatrist. I suppose I was becoming more aware of the pathological nature of my eating habits, because I mentioned my obsession to the psychiatrist on one or two occasions. He said that listening to me talking about food was like listening to an alcoholic talking about drink; but he did not seem to regard my behaviour as particularly serious and did not address it as a matter for therapeutic treatment.

The process of recovery really got under way shortly after this time. I had left home and was starting to enjoy being able to have more control over my life than had previously been the case. Perhaps that influenced the change. Then someone I loved very deeply died in tragic circumstances, and for six months I was completely overcome with grief. During those six months and the following six I was caught up in attending to the most extreme emotions – crying every day, and raging with anger against one of the people who was most trying to help me. I also made friends with some of the most compassionate people I have ever known. They were women I had met at the local women's group and one or two friends of theirs. I have never again encountered people who knew how to listen with such attentiveness and to respond with such sympathy. And at some point during these months, I noticed one day that I was making myself a pot of tea without taking anything to eat with it, and I realized that this was not the first time this had happened. I knew then that the spell was starting to be broken.

Subsequently, I discovered an academic discipline that I fell in love with, and my life was filled with excitement. It seemed that the studies and I were made for each other, and under the guidance of an excellent teacher I achieved very good exam results and went to the university of my choice. By the time I started at university, eating was no longer a problem and I was the size I felt happy to be – not at all thin, but just right.

Since that time, I have occasionally suffered relapses. My undergraduate career did not in the event turn out very well, and there were two or three periods during my student days when I returned to my obsession with food. I have a vivid memory of breaking out of this on one occasion. It was Easter Monday, and a relative and a friend of hers were going out for the day to visit a stately home. They invited me along with them. Looking around the house, we saw a lot of tapestries and needlepoint, and I suddenly felt an enormous desire to take up textile work of this kind. So I determined that the next day I would go to a needlecraft shop and buy a kit to get myself going. I did that, and as soon as I started sewing I realized that the compulsion to eat had entirely retreated. It is not for nothing that needles and thimbles so often have magical meanings in folk tales.

### *Achieving freedom*

I am still not free of all tendency towards overeating, but I believe that that freedom can be achieved. I once shared a house with a young



woman who had previously been anorexic. She told me of the period in her life when she had 'crossed the line' and knew she would never return to starving herself. I too intend to cross the line.

In my twenties I became a Catholic. I cannot honestly say that my conversion in itself did much to improve my mental health. However, one of the motives for my conversion was a deep devotion to Our Lady – a devotion which I felt could be lived out properly only in the Catholic Church. That devotion is now a source of hope to me when I feel that I might again be 'going under'. Recently, it has seemed to me that part of the reason for my eating disorder is that I have not had a proper sense of authority over my own body. It is as though I sometimes feel that I have no power over myself in ways in which I ought to have such power, and that this manifests itself as a lack of control over how much food I take in. It is the same sort of powerlessness that in some people is expressed by a willingness to engage in an array of destructive sexual relationships: for here again, there is a lack of proper authority over one's body. For me, Mary's perpetual virginity is a sign that she has precisely that proper authority over her body. It signifies that she has not been sexually abused and that she does not have to give herself over to manipulation or invasion. By analogy, her virginity is a symbol of personal integrity in general. It is a sign of hope that women and men can live in a manner which respects the body's nobility and vulnerability. So when I feel that I might again be sinking into obsessive eating, I try to remember the ideal of having proper authority over my body, and to call to mind Our Lady's virginity as the emblem of that dignity.