

Transforming the Causes of Compulsive Eating Into Life-time Well-Being Bob's Story—Searching Deeply for Intertwined Patterns

By Bob Wilson BS, DTR



Get to the

ROOT causes.

Roots Parable

All of us are conditioned, from birth on, to have certain emotional response patterns and coping behaviors. Getting to the root causes of specific, problematic patterns and behaviors, such as those that lead to one's being overweight or experiencing relationship, drug, or alcohol addiction, can be a formidable challenge. In our search for these roots, we frequently discover them to be tangled and knotted together (see photo). We can cover up the problems, so we are not aware they exist. It may take many years and lots of soul-searching to acknowledge and **change the root causes, but unless the roots are pulled up, the problems continue to grow.** Here are some examples:

- The need to please everyone else in order to feel all right about yourself (being yourself isn't enough).
- Feeling shame or low self-esteem, which may stem, for example, from comments others have made to you or the inner emotional wounding from a chaotic family life.
- Being over committed to others and under committed to yourself; which leads you to feeling drained, confused and out-of-control and unable to care for yourself.

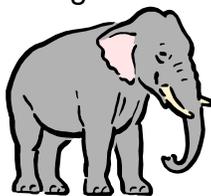
To change, you must learn to become a loving caregiver to your inner emotional self. You must learn how to nurture yourself.

My Story: A Journey Out Of Hell And Into Freedom

What worked for me? My compulsive eating and addictions were transformed through learning about self-care. I didn't like the results I was getting, and I realized:

**If I continue to do what I've always done,
I'll continue to get what I've always gotten.**

To change seemed overwhelming, so I thought: How to swallow an elephant?



One bite at a time!

That is, small baby steps lead to success. Ya-a-ay!

I've lost 170-250 pounds (my dad said I weighed 400 pounds; but I remember weighing only 320) and I've maintained the loss for 31 years. I've also been drug and alcohol-free for 16 years.

Early in my life, I created the causes and made the daily choices that led to my being overweight and unhealthy. Then, step-by-step I have created the daily choices to be thin and healthy. Gradually, I transformed my whole life—one bite at a time! My life has been a demonstration of the *Laws of Cause & Effect* or *Sowing & Reaping*.

Self-learning was required since I didn't come with an instruction manual that answered these questions for me:

- What kind of **body fuel** should I eat? How could I find a food plan I could follow for life? How could I fix quick and delicious meals and snacks in the midst of a busy day?
- How often should I "fuel up" my body? See "Defining a Plan of Eating" in the appendix.
- What kind of **body movement and activity** was best for me? What activity would I enjoy for a lifetime? How much? How often?
- What kind of **nurturing activities** would help maintain my buoyancy and delight in life and fill up my well of reserve? How would I establish and continue healthful social relationships? How could I keep all of these relationships in balance?
- What kind of **spiritual discipline** would help me maintain my innermost connection with my deepest sense of openhearted aliveness? How do I daily find time to nurture this relationship?
- How would I **discover resources and supports** that provide structure, insight and a process for on-going life transformation, guidance, and balance?
- How would I **practically** apply these awarenesses in the day-to-day adventures of life?

My unhealthy habits; negative, self-defeating attitudes; and self-destructive overeating were firmly entrenched--so it took lots of practice, patience, persistence, and positive attitude to persevere on this personal *odyssey* of adventurous wondering. **I decided to celebrate a healthy lifestyle—to cultivate the attitude of *joyous effort*—an attitude of excitement and fun—the fun of lifelong learning.**





What It Was Like:

Bob at 260 pounds—my high school graduation picture—I weighed over 100 pounds more

I started out life weighing 4 pounds, 12 ounces; and I reached 320 with a 57" waistline by 16. I now weigh 155 pounds. I have maintained this weight for 31 years.

My excess body weight was the result of all the daily choices I made. The patterns those choices formed, were on these levels: physical, emotional, spiritual, social, discovering and applying balance in lifestyle, and mental.

I Began My Changes First at the Physical Level

I followed the “see-food” diet—anything I saw I ate! At an early age I started using food as a comfort (a tranquilizer) for family problems. My overweight mother had been prescribed “speed” in order to lose weight in 1950. It worked very well but she became addicted to drugs. Then, as a head nurse at a hospital, she started taking patients’ medications. She also got addicted to alcohol and cigarettes. In 1950, there wasn’t the knowledge and support to help a person change that we have available today. My mother’s patterns had a dramatic effect on the whole family.

My parents loved us dearly and without their kindness I wouldn’t be alive today, although multiple addictions wreaked havoc on our home life. When I was a little child, I loved many things: nature, swimming, games, and relationships with lots of friends. Then the swarms of negative life experiences started—constant fighting and discord at home; mother was ill, physically and emotionally; father was gone. When he was home, he was overbearing and had high expectations. Instead of one of closeness and harmony, my parents’ relationship erupted into many fights. I remember being in my room with the door closed, hearing my parents’ angry screaming and I would cry. I felt so sad and helpless; so sad that they couldn’t get along, so helpless that I couldn’t do anything about it. My mommy and daddy hated each other so much.

Food consumption was always a soothing experience for me; it would "make it all better," at least for a little while. However, as my food consumption increased, so did my size. I started to become different from everyone else. Between the ages of 8 to 15, I began to get FAT. At school, messages of not being OK, of needing to perform and being rejected for who I was, of not being played with and being made fun of, "Fatty, fatty 2 by 4, can't get through the bathroom door!" So I withdrew into the cocoon of food and gained more weight. I yearned to get out of my cocoon, but how?

My food habits were always extreme: bags of potato chips, quarts of pop, six candy bars at a time, "Wholesome" Hostess products, whole pizzas, HUGE portions at all-you-can-eat restaurants, quarts of ice cream, and hundreds of other food items. As if that weren't enough, my two grandmothers were wonderful cooks. I was ALWAYS eating--except at breakfast! I would eat so much before going to bed that I was never hungry for breakfast. I tried to lose weight and stop overeating on several occasions, but without any success. By the age of 13, I just gave up and knew I would be fat forever!

In 1969, when America landed on the moon, I started my weight loss at the age of 19 as an exchange student to Costa Rica, but it was an unpleasant way to go about it: I had diarrhea for several months. Even though I lost fifty pounds, I wouldn't recommend that method.

I started a more conventional weight-loss program in May 1972 when I joined *Weight Watchers*. I lost 118 pounds in seven months. They taught me what to eat and how to cook low-calorie meals. I now understand that they helped me with ONE of the roots of my being overweight, my cooking habits. Previously my cooking repertoire had consisted of *Hamburger Helper* and fried potatoes. Through *Weight Watchers'* program I received fantastic moral support.

I also received positive encouragement from friends and co-workers--this was a new experience for me. People commented about my weight loss and gave feedback about how much better I was looking. They asked me what I was doing. I shared with them new recipes and cooking and shopping strategies. To finally be successful felt so good.

In the 10 months in the program, I learned to apply a foundation food plan—one that taught me reasonable portion sizes and practical ways to apply the plan using delicious recipes. I was amazed I could eat such yummy food for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks and still lose weight. I did not feel deprived and actually enjoyed myself. It was fun to learn about healthful kitchen management skills and ways to set up my environment to support my success. I planned menus for the first 7 months, and my mother helped me learn how to cook. I am so glad I spent the time learning these skills because this is the eating program I still follow 30 years later. If I hadn't learned about all of these things, I would have gained all of the weight back. Many of the tools, tips and ideas that I have learned are shared in the *Freedom From Diets Program*.

However, soon after I had lost the weight, my old, compulsive food patterns started to return. I binged on lots of desserts and sweets and found myself out-of-control, unable to stop overeating. I was very confused. I had gained back about 15 pounds. I was still following my foundation food plan, but I really started to learn that there are foods "that really arouse me, really turn me on." When I eat them, I have an extremely difficult time eating them moderately. Foods like Snickers or Butter Fingers candy bars, brownies, cakes, pies,

cookies, ice cream and barbeque potato chips. Remember the TV commercial: “Bet you can’t eat just one?” Well, I couldn’t. I’d seem to go into a food trance and eat one after another, after another, after another until I’d feel quite numb and sick.

A friend suggested I attend a spiritual support group, a group that focused on the WHY of overeating; on looking at the reasons people overeat, not just at the WHAT people eat. Following my friend’s advice, I began to examine and heal the inner and outer relationships that I had.

Over time I learned to become my own honest and gentle observer. I noticed what worked, and I noticed what didn’t work! I became willing to avoid my problem (binge) foods one day at a time. This took a LOT of practice. Certain foods seemed to have strong magnetic power over me, like SUPER-CRUNCH PEANUT BUTTER.

I tried over and over again to eat it moderately. Promising myself I would have just a small amount of it, I would find myself getting the jar out of the cupboard, putting the spoon in it and end up eating half of the jar! On one occasion I mixed so much honey and raisins with it, and ate so much of it, I went into uncontrollable convulsions. There I was, lying on my bed convulsing, while reminding myself, “Bob, you did this to you. No one else did this to you. You did this to yourself. Do you see the effects on your physical well-being because of your relationship with peanut butter?”

To this day, 25 years later, I don’t bring peanut butter into the house—at least rarely. Perhaps about one time a year, I get a small jar of peanut butter and take a LARGE serving and then immediately throw away the rest of the jar (or else generously offer it to my companion, provided he hides it in his room so I can’t find it!). I also found an alternative that works for me. I keep salted peanuts in the basement and find that I can eat them reasonably. I don’t keep the peanuts upstairs, within arms reach. I have to go down to the basement and get a single serving and bring it upstairs to eat, mixing them with some raisins in a small container to make them special. I even share them with my companion. I make that agreement with myself because I know my limitations.

To figure out which foods were problematic, which ones I could eat regularly and really enjoy, and which ones were in the “gray area,” that is foods with boundaries, took LOTS of practice. I discovered that in some situations I could handle certain foods, and in other situations I couldn’t.

For me, the key to changing these patterns was discovering the extraordinary value of keeping a diary or journal. Through keeping one I learned about how people, places, and things influence my mental, physical, and emotional health, which in turn affects my eating choices. (See the appendix for an example of my actual, alcohol-consumption diaries.)

A food diary or journal is like a treasure map; a tool to help me learn:

1. It helps end denial, “Oh, it’s not that bad!” and fosters honesty with myself.
2. It helps me see patterns of alcohol use, drug use, foods, people, places and events.
3. It helps me develop compassion toward myself, and gratitude towards others who have helped me along the way.
4. It helps me see how baby steps, over time, have made a HUGE difference. Just like the evolution of the sun from winter solstice’s short days to the splendor of

summertime's long days. The shift happens 1.2 minutes/day. It's barely noticeable, but it adds up over time to a big difference.

Through writing in a journal I really learned about my eating habits. **Taken from my journal on December 3, 1979** (7 years after I had lost my weight): "Eating habits are sneaky! They sort of change gradually, into poor ones. Suddenly I may become too lazy to prepare vegetables, have the wrong foods in the house, and start lying to myself about, 'Oh, I can eat only one. I'll save the rest.' Then I start meditating about the glory of food, how great it will taste. I can forget about what it was like to be fat and I suddenly arrive at 175 pounds, up from 160 pounds. It sort of 'snuck up' from 160→165→170→175 pounds. Very gradually, it all added up. During the last two weeks I solved very tense, stressful problems with turning to food. It was a comfort to feel stuffed. It gave a full, satisfied feeling."

Sometimes I found that I didn't want to face my behaviors or myself. At those times, I didn't keep a diary because it was too painful to see what I was doing. To help me begin to keep records again, I would tell myself that keeping the diary wasn't so that I could beat up on myself. I reminded myself that it took a lot of courage and self-honesty. I also noticed that if I wrote my food choices and life events down, I was much more likely to consider alternatives to overeating. I could figure out what was going on and make plans to change my choices.

In writing this personal story, I reviewed the 24 years of diaries that I have kept and discovered that **my life is an ecosystem**. All of my different patterns interact and interconnect in an intricate web, everything affects everything else—a web that will either support a healthy weight or gradually bring on increasing levels of disease. I have fallen into unskillful patterns, time after time. But through problem solving and trying out new options, I have gradually come up with behaviors that worked better.

To help me change my life, I reached out to friends and other supportive people in the spiritual support group. I wrote my program foods in a diary and called a friend and told her what I was doing. I let her know when I needed to make changes. I also worked with a counselor.

To this day, I don't bring *problem foods* INTO the house. I came up with this rule because of what my food journals showed me. I discovered I could resist anything except temptation! I'm NOT a saint. I've learned about my abilities and strengths and I honor my limitations.

MY CARDINAL RULE: IN house, IN sight, IN mind, IN MOUTH! I keep the refrigerator/cupboards stocked with LOTS of healthful foods. I BRING them with me to work and times of play in a food bag—I'm willing to go to any length because I have the DIS-EASE of compulsive overeating. I kept hoping that healthful foods would just fall out of the sky for me, but that didn't happen! This one tool, my food bag, helps me eat whenever I'm hungry and to stop when I'm just satisfied. I've used this tool for 24 years. Even though I can see the value of this now, it took me quite awhile to be willing to bring foods with me. In 1978 I had just graduated school in dietetics and was working on a new job as a food service supervisor in a hospital kitchen. The kitchen had a wonderful bakery and it was my job to sample the foods before they were sent up to the patients. I could have all of the food that I wanted. Since I could sample the foods for free, I didn't bring my meals and snacks along with me. As my diaries showed, on many occasions, one bite led to another: **On one Wednesday evening:** "I was fighting the desire for sweets all day until 4:30 pm when I tasted 1 cookie in

the bakery → 4 more → 4 brownies → 2 cookies → 2 chocolate milks → 10 raw cookie dough balls → 2 candy bars as I went out the door. Oops, I did it again. I need help.” And later in that week on **Saturday evening**: “I was tired so I ate 5 pieces of pecan pie from tray line. I told myself I was tired and the pie would give me energy. It didn’t!” I went through countless experiments like this until I realized at a deep level that free food comes with a profound cost to me. I could, at last, see the value of bringing a food bag along with a variety of snacks and foods for mealtime. I clearly saw it would be best NOT to sample all of the foods in the kitchen. I ultimately decided to work in the diet office and to get out of the kitchen because that environment is too stimulating for me.

My Changes at the Physical Level Developed Further As I Learned About and Experienced Exercise



PICTURES show my garden and hiking in nature (at Goat Rocks Wilderness Area)

Oh, no! NOT THAT! Not the “E” word! Anything but that! Am I serious? Nope! I’m not serious at all. Exercise doesn’t have to be serious. It can be fun! It doesn’t have to be formal, either. You can *sneak* it into your life! I remembered that song “*High Hopes*” and how that ant could move another rubber tree plant and I sang...“Oops, there goes another calorie, NOW! My goal was to make the “E” word not only “exercise,” but also “enjoyment.” How I learned to do this was to focus on FUN, favorite things—things I really liked doing. Things like gardening, going for walks in my neighborhood with friends, and hiking in nature. That was the key for me: doing those things I already liked to do.

The *Freedom From Diets Program* provides support and suggestions to discover *enjoyable ways to be more active* and vigorous for a lifetime.

When I began to change, the PAIN of being overweight wasn't just psychological for me, but physical. My feet hurt me at 20 years of age, and I wondered if I would even be walking by 50. I experienced constant back pain and frequently visited the chiropractor for adjustments. I was always going to the dentist to have cavities repaired—as many as 13 at one time—because of all the candy and sweets that I was eating and my poor oral hygiene habits. At that time they didn’t have high-speed dental equipment, and as my teeth were being repaired it sounded and felt like a riveting gun was going off in my head. For me, the physical pain was a motivator to get out and do something different. Over time, the more I did, the more that I was able to do. My stamina and energy gradually increased. My increased physical abilities brought me a sense of awe and appreciation for life. The quality of my life has improved

dramatically because I lost weight and became more full of zip. I never would have been able to hike to the Goat Rocks Wilderness Area if I hadn't made a commitment to myself of regular physical activity. I am SO grateful for the miraculous changes in my life!

I learned to love the wonders of the out-of-doors from my parents and the Boy Scouts. I live next to the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area, which provides many enjoyable hours of healthful, fun physical activity. I plan many backpack vacations and hiking day trips with my friends. We bring along wholesome munchies and have a terrific time.

My mother and two grandmothers were gardeners and I learned the JOYS of gardening from them. I have my mother's mother's birdbath and my father's mother's birdbath in my side yard; oh what fun! I always feel the presence of my mother and grandmothers when I'm in the yard.

Walking for me is like a mini-vacation from my daily routine and worries. It always relaxes and revitalizes me. It is a time for inner reflection. **We all arrive at that place where our thinking is confused and reflects a great deal of inner distress.** I have found new *seed thoughts and insights* that I plant into my consciousness at those times. When I'm confused, cranky, compulsive, discouraged, frustrated, and angry I go out for a walk—bring along a piece of paper with the following thoughts listed and one-by-one and consider the following:

Wise beings shape their own lives:

☺ My choosing to take time to consider the following thoughts is a gift to me.

☺ **May I guide the being that lives inside of my skin with great tenderness and respect.**

☺ **Loving-kindness & good wishes:**

What do I really need right now, in this moment, to be happy?

☺ Am I happy? May I be happy. May I be free! Now.

☺ I choose to nurture a sense of joy & contentment.

☺ Remember, I choose my own state of mind.

☺ **Compassion:** May I be free from pain & sorrow.

May I be free from danger & harm.

May I:

- Have mental happiness
- Have physical happiness
- Have ease of well being

☺ It is not my job to fix the world. It doesn't need fixing. It's important for me to watch the way I shut down my sense of joy because of the world's suffering.

☺ **Sympathetic joy:**

- May my good fortune continue & increase!
- May I feel the joy, playfulness & wonder of life!
- May I say YES to life.
- May all of my thoughts and actions be ethical & kind; both towards others and myself.

- May I CELEBRATE the wonder & beauty of life.
- May I ACCEPT all of life, *as it is and as it isn't*.
- May I accept and delight in all people—as we are—with all of our complexities, uniqueness, diversity, gifts and oddities.

(See the appendix for other examples of the *Out of Hell, Into Freedom* thoughts.)

The Anatomy of Persistence:

Transforming injuries into new beginnings—or just begin again and again and again....

Because of my early severe obesity, my body's musculature is prone to aches, pains and malfunctions. About every 3 years I have to change my fitness routine. For example:

- I cherished Jazzercise® (aerobic dancing to music) and did it three times/week for four years. Then all-at-once my feet started hurting me. X-rays revealed that feet have hammertoes and large bone spurs, so I couldn't do it anymore and I needed to get orthodic shoe inserts.
- I started yoga to increase my flexibility, balance and strength. A friend referred me to a qualified teacher, to whom I have practiced with for ten years. I love it. I've had to stop, at times, due to my knee and shoulder pains.
- On a hike I slipped down a hill and severely pulled out my shoulder muscles (rotator cuff) —ouch! I had to see a physical therapist, who recommended a whole series of exercises to build up my shoulder and upper body muscles. My job doesn't use my upper-body muscles and so they had deteriorated over time. It took about one and a half years to get better. It was at this time that I joined a gym—something that I never wanted to do before. All of the strength-training machines looked like *torture machines from outer space*. My injury was the triggering event that got me started and I have kept going for about 5 years—for two to three times a week. I also look forward to taking yoga at the club every Tuesday and Thursday. I feel SO good afterwards.
- Then my knees started hurting. X-rays revealed I have arthritis. About one year ago I stopped doing knee exercises because of the pain. I discovered all of my muscles seem to easily waste away without constant strength training and maintenance. After one year, my knee-geometry was thrown off due to weak muscles and a severe pain developed. I could barely walk, and no hiking was allowed. I felt very sad and discouraged. Oh, no. **Not another change!**
 - A trip to the doctor and physical therapist provided me with strengthening exercises—but how to do them?

To help me make lasting activity changes, I applied the Stages of Change model.

The Stages of Change:

No one stage is more important than another—it's a process.

Stage of Change	Ways to Motivate Change
Precontemplation —Not even thinking about changing.	Increase awareness of the effects of the problem behavior. Take responsibility. Seek information.
Contemplation —Beginning to think about risks and benefits of change.	Decrease ambivalence by identifying pros and cons of change. Get support for yourself.
Preparation —Plan for a change, but don't know what to do. Think of ways to change.	Evaluate your life and get help. Make an action plan with specific steps. Set a date. Identify rewards.

Action —Making changes. Committing time and energy to practice new behaviors.	Start small. Set specific short-term goals. Work to solve problems as they arise.
Relapse —Returning to former patterns. <i>It will happen.</i> Choose to learn from it. Can last five minutes or five years!	Be kind with yourself. Determine what you can learn from the experience and plan ahead for the future. Don't give up. Just begin again! Seek out helpful resources.
Maintenance —Continuing new behaviors with increased confidence. Have awareness of what triggers a relapse.	Remind yourself of reasons for having changed. Be patient and persistent. Practice self and stress-management skills.

- **Contemplation:** I thought of all the reasons why I just wanted to give up—throw in the towel. I listened to my sad, angry, fearful and frustrated emotions. I then thought of all the reasons why I would benefit from doing the exercises. I talked myself into beginning and congratulated myself for having the courage to begin.
- **Preparation:** I visited the health resource center and the Internet and got information on arthritis—on what it is—and how I can manage it. I made copies of the exercises to have around the house. I got my yoga mat and belt and the strap-on leg weights and put them in the living room for easy access. I made a *date* with myself for exercise and put it on the calendar—the days and times. I called up the instructor and put-on-hold my Friday yoga class—since it was too intense for me right now. All of these steps helped me actually DO the exercises.
- **Action:** I first tried the exercises with the physical therapist. When I got home I did them the best I could—as the pain would allow. I saw the therapist again and discovered I wasn't doing them all correctly! So, I modified the routine. I needed to look at her written instructions and use an exercise log to remind me of what to do and keep record of my progress. I have a number of different exercises to do on different days of the week. As I am doing the exercises, I have to modify all routines depending on the pain that is present.
- **Relapse:** “I was exercising until...” My relapse started a year ago, due to arthritis knee pain. Previously, I was doing regular leg exercises at the gym. Within one year, my legs got really out of shape. I learned from this that **all muscle groups** need a regular workout and that one exercise doesn't substitute for another. Darn! I can see I will also have to watch getting so busy I forget to schedule time for me. I remember: I did it before and I can do it again.
- **Maintenance:** After 6 weeks of doing the exercises, my knee is starting to get better. I was actually totally pain-free on a longer walk! I remind myself of the value of doing the exercises and of how they directly contribute to my knee health. I know that if I stop doing them that my muscles will again get weak and the same problem will occur. I remind myself of the *pros-and-cons* of change. I asked the physical therapist for an exercise prescription for maintenance—because I know that *if I don't use it, I will lose it*.
- **I also used positive self-talk.** I thought about attitude—the attitude of acceptance, patience and appreciation—accepting the weaknesses of my body (and its strengths) and the slow progress I experience. I also practice being my own *rooting squad* and tell myself, “Good job, Bob! I'm proud of you for your efforts! Keep up the great work!” Also appreciation—I had totally taken for granted the ability to walk and hike—now I don't. I really treasure my blessings.

Slow and steady wins the race. My boss calls me “Mr. Maintenance.” But really, my strength is **persistence**. I just begin again and again. I developed the *habit of persistence* by using the **Stages of Change process**. So you can see from my story that long-term fitness requires adjustment for the different ups-and-downs in the different seasons of life. It’s not always easy, but the results of being consistent are worth it.

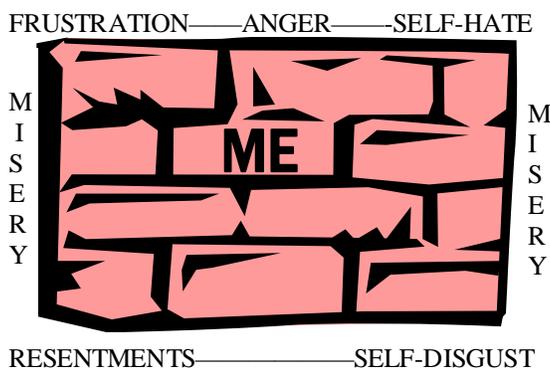
The Second Area of Change Was the Emotional

Food was my closest friend and companion. Starting in grade school, I began to use FOOD to comfort me--to make the difficult family situation more bearable. I heard voices in my head: "Ah, have some food. It will make it all better." I listened to the voices and ate lots of food.

As My Size Increased, So Did My Separation from Other People.

Children frequently act cruelly towards anyone whom they set apart as different. I was spit on, I was not played with, I was made the object of ridicule on many occasions, so many occasions, that I just wished people would go away and leave me alone. FOOD became my only friend. It wouldn't hurt me, put me down, or call me names. I started to build a wall around myself. I thought, "No matter what you say or do to me, it won't hurt me. Just go away." I didn't want anyone to touch me, love me, or hug me. Emotionally I was totally shut down and withdrawn.

Building a Wall Around Myself



I started to feel excruciating pain from being fat and different and rejected.

Oh, The Pain of Being Fat, of:

- Giving up on myself
- Feeling disappointed in myself and disgusted
- Wanting to commit suicide because I didn't want to live anymore (I didn't do it because I was sure I wouldn't be successful and would end up as an invalid)
- Not fitting through turnstiles at stores
- Not fitting into my clothes
- Wearing big sweaters and other clothing to hide the many rolls of fat
- Dreading Christmas Day get-togethers because none of the clothes that anyone brought me would fit because I had gained so much weight
- Breaking down furniture (if I did fit, I had to push the fat aside so that I could sit down)

- Breaking down my car seat
- Not being able to do pull-ups or rope climbs in physical education classes at school and having to disrobe in the locker room and have people SEE my fat
- Having my weight cut out the joy of hiking or team sports
- Not getting invited to dances or other social activities
- Having FOOD be my only friend—it wouldn't put me down or call me names
- Knowing that I had bones, but never being able to find them
- Having many people tell me that "I ought to lose weight," and telling them I would
- Knowing that people were looking at me and how fat I was
- Feeling guilty about buying so much candy and "junk" food from one store, so I went to several stores so that they wouldn't know how much food I was buying
- Wearing out my pants between the legs because my fat rubbed the legs together
- Not taking baths, for weeks at a time, because I really didn't want to look at myself
- Not feeling accepted for who I was and believing I had to earn acceptance by pleasing others and doing things for them
- Worst of all, putting myself in a big shell so no one could touch me so if they called me names, it wouldn't hurt me. As Simon and Garfunkle's song states, "I am a rock and a rock FEELS no pain."

I wanted NO ONE to touch me. I wasn't worthy of any love. Overweight isolated me and it caused me pain.

A note: For me, taking time to remember the pain of the past helps keep me motivated to make the daily commitment to ongoing lifestyle change.

Food was my closest friend and companion. It was dependable—it SEEMED to make it all better. I tried to reach out to people, but I had developed an addictive personality—I unnaturally turned to FOOD (and eventually to alcohol and overwork) to nurture and comfort me. My excess weight affected ALL parts of my life—ALL my relationships, but especially my relationship with myself. I hated myself. I would beat myself over my head with my hands and wish myself dead. Compulsive overeating is a disease of isolation, self-disgust, and self-hatred.

I finally discovered what overeating really does for me. **Taken from my diary on February 2, 1980:** "When I compulsively overeat my thinking goes all wrong. I don't love me. I'm upset, disappointed, and frustrated. I become quiet and self-condemning. I just want to be alone (crawl into a hole and die). I just continue to eat, although I'm not at all hungry." I could see overeating doesn't fix any problem. It just makes all problems worse.

Overeating is a learned dysfunctional and ineffective coping behavior. I had used it to help me bear the pain of:

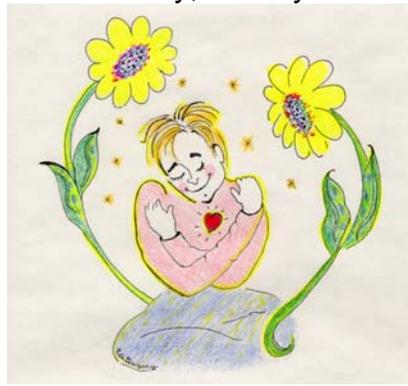
1. My parents' VERY unhealthy relationship, which ended in divorce. I was then shuffled between two households. I felt such inner turmoil because I loved my parents so much.
2. My mother's chronic depressive illness (alcoholism/chemical dependency). Over a 25-year period, she went through hospitals, nursing homes, mental institutions and ultimately death. My mother died at 50. I experienced intense anguish over her pitiful suffering.
3. My school experiences, including community college and university were frequently interrupted due to family chaos.
4. FEELING deeply isolated, unwanted, inferior, and ugly due to my lack of social skills.

How did I transform this area? How did I break down my emotional walls?

In the past I had learned to be an excellent caregiver to my family and classmates **but I didn't know how to love and care for myself!**

One of the most difficult things for me to do was to love me—in practice. To admit I was SICK—that **I needed help**—and to take care of MY NEEDS required time! I finally HAD to put my needs on the list—first things first—and slow down and stop fixing everyone else. THAT was hard to do. A day at a time, I'm falling in love with myself AS I AM. I'm respecting myself and treating myself with gentleness. I'm no longer willing to kill myself for ANYone or ANYthing. When no one is around and I NEED a HUG—I wrap my arms around ME and give myself a HUG! I tell myself, "I love you, Bobby Sweetheart. You are wonderful!" This felt very odd and unnatural at first. But I thought that if I could hit me over the head and wish me dead—as I had done on many times before, then I could certainly give myself a hug and a kiss; just as I would to a loving friend.

Oh Bobby, I love you...



as you **are** and as you **are not**.

Part of the root of my low self-esteem came from having **delight deficiency syndrome**. I didn't take enough time to care for my soul and spirit in nurturing ways. I found that deep down I didn't feel worthwhile. For me, **applied self-esteem** was learning how to take time for activities that fill up my well of reserve; so from that well, I then take time to help others.

For me the daily practice of:

- Preparing yummy meals and snacks,
- Of bringing a food bag with me
- Taking time for loving social connections
- Finding fun ways to be active on a regular basis
- Taking time to provide a rich treasure chest of nurturing activities for me.
- Making time for daily prayer and meditation and retreats on a regular basis
- **Keeping my life in enough balance** so that I can regularly apply all of the ideas I am sharing with you in my story.

These are all the things I do for me. **This shows me, at a deep, core level, that I really love and care for me.** I'm not "holy hot stuff!" I have limits. When I exceed my "design capacity," I become unhealthy. If I don't practice these essential supportive activities on a regular basis, then I crash and burn. It happens gradually. Just because I know about all of these things doesn't mean that I don't need to PRACTICE them.

I noticed that everything I do affects everything else. **My life is an ecosystem.** The law of cause and effect, or sowing and reaping, plays out at all levels of my being. An example is if I keep too busy, don't plan for healthful food choices, don't plan some quiet time or some fun ways to relax, nor take time for physical activity, then I'm much more likely to make poor food choices and end up emotionally and mentally off track. If I **do** practice self-care, then my life seems to roll on a wholesome rhythm and I make healthier choices in all levels of my life.

See the *transforming root causes of social isolation* part of my story to see how for me, entering into balanced, healthful relationships was an essential part of my transforming my low self-esteem.

A concept that REALLY helped me be gentler with myself was to remember I STILL HAVE a "little child" part of me INSIDE my adult body. I learned to make friends with that emotional part of me—to remember HOW little children grow and change. They NEED freedom to try out new things, they need support and encouragement for their efforts, and they ALWAYS need unconditional love that nurtures them while they're learning. They need to feel that their worth is NOT tied to performance, that they are O.K. and loved—no matter what. As an adult, I know how to do MANY things with great skill. In OTHER areas of life, I still feel like "a kid in poopy diapers!" I NEED HELP to clean up my messes. I NEED LOVE AND ENCOURAGEMENT. One superb book on the issue of learning to love, support, and nurture yourself is *Self-Parenting—The Complete Guide to Your Inner Conversations* by Dr. John K. Pollard, III. (In *Freedom From Diets*, other ideas and resources are provided.)



Me at about 3 years old

How did I transform the suffering and pain in my life into well-being? I did it through practicing compassion, kindness, awareness, and making more skillful choices. I did it by valuing myself more and making a commitment of time to find out what my needs were. I also learned about my personal limits and noticed the inner signals of "malfunction imminent, shut down in progress." I found these ideas to be universal: everyone can benefit from them.

Through practicing these ideas, many times, I learned how to be with uncomfortable emotions and not eat to mask them.

The suggestions below summarize the compassionate process about the journey of personal transformation—mine and yours. Practicing this skill on a daily basis has helped me transform my self-hate into self-respect.

We start with touching our suffering—the things that hurt:

Where you're at, is where you're at! You can't be anywhere else. So, just start there.

The process is summarized in the following FIVE steps:

Step 1: Recognize it—observe it—notice that something is wrong. Something hurts. You don't know what it is, so you check it out.

Step 2: Accept it and look deeply—you do not deny it; you accept whatever is present.

Step 3: Embrace it—your mindfulness (awareness) embraces your situation and your feelings—without judging yourself. You just notice, and are present with, whatever arises.

Just like a baby or child crying, you pay attention.



Embrace your pain and confusion as a loving mother would toward her child.

Talk with yourself:

Oh, sweetheart, what is the matter? What do you need? I am here for you.

I will not abandon you and I love you.

I hear that you are in pain. Can you tell me about it? Take your time.

Let me know when you are ready. I don't want to rush you or invalidate your feelings.

I will always be here for you.

So, let me know what hurts. Is there anything I can do to help?

After being present for your inner emotional self (like an inner child), then you may want to start providing suggestions, insights and other options for healing. Consider reading inspirational books or self-nurturing and self-esteem books. I have had to read things over **many times**—gradually my understanding deepened and the *tone of the relationship* I had with myself changed from self-hatred to self-love. I gradually stopped beating up on myself (literally) and became kinder to me and learned the skill of compassionate self-care.

Self-abuse is not OK.

It's just not OK to be mean to yourself for any reason.

If you notice that you're about to beat up on yourself....

Just STOP!

Step 4: Then **evaluate it**—what is causing it? Is it physical, emotional? Just like a doctor that evaluates an illness, we tune-in to ourselves and notice the symptoms. What patterns do you have in your life that are causing the distress? Notice your habits.

Step 5: The suffering needs to be understood. Encourage yourself to look deeply into your suffering—recognize its nature. You do this by seeing how it came about.

What nutrients are creating and sustaining it? Notice—be mindful, which nutrients are creating the symptoms that you are presently experiencing?

- **Food nutrients?** What you eat or drink can bring about distress in your body and mind. Do you cook and shop and eat with awareness? Just notice.
- **Sense nutrients** (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings of body or thoughts of mind)? You are always in constant contact with sense objects. They are food for your mind and emotions. Notice if certain *objects* stimulate your cravings and misery.
- **Intention/Motivation nutrients?** Choose to be aware of what motivates you. What do you think will bring you happiness? Wealth, fame, career, a mate? Do those things really bring lasting happiness?
- **Nutrients stored in our subconscious**—your past actions of body, speech and mind—your habits? All of your habits of body, speech and mind are stored in your subconscious. Through repetition, these choices become unconscious and automatic. **Which habits for you are creating the problems?**

Through practicing this skill of going inside for our answers, then we can unravel the roots of emotional eating.

To transform our emotional eating habits, we learn to ask: Why am I in this place, at this particular time, with this food in my hand, about to eat it? Do I need it? Am I really hungry? Do I need to eat food at this time? Do I feel stressed or emotionally overwhelmed? What am I feeling? Will eating solve the problem, or will it make it worse? What do I really need?

Am I eating to fix painful emotions or situations?



From Sandra Stoltz, *The Food Fix*, 1983.

Many times for me, family chaos brought on feelings of extreme sadness and confusion. In 1979 my mother's mental state had deteriorated due to her alcoholism and chemical dependency. I was responsible for caring for her. For her own well-being, she needed to be committed to a mental institution.

Taken from my diary on May 9, 1979: “My mother is mentally ill and I will have her committed for assistance this evening. I am troubled at heart. My mother and I have gone through so much together. I tried to call the courthouse to find out about the process of committal. The phone line was busy. So I rushed off to the store and got 7 ounces of Butter Finger miniatures and 1 pint of ice cream and ate them. After I had finished, them I wondered WHY I had done it. It didn’t help my mother or me.”

My diaries tell many stories of similar painful situations and my response of destructive eating “to make it all better.” **On October 5, 1979:** “Last night (after a fight with a friend) I overate 8 –10 cookies, pecan pie, a French dip sandwich, 3 candy bars, 1 pint ice cream with chocolate sauce, 2.5 glasses wine, 1 scoop ice cream, 1 square of pumpkin pudding. I wasn’t feeling well (from overeating the night before) and so to comfort myself I overate to ‘help out.’ Ha, ha! What a deception and a lie. Overeating did NOT help out.”

I’ve always been the best me I could be, at each stage of my journey of change. I’ve done the best I could with the knowledge and skills I had at the time. When I learned more and practiced new skills, my choices became more effective. The pivotal, most essential practice was to:

Stop the inner firing squad, to stop self-judgment.

I was willing to practice the skill of compassion to the wounded being who lives inside of my skin, not demand it be different or more evolved. I learned to truly listen to that part of myself while asking, “Oh, Bobby sweetheart, what do you really need?” This PRACTICE helped my inner, emotional part to really understand that **I do care**.

Previously, if I had been an “outer parent” to little Bobbie, I would have been arrested for child abuse. To really learn to **be a kind and gentle parent to myself** required trying out, over and over again, everything that I’ve shared with you in this section. For me, the results have been miraculous. I’ve come out of hell, into emotional well-being. I’ve learned, every second is a new beginning. **The key to success is to: just begin again!**

It’s not OK to harm myself, even for a spectacular reason.
I deserve warmth, caring, affection, and self acceptance.



I radiate these qualities first to myself, and then to others.

The Third Area Of Change was in The Spiritual Dimension.

I experienced much self-anger and disgust due to my inability to stop overeating (what can be called “food trances”) around my various life problems. When I finally arrived at a place where I no longer wanted to hide my feelings with excess food, I **STARTED** to learn about myself. Overeating was such a pain that I became willing to exert the effort to find out how to get better.

I needed a practical way to get in touch with a God of my understanding—to somehow get back in touch with the core of inner aliveness and delight that I had as a child. As a child, I had developed the concept of a fearful and condemning God from whom I felt very distant.

I grew up in the Catholic faith. Earlier on I was totally “into it.” I was even an altar boy. I felt a deep belief in God. But as my emotional and mental and physical life deteriorated, I felt more and more separated from “the God of my understanding.” I received an excellent education and experienced the instilling of spiritual values and self-discipline. However, I also felt deep self-condemnation for my failure to live up to the high moral standards that were taught to me and as time went on, I became more and more compulsive, and felt more and more isolated.

I continued my search to unravel the mystery of why I was so compulsive around food (and everything else) and was **led to join a 12-Step program**. When I first entered the spiritual support group it was to help with my overeating. I didn't want anyone to get close to me. I just wanted to be alone so I could eat (and die)! In the group I discovered hugging. I felt accepted and loved and I had someone to listen to me. I had a new family who cared for me.

I was introduced to a program for living. I started to change. I had to admit that I was (and am) powerless over food, without any help, and I **GRADUALLY** came to believe that a power greater than myself—both inside of me and outside—could restore me to a right response to life. So I was willing to follow the suggestions. Over time, using the suggestions of the program, I was placed in a position of neutrality. The compulsion to overeat (and drink) has been removed **on a daily basis, depending on my spiritual condition**. I now don't fight against compulsive eating and drug and alcohol use. The inner war has ended. A personal truce has been put in place. Ah. I experience peace.

Sometimes my prayer is simple: “I don't know what I need. If I could fix me, I would. My best thinking brought me to my present experience. I need help! Higher Power, I don't know **WHAT** I need. But, whatever it is, can you bring it to me in a **GENTLE WAY**, because I have always beaten the heck out of me. P.S. Thanks!” After 30 years, I can tell that my life **HAS** been guided against my best efforts to kill myself in numerous ways. I am very grateful. Sometimes answers come from people, books, magazine articles, TV shows—suddenly, an aha—an insight or understanding or healing comes and it precipitates the sought-after change.

My concept of a God or Higher Power has changed during the 30 years that I have been in the program. I experienced step-by-step guidance. My prayer: I'm open to receiving guidance from various spiritual sources—**HELP!**

One of the wonderful things I discovered was the practice of daily spiritual quiet time and reflection. The program provided suggestions for achieving a deep personal and spiritual transformation. So, **no matter what condition my condition was in**, I took time for daily prayer and meditation, a practice that I still maintain: I spend from 20 minutes to 1.5 hours/day. I pray for others and myself, read inspirational materials, and take time to be quiet—to meditate—to be open to *the still, small voice within myself*. I developed this daily pattern so that—always, first thing each day—no matter what, I spend the time. I have done this for 30 years. This one choice, to cultivate my spiritual dimension, has been the most valuable choice I have ever made.

These programs have helped me with my food, alcohol, and drug compulsions.

I then **joined the Four Square Gospel Church**. The people were wonderful, very loving and encouraging. I joined the church after I had lost the weight in 1972. In church I was given a prophecy that I was supposed to be “God’s minister of health—of body, mind and spirit—reach out and follow Christ, that I was chosen a fisher of men. That I could do all things through Christ that strengthened me.” I had a health ministry at the church. Trying to follow this vision lead to me being completely overextended and stressed out, which contributed to me using alcohol and drugs to relieve my stress.

It was their belief that if a person just had enough faith then any condition would be transformed and healed. All I had to do was “trust in the Lord Jesus, have faith and all would be transformed.” I had seen that belief work for many people; but for my mother and myself being prayed over, anointed with oil, “being slain in the Spirit” did not transform our deep-seated compulsive natures. They found out that I am gay, and according to their beliefs, that was *an abomination before the Lord*. Because of my inability to change this aspect of my person, I decided not to continue attending their fellowship.

In 1985, I discovered **the Course In Miracles**. It is based on Christianity and is a training manual for spiritual growth. It has a *Text, 365 Daily Lessons and Manual for Teachers*. It teaches us to see the world about us differently—to see beyond the confusion and weakness and to find strength and unity. It helps us to see all actions of everyone as pleas for help, requests for love. It leads us to recognize and know our Internal Teacher, to find our Self. It’s *not* a course on changing water into wine or walking on water! This course really helped me to begin changing my inner conditioning and to think of life differently. It did not help me understand the tremendous suffering that I saw in the world.

I was also still drinking alcohol at that time, even though I had gone to outpatient alcohol treatment in 1985, but continued to drink until 1987 because I was unwilling to change my life and do the pruning that was needed. And so I continued my spiritual journey.

Next I was drawn to **The Church Of Religious Science: Science Of Mind**. It uses the power of the mind and our thoughts to help people transform their thought processes to produce the positive results in their lives that they desire. It was their belief that any condition could be transformed by using a *spiritual mind treatment*. One of their ministers is Louise Hay. I loved her book; *You Can Heal Your Life*. I found their approach very helpful for me—to use affirmative suggestions—to help change my tremendous self-hatred and negative self talk. The people in this church were very inspiring and heartfelt.

What they didn’t provide me was an explanation of the deep and profound suffering I had experienced in my family, in the work that I do (working for many years in the cancer and

Aids wards of a hospital), and in the suffering that I see in our world-family. I deeply cried out for an explanation.

For me, God had not lived up to His or Her job description: Everyone told me what God would do, when and where God would do it, and how God would do it—but for me, things were still a mess and so was I!

On one of the Course Of Miracles retreats (in 1987) I picked up a book by Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness!* It was my first introduction to **Buddhist meditation**. As I read it and started to practice what it suggested, things started to change for me. I started studying *insight meditation*, which provides techniques for becoming more aware of thoughts and automatic emotional and thinking patterns and gives techniques for changing them. I read many books. Very gradually—step by step—my deep questions about all of the profound suffering (and great joy) that I see all around me were answered. I started to change on a very deep level.

For me, **I found Buddhism to be like spiritual cognitive therapy**. It gave practical answers and insights about what creates suffering and problems in my life and what creates happiness and joy. It doesn't ask me to look outside myself for answers, but suggests I look within to cultivate health and long-term well-being. I wasn't drawn to it as a religion, but for the very practical explanations about our human journey. It helped me to understand my inherent (inborn) sufferings, how I *create* many of my own problems, and how to transform my experience by thinking and acting in new ways. Buddhism provides suggestions on leading an ethical life and the means and process to achieve it. It helped me understand and apply 12-Step program's *Serenity Prayer*: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, courage to change the things that I can and the wisdom to know the difference." The next ideas share some insights.

The Four Truths from the Noble Ones describe the unsatisfactory situation we are presently caught in, as well as our potential for liberation and happiness.

The Four Truths of the Noble Ones

The first two Truths outline our present situation and its causes; the last two present our potential for change and describe the practice to achieve it—that is, to bring about changes in our lives.

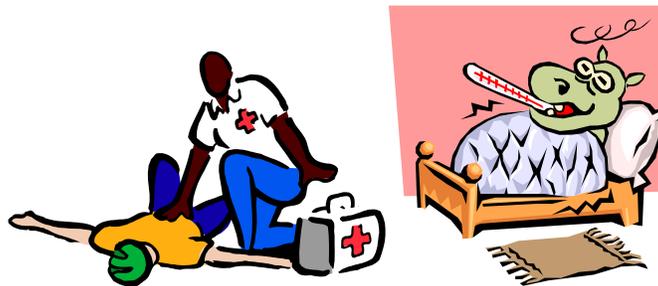
1. It is true that we experience unsatisfactory conditions, suffering, difficulties, compulsions and problems. Acknowledge what hurts, what isn't working in our lives. What difficulties, both physical and mental, do you have in your life? See them as part of the human experience, as arising simply because you have the body and mind that you do.
2. These unsatisfactory experiences have causes: lack of understanding of cause and effect, attachment, anger, and other disturbing attitudes, as well as the actions we do under their influence. These causes of our unsatisfactory situation are to be understood and then abandoned—to be transformed into peace, contentment, and joy.

Conclusion: See how your negative emotions and behavioral patterns cause you suffering. Reflect that they distort your perception of an experience and cause you to act in ways that bring suffering to yourself and to others.

3. It is true that the possibility exists to completely cease these unsatisfactory patterns and their causes. Examples: low self-esteem, compulsive eating, alcohol and drug use. These changes are to be realized. How do you do it? Reflect on that it is possible to be free from disturbing patterns. What would it feel like not to be under the influence of disturbing attitudes, negative emotions, and the actions motivated by them?
4. It is true that there is a path (a process) to bring about this transformation and personal freedom. The path (ethics, mindfulness/concentration and wisdom) is to be practiced. First, be aware of your habitual patterns. Notice your unproductive responses. While in a calm state, **rehearse a new, more effective response**. When a situation arises again—try the new response out. Practice. Be gentle and kind with yourself. Over time, new patterns and responses are created which then replace the old patterns. This happens one step at a time, one day at a time. Gradually, your whole experience transforms.

Practice doesn't make perfect, it makes change and happiness easier and more natural. Practice also makes new patterns permanent.

The 12-step programs say, “Even people with grave emotional and mental disorders do recover if they have the capacity to be honest.” I have felt like a “grave emotional and mental disorder” walking around—and just kept *practicing* new patterns, new choices for myself and, little by little, my inner and outer patterns were transformed.



The Characteristics of life on earth

Contemplating these characteristics of all things in life on earth helps us to better understand our present situation. For me, taking into consideration these ideas normalized the universal challenges that I saw everyone experiencing.

Consider the difficulties we experience as human beings. All people and things on earth have these characteristics:

1. **Transience**. By looking at your life, reflect:
 - Everything in our world—people, objects, reputation, everything on earth—is transient and changeable by its very nature.
 - Things aren't *solid*—although they appear to be that way—everything changes. Some examples: a person, a mountain, a car or a flower. Reflect that all these seemingly solid and independent things—ourselves and other phenomena—are illusory—that means that everything exists by depending on causes, conditions, parts and a

consciousness, which conceives and labels them. As any of the *parts* change—the causes and conditions that brought them about—then the person (our self concept or personal identities), place or thing changes. It is NOT solid, fixed or unchangeable. There is nothing that exists without depending on causes, conditions, or other factors. This truth allows everything to change, grow and evolve. Things are really more like a rainbow or a reflection in a lake or a mirage, rather than the solid and fixed way they seem to exist.

- Our refusal to accept this reality causes us pain.
 - In your heart, try to accept the transient nature of all things.
2. **Unsatisfactory conditions.** Not everything is 100 percent wonderful in our lives. We experience:
- Unsatisfactory situations of pain and suffering, both physical and mental.
 - Happy situations that are unsatisfactory because they don't provide lasting happiness. In addition, they change and disappear.
 - ♦ Think of the act of eating. It seems to give us pleasure but as we keep eating we get more and more uncomfortable. At first, we experience the pain of hunger, so eating seems like happiness. The pain of hunger stops as the pain of overeating begins. If eating were inherently pleasurable—the more we ate the better we would feel—but this isn't true.
 - The unsatisfactory situation of having a body that ages, gets sick, and dies, and a mind that is under the control of disturbing attitudes and actions.

The Five Daily Remembrances—The Sufferings of Human Beings

Considering these ideas, helps provide the wisdom of perspective about our human journey.

1. I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old. Think about someone you know and the changes you have seen him or her go through as they age. Think about yourself—growing from a baby to a child into a teenager and onto young adulthood to being a mature adult. Just observe that you keep the same body—but it gradually changes all of the time.
2. I am of the nature to have ill-health. There is no way to escape having ill-health. Remember a time when you or a loved one has been sick—colds, flu, allergies, aches, pains, and injuries. Notice that frequently these transform naturally into well-being, and over time, into ill-health.
3. I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death. Bear in mind—through personal experience or watching the news—that everyone, rich or poor, famous or unknown—at all different ages, leaves this earth at some point. This process is natural for all things on earth: “To everything there is a season under heaven.”
4. All that is dear to me, and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them. Everything we encounter—family and friends, careers, beautiful possessions, and even our youthful, strong bodies—everything is of the nature to change.
5. **My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions.** My actions are the ground on which I stand.
(Adapted from *The Heart of The Buddha's Teachings*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, page 124.)

By taking time each day to reflect on my life, I learned to be a gardener to my own mind and

life. I was able to uproot harmful patterns and nurture skillful ones. You can do the same. **Life can be a dramatic demonstration of these principles of self-awareness and self-change.** Even though I felt that my depression, self-hatred, and compulsive nature was *unchangeable*, it wasn't. As I changed my thoughts, attitudes and actions, gradually everything transformed into well-being and health: balanced thinking, freedom from compulsion, self love, and gratitude. **This same process can work for you too!**

I found if I live ethically, my mind calms down. I can concentrate better. I'm less agitated and guilty. I like others and myself better. Including the spiritual component in weight management helps my motivation, in that I take a long-term view of emotional growth and physical well-being. I deeply care about others and myself. As I become healthier on all levels, my relationships with others improve. Through the practice of compassionate self-care skills, I achieve my highest spiritual aspirations.

What my spiritual journey showed me was that we are all individuals. What works well for one person may not work for another. I celebrate the fact that so many people's lives have benefited from so many different faiths.

Life's Lessons

Life presents us with many challenges, which vary from one person to another, depending on family, location of birth, and personality characteristics. On close examination of these challenges, we frequently notice patterns. My inner torment lessened and my inner peace increased as I became aware of the *patterns of experiences* that seem to repeat in my life. Reframing these difficult life experiences as learnings and rich growth opportunities helped me put them into perspective.

(See the appendix for the *Rules For Being Human*, which for me provided perspective to our human journey.)

Working with Chronic Lessons

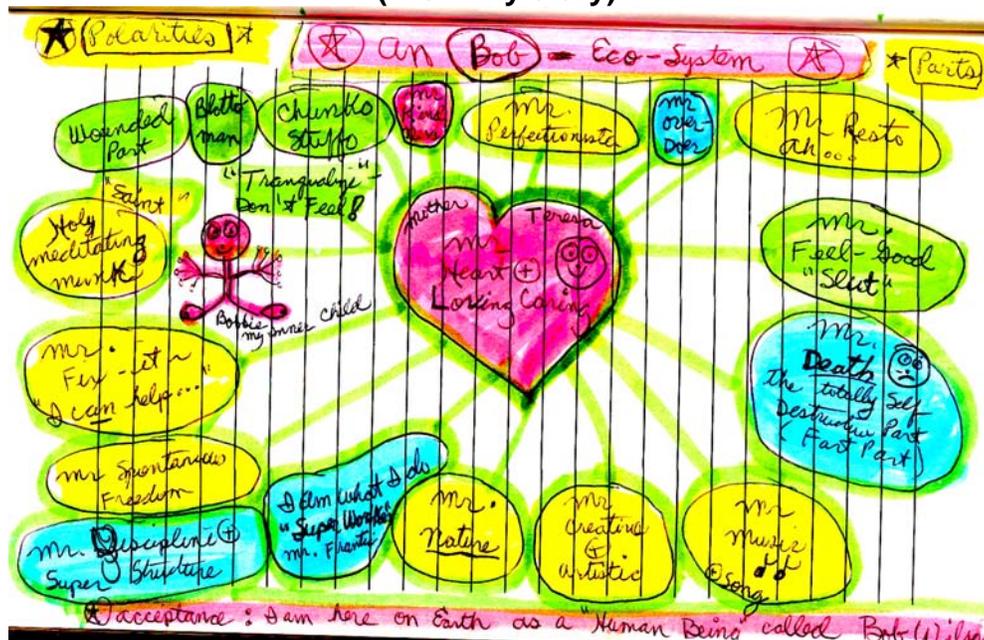
Some of life's lessons that seem to repeat over and over for me:

1. **An extremely compulsive personality**, which is very passionate about life and is easily carried away by anything pleasurable: food, drugs, and alcohol—anything that feels good. One part of me wants more and more and more...and *more*.
2. **World codependency—I feel I am a “big mother with a beard.”** I care about the whole world and deeply wish our human family would just get along and *quit fighting with your brothers and sisters! Get a grip, just get with it!* I also can let the earth's sufferings affect my emotional health—allowing me to feel despondent, frustrated, and cynical. A part of me wants to *shut down emotionally* and run away and really hates being human—with all of its sufferings and pain. Since many of my friends and family have numerous challenges, I can easily get trapped into taking on their problems as my own, getting discouraged and wanting to “numb out.” That part of me also wants to *fix* everyone and make them do the things to get better. I know intellectually that it's not my job to fix the world, but that part of me forgets and suffers when other people suffer. I then get very sad, frustrated and pessimistic and lose perspective. Through therapy I know that part

came about from wanting to fix a chronically un-fixable family. I know I have continually had to remind myself to regain a *healthy perspective*. Over time I've gotten much better.

3. **A part of me wants no limits.** I want to be able to do everything! My brain dreams up commitments that my body can't keep. I can easily find my self overwhelmed and exhausted and a part of me screams out, I don't want to take a nap! I just hate being human with all of my limitations. Why can't I do everything that I want to do?
4. **I love all of life, but there is just too darn much of it!** Life in America seems way too busy for me. I work only part time, but with all the things it takes to be healthy in body, mind and spirit, I find my attending to all of life's opportunities and responsibilities can easily push me out of balance. I like to take time to gawk at trees, flowers, birds, and people and really enjoy the sacred wonders of life, not feel like a chicken running around with its head cut off.

Diagram: Parts (polarities) of Bob Wilson—An Ecosystem
(From my diary)



I feel at times that I'm on the board of directors of an insane asylum! Each of the different parts of me wants different outcomes. Gradually I have learned to listen respectfully to each of the voices, practice "win-win" conflict resolution, and come up with more skillful responses for the situations in which I find myself.

In my personality I'm aware of two especially strong polarities—the saint and the slut. The saint part is extremely kind, thoughtful, and balanced and sees the value of discipline. The slut part wants everything—food, drugs, sex and alcohol—everything to excess with no limits—gets really over extended and numbed out. When the saint mentions to the slut "You know, this may not be the best things to do," the slut says "Oh, shut up! I'm having a really great time. Don't bug me." So I have to have a "conference call" between the two parts. They

both talk it out and express their two perspectives. Gradually the wisdom of the saint has helped moderate the slut part and I have learned about the strong tendencies I have to follow certain unhealthy patterns. I have developed practical strategies to keep myself more in balance.

The Fourth Area of Change was Transforming the Root Causes of Social Isolation

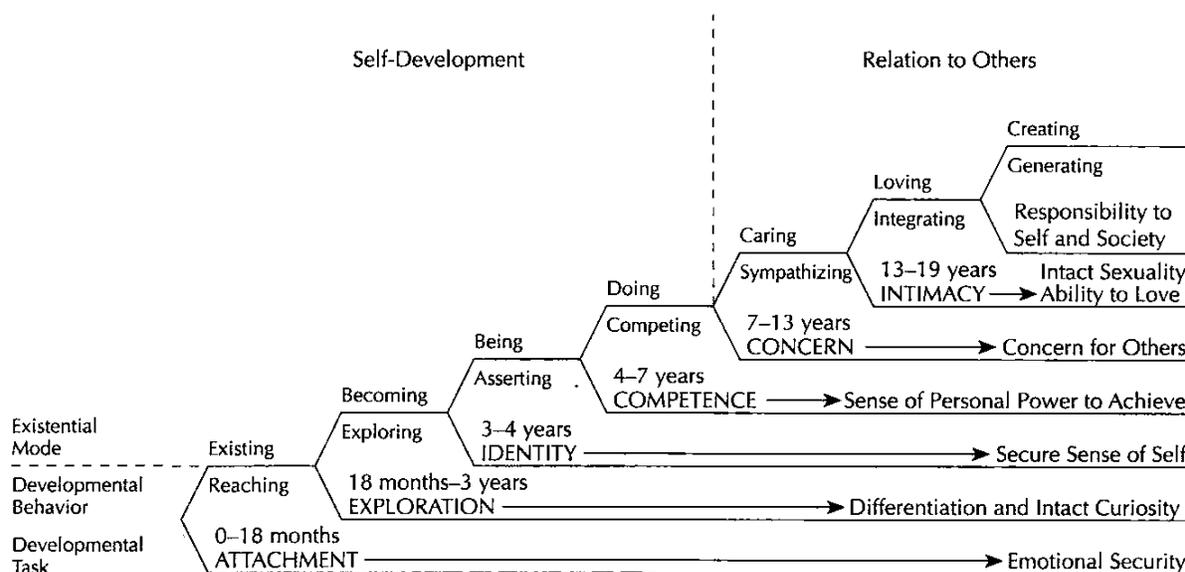
To expand my social life, I learned that life is about relationships—with ourselves and other people.

I needed to learn how to establish good relationships with people, not just FOOD! I had to find out how to be honest with others and myself, both at home and at work. I started by setting right my family relationships with my father, mother, grandparents, and the God of my understanding. I did this by using the tools of a support group.

I really wanted to learn how to deal honestly and openly with all relationships. I found if there were problems to work through, even if they were difficult to face, I should face them. This area was one of the most challenging for me. I needed to find a counselor who could help me through all this learning. (The Appendix has suggestions on getting therapeutic help for your journey.) It is in the family system that we learn about how to explore our world, what our identity is and how to develop skills for being competent in the world. We also experience—at a deep core level—our unconditional value as human beings and how to establish healthy patterns of intimacy and concern for others. We also learn about how to resolve problems and to set limits for ourselves. The family is an ongoing laboratory where we gain knowledge of all of these things.

At each stage of our life, we learn a predictable series of skills. If development is impeded at a particular point, an important skill may not be learned affecting the next stage. The first four to six years of life are when we are most dependent, receptive, and malleable—and they have a profound effect on the rest of our lives. For me, being wounded at many of the stages affected all of my relationships—with myself and other people.

The Psychosocial Journey of the Self



From Harville Hendrix, *Keeping The Love You Find*, 1992

I learned about these concepts in *Keeping The Love You Find*, by Harville Hendrix, (1992, Pocket Books). The book explains with amazing clarity how our initial relationships form an *imago*, a buried potential image, and consequently create an unconscious attraction to fall in love with someone who has the positive and negative traits of our imperfect parents. This is someone who we feel will meet our emotional needs—except that they can't. My parents' positive traits were: they liked the earth, nature, and flowers. They had an intense spiritual side, were sensitive and sincere, intelligent and honest. Their negative traits were: they didn't take care of themselves, abused alcohol, food and drugs. They didn't communicate about feelings or work through problems in healthy ways, and they finally abandoned me—if not physically, at least emotionally.

I was baffled by relationships. Were there really any healthy ones on earth? I hadn't seen them. How did people create one? I sure hadn't learned about how to have one. I am so grateful that I could learn—through books, classes, and individual counseling about nurturing relationships.

These were my initial experiences:

1. My parents' failed relationship and their individual, multiple, unhealthy, unsuccessful marriages to other people.
2. My first relationship at age 21 to a person with many fine qualities as well as many addictive habits and harmful patterns: alcohol, drugs, and non-monogamous sex. I ended this relationship after 16 years.
3. Few of my friends and other family members had loving, long-term relationships.
4. I noticed that the same patterns just kept repeating for people—again and again—but I didn't know how to stop and change the process. I became aware of the fact that if people didn't LOOK at the root patterns, which resided under the surface, they created the same problems, just with a different person.
5. I thought that if heterosexual people had so many problems with relationships, that as a gay man, I was sure that I'd have to move to Mars to find someone.

To transform the patterns in my life, I chose to explore the root causes and try out new skills and choices. This took extensive soul-searching and working through the kinds of exercises included in this book. I kept notes in my journals as I dated (about 100 people!) Through this process, I went through the normal socialization process, but at 40 years old, that I hadn't gone through in my teens. I noted all my feelings, compulsive eating binges, successes, failures—all my ups and downs—as I noticed that “those people whom **I wanted** to fall in lust with me, didn't and those people whom I did **not want** to fall in lust with me did!” My counselor shared resources with me on healthy dating and self-love and helped me put together a list of the qualities that for me were essential in a heart-centered, loving, and conscious relationship—both with myself and for another person.

My counselor encouraged me to think about giving to myself all of the love and nurturing that I'd like to receive from someone else and really be willing to give it to myself. To ask myself, what I would like? Am I willing to give it to myself? What would my vision for the relationship be?

She told me that I needed to complete the inner work before the outer need would be met. That I would get the person I needed as I healed and that my deepest inner needs would be met when I was ready. She said that “I'm the **cake** and the relationship is the **icing** on it.”



I'M SO GLAD I TOOK THE TIME AND EFFORT TO DO THIS! My **cake** is now **frosted** with a delightful, wonderfully healthy relationship—one that is beyond my wildest fantasies.

Another enormously challenging area of learning was how important it is to watch extreme loyalty (codependency)—sticking with people (family, friends or lovers) when they practice self-destructive behaviors. We are doing neither them nor us a favor when we do not let them know their behaviors are not okay with us. The responsible action to take here is to communicate we will stay in relationship with them only if they are willing to make changes...and to follow through on those changes. We can also tell them we love them and deeply hope they take responsibility for their choices.

The Fifth Area of Change was Discovering Balance

My brain (and heart) dreams up commitments my body can't keep! For example, providing care to sick or elderly friends and family members. I took care of my mother for 12 years and my grandmother for another 10 years. For me this proved to be exceptionally challenging. Many times I depleted my “sanity reserve bank account” and fell into self-destructive patterns while providing exceedingly loving and compassionate care. My thinking patterns became very distorted—I loved others so completely that I would do anything for

them, but when it came to me, I wished God had made me a robot so that I would have NO needs. Having needs was inconvenient. If I was supposed to be an “infinite helping machine,” then why did God make me with needs? **I finally realized that I had over-commitment to others and under-commitment to me.** I saw the effect of this pattern on my life.

One of the great joys and blessings in life is being able to share our talents and gifts with our larger community—as volunteers. Again for me, **this area has time and again caused me problems.** I want to make a difference in my spiritual group, dietetic community, neighborhood, and the world at large—and my diaries have shown me the harmful effects of what happens when I get out of balance. I become compulsive, cranky, controlling, reactive, depressed, and physically, mentally, and emotionally ill.

In 1985 I went to outpatient alcohol treatment to stop drinking. I had just switched compulsions from food to alcohol and drugs. I was in a relationship with someone who abused alcohol and drugs, was caring for my sick grandmother and reaching out to the community in numerous ways while teaching extra nutrition classes and working full-time. In 1987—two years after treatment—I was still drinking. In treatment I had written out a plan for change—but I never carried through with any of the options that were planned. Then in 1987 I took a week off, went camping, and did a thorough evaluation of my life. I realized I needed 9.5/days every week to get done all of the things that I was doing! No wonder I was stressed out and harming myself. I thought of all my options and wrote out a list of possible consequences and then did a SCARY thing...I carried out the plan and got out of my 16-year relationship, quit my job, and changed my friendships. Since that time, the urge to drink alcohol and use drugs was completely removed and I have not had a drink for 15 years.

As you can see, when my life got out of balance, I created the causes and conditions for compulsive behavior. These were some of the things I have obsessed over, felt bad and guilty about, and then ate or drank over to numb out because I felt so awful. How about you?

Balance in lifestyle is essential for my physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and mental health. When I'm over extended, I become too confused and overwhelmed to practice all of the things I know, and go into “automatic self-destruct” mode. My bio-computer (my brain) blows a fuse, I'm unable to stop and, at that point, I don't care. If you told me to stop, I'd tell you to “stick it!” It is most valuable to notice the symptoms of impending emotional and physical overwhelm (see stress management in the appendix) and make choices to prune my life back to a healthful balance. Over time, I've learned to be my own wise lifestyle counselor.

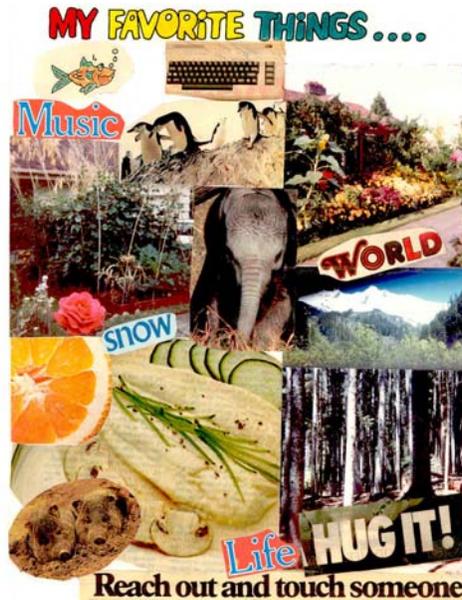
*Don't look around and see what the world needs.
LOOK at what you need to truly come alive
and give that to yourself,
because what the world needs is...
“truly alive people”,
and give that gift to the world!*

(Author unknown. Discovered on a bulletin board at a retreat center.)

Freedom From Diets explores ways to bring simplicity and balance into our lives.

The Sixth Area of Change Was in the Mental Arena

Although I could learn about food, nutrition, and my eating habits, there was still something wrong: my body had changed, but my thinking hadn't! The ways I *reacted to life* were still the same. I had to learn about my thinking habits, to accept the fact that "what I think becomes me." Whatever I put my focus on...EXPANDS: fears or trust, misery or happiness and joy. When I constantly think discouraging thoughts about myself and others, I end up feeling very discouraged about everything. I tried it. It works! But when I put encouraging, loving thoughts into my mind about others and myself, I have a great time! I tried it. It works! The choice is yours—and mine.



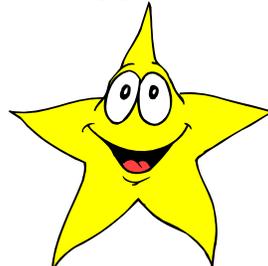
Collage shows my flower and vegetable gardens, forests and yummy foods.

I had to learn about what really makes me happy:

- It's NOT about losing weight.
- It's NOT about having material possessions.
- It's NOT about having a career or the perfect job.
- It's NOT the many other things that I thought would make me happy.

What really makes me happy is focusing on WHAT I do have to enjoy, SIMPLE THINGS, to rejoice in ordinary things. Just the ordinary things of life add richness and depth to existence.

I started by watering the seeds of happiness in myself.



I discovered **suffering could be transformed into well-being**. So I took time to realize the well-being that already existed in my life: taking time to notice the wonders, beauties, and blessings in my life *balanced* the experience of the challenges and sufferings that were also present.

1. I asked myself, what nourishes joy and a sense of contentment in me? (See the appendix at the end of my story for self-nurturing ideas and an Alphabetical Guide to Zestful Living.)
2. How could I enjoy the precious jewels that I already have? I slowed down enough to allow myself to feel the sacredness of life.
3. I encouraged myself to find peace and joy. I took time to delight in my life. Yay, whoopee!
4. I noticed the kindness of others and practiced the skill of gratitude: what am I grateful for? I wrote a gratitude list. This truly helps me. It is SO easy to take everything for granted. See Appendix for an example.
5. I practiced dwelling deeply in the present moment—not thinking about the future or the past—just really noticing and experiencing what is happening right now.
6. I also noticed it is calming and nurturing to my mind and emotions to **practice feeling contented and peaceful—with whatever is going on and wherever I am**. This practice forms a *habit of mind*. I am then not waiting for everything to be exactly the way I want it to be before I will allow myself to feel happy.

After noticing the nutrients (life choices) that caused suffering and pain, I began to transform them through making more conscious choices. As I ingested less of the nutrients that caused suffering, my suffering lessened. It took practice, but as I created the causes for well-being—well-being eventually showed up and grew. **My whole life has been a dramatic demonstration of the law of sowing and reaping**. (See the Introduction of this story for additional ideas about *Ecosystem Weight Management*.)

Thought by thought,
word by word,
choice by choice,
action by action,



I lift myself to a new level of living! Ya-a-ay!

Using the Power of Choice and the Law of *Sowing and Reaping* to Bring Me Freedom

It seems that all of life is learning about how to use the power of choice responsibly. **In gardening**, if the conditions are right, what you plant is what you get. If you plant a tomato seed, you get a tomato. If you plant a dandelion seed, you get a dandelion. **In life**, if you plant seeds of well-being and nurture them, over time, you get well-being. If you plant seeds of dis-ease, over time, you get disease.

Whatever I cultivate, over time, is what I get. If I have an addiction to anything, I can look at the seeds that I have been planting with my choices. And just like in gardening, I can uproot the plants that I don't want to keep.



Notice the seeds you have been planting with your choices.

Do you want to make any changes?
What new seeds do you want to plant?

**Your life is your garden. Over time, what you plant is what you get.
Be a Gardener to Your Own Mind & Life. Choose to cultivate health.**



Prepare the soil, trim and weed.
Water, fertilize, provide "TLC".....practice, perseverance, patience.....over time, your life changes.

Use the right tools.

Experience the garden of freedom.

Notice your choices and your motivation (seeds) → Thoughts → Actions → Results (effects).
Learn to guide yourself towards choices that are more effective.

In the process of LEARNING all of these things, I found that I made many mistakes. Mistakes are teachers. There is no way to learn any task or skill without errors. This process of learning can be thought of as progressive approximation. Mistakes are a form of FEEDBACK. Every error told me what I needed to correct. As I changed each ineffective pattern, I got nearer to the behavioral sequence that worked better. Mistakes gave me feedback about what worked and what didn't work! They have nothing to do with my worth or intelligence. They are merely "steps toward a goal." I have made extensive research about what doesn't work at all and practiced behaviors that were totally ineffective—just to see if they would work. Then I would try them out at least three more times just to make absolutely sure they wouldn't work. And then—when I was writhing in pain—I finally changed! In *Freedom From Diets*, we talk about the Stages of Change model, which provides some helpful guidelines on how solve the mystery of unconscious patterns and how to make lasting changes. We have discovered for most people this process takes from 1 – 3 years.

Many times my changing has seemed VERY SLOW. I have felt as if I were walking through SOLID CONCRETE! The ONLY thing I didn't do was give up. It helped me to tell

myself (many times), "Bobbie sweetheart, I unconditionally love and support you just as you are, in all your magnificence. I love you the way you are AND the way you are not!"

For me, the food and exercise changes were easiest to make. The more challenging areas to heal and transform were the social isolation, self-esteem, and mental areas. I read many books, went to counseling, and tried out many new things. Gradually, things shifted.

I learned not to give up 5 minutes before the miracle.

Success
Is going
from failure to failure
without a loss
of enthusiasm.
-Sir Winston Churchill

How do you begin to make changes?

- **Start where you are, and choose to invest in yourself. You take the time.** You slow down enough so that you can begin to notice what is going on in your life.
- You have an intension to refrain from ingesting nutrients that make you suffer; you also have an intension to ingest nutrients that are healthy and wholesome.
- You encourage yourself to put an end to the *causes* (your daily choices) of your suffering. You notice (be mindful of) your *chronic distress patterns*: When do you allow your buttons to be pushed? When do you respond with unhealthy choices? Choose to act outside of the patterns.
- You investigate the kinds of cognitive, emotional, or physical nutrients you now ingest and decide which ones to continue to “eat” and which to resist.
- When the cause of suffering has been seen (through mindfulness), healing is possible.
- You see the nature of suffering and begin to *see a way out* of your patterns. What can you do differently? What would be the value to you of doing it? Use the Stages of Change model to help you explore the process of making lasting changes for yourself.
- I encourage you to go to counseling or a healthy lifestyle-management program to receive support and guidance during this process.
- As you create the causes and conditions for greater health and happiness—that *result* increases.

You are not condemned to your habits.
You can indeed emerge from them.
You can change and grow more and more free.
How?

With daily practice, you can nourish and develop wholesome mental patterns and transform unwholesome ones. Just keep planting seeds of well-being and gradually your garden of well-being will grow and flower as you provide the supportive conditions.

Many times in the past I have tried to motivate myself to change through abusive self-talk: Get with it! What’s your problem? Just do it. It’s like I have a Gestapo Man in my head that

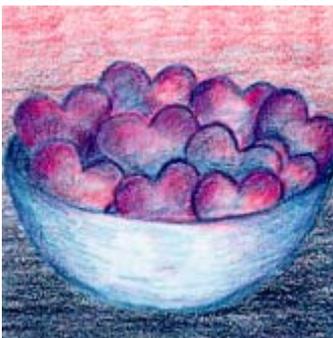
says, "I have ways of dealing with you. You will perform, or else." He would put me before an inner firing squad to get me to shape up. I really tried the "beat myself up approach to self-change." I, at last, discovered that approach does NOT work. Ten years ago I ultimately learned the important lesson of self-talk that is nurturing and encouraging.

Taken from my diary on August 26, 1992 (20 years after I lost my weight): "God, how do I allow you to bless and support the world through me and stay in balance, not get used up and burned out? How do my needs for companionship happen? Closeness? Fun? You seem to say wait, trust, and go with the flow—f - k! I'm lonely, and tired. I don't know where to meet friends. I've gone to groups, reached out to my old friends, and no one returns my calls. Everyone is too busy and doesn't care if I exist. It's hard for me to not want to beat up on me and blame me for my present situation. It seems to be going on for all of my life. No one wants me. I'm only OK if someone needs something." At that point I became so angry at myself that I "wished myself dead" with such emotional intensity—I really meant it—that within 4 hours, my body manifested a 104-degree temperature and I was sick in bed, with severe sweating, for a week.

One other time, about a year later, I was feeling those same emotions. I had taught too many classes and contributed to too many committees while trying to set up a neighborhood crime prevention program. I was so needy, lonely, and horny, I couldn't stand it. I got so angry at my need to be touched, loved, and hugged—at my sexual needs—that I wished, with great emotional intensity, that my penis would fall off! It didn't. However, within 2 hours my body manifested a bladder infection. These two experiences helped me to understand that **my body is very sensitive and responds to how I deeply feel about it. I would never treat anyone else I know as terribly as I have treated myself.** Right after these events, I started to go to a counselor for help to learn the dating skills that I mentioned in the social isolation section of this story.

Sondra Ray explains in her book, *The Only Diet There Is*: If we forgive the past, drop negative thoughts and resentments, stop being victims—we drop our fat as well. She asserts that as we release our negativity, we release excess weight in our minds, hearts, and in our bodies.

Practice a diet of self-love



Fast from negative thoughts

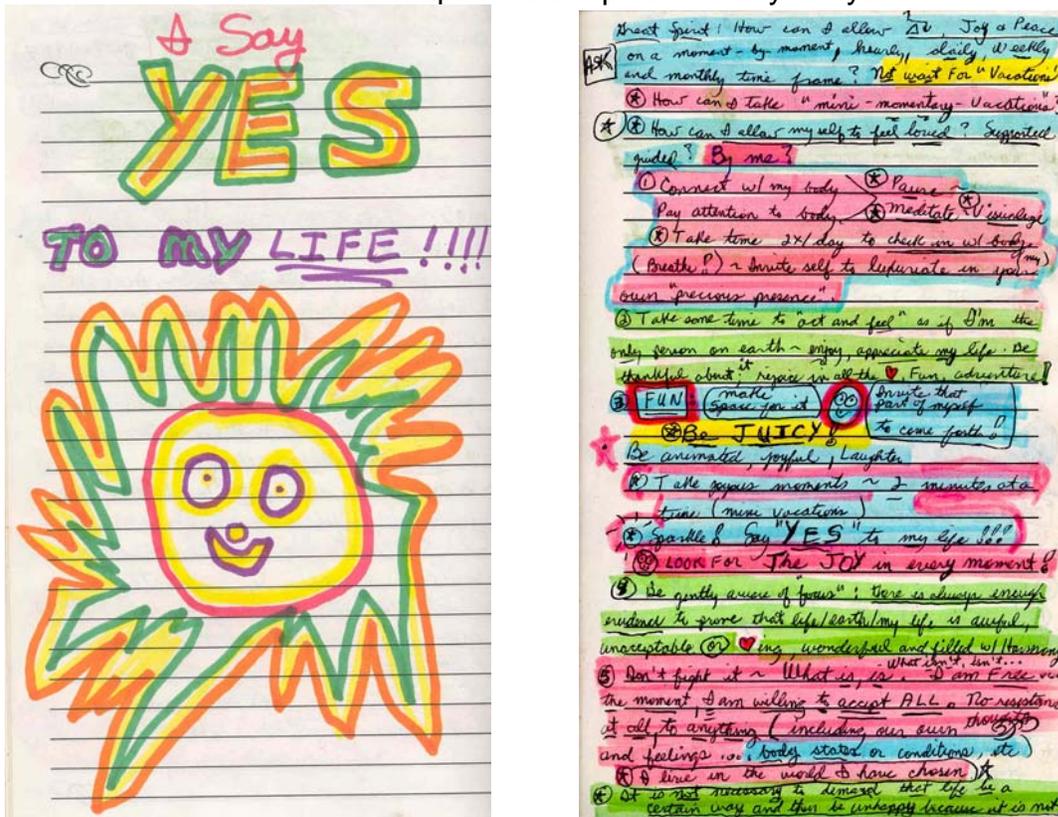
Sondra Ray's steps are as follows:

Diet from negative thinking, feast on affirmations, use visualizations, give up anger, write down your feelings, bless your food, love your body, nurture yourself, turn it all over to God, and give thanks to God.

I used this book extensively. Although I don't agree with all of her concepts, I found the book to be generally quite helpful. Copyright date is 1981 by Celestial Arts Publishers.

One thing that helped me facilitate all of this learning was to keep a lifestyle journal. I KEEP A JOURNAL of insights gained, of food experiences and food consumption and of patterns. I note when I have failed to follow my food program, and when I do well! I jot down WHAT I learned. I don't have to keep it all of the time—only when I feel compulsive, confused, and thankful! I have kept many kinds and different formats. I also use a computer nutrition analysis software program (Diet Power) to evaluate my eating patterns. A journal is not just keeping foods but also noting emotions, aspirations, thoughts, prayers, insights, and possible strategies. I like to use color!

Here are a couple of examples from my diary:



As you can see, there are many things to learn about if you want to lose (release) weight and keep it off—permanently! You will have to SPEND TIME ON YOU! In this society, we regard material possessions as having great worth: our house, car, stereo, TV, boats, ski equipment, *ad nauseum*. We spend great amounts of our time acquiring material possessions. I will give you an example. If you have a couch in your living room it could easily cost \$1000.00. For ease of computation, assume that you take home \$10.00 an hour. You worked 100 hours of your effort, toil and trouble to purchase the couch that you sit your rear on. The couch might be a lovely material possession, but wouldn't it be GREAT to have a thin and healthy rear to sit on that couch? Yes, it sure would! It might take you 100 hours to learn about and apply the different areas of self-care and get to the root causes that I have talked about. With all of the distractions that are available in our culture, I have found it valuable to consider:

You Are Your Most Precious Possession! The "House" You Live in is Called Your Body.

Life has to be lived forwards, but frequently is better understood looking backwards. I have found for most people's healthy weight management journey, the following truth applies: **There's always a simplistic answer to a complex problem, and it's wrong. Quick "fixes" do more harm than good.** It will require time to learn about and run through all of the areas that I have mentioned, but you will be rewarded with health, true happiness, and peace of mind. What a bargain! YOU TOO can experience the gift of a changed life. It takes honesty, open-mindedness, willingness and...LOTS OF PRACTICE! There is no such thing as microwave change. Change is a slowly evolving experience.

You may find the root causes of your being overweight are similar to or different from my own. I encourage you to take the time and make the effort to transform *your* root causes, so you can bless yourself and the world with your delightful friskiness.

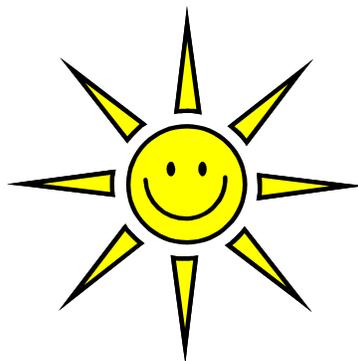
**Remember, Progress. Not Perfection.
Easy Does It. But, Do It.**



These two buttons are on my kitchen wall.

The story of the buttons: Several times in the process of changing my life, I have been put in the middle of family chaos; I have made choices to overeat and drink in response to the challenges and stresses. And I have become so angry at myself for not being able to "make it all better" that I took it out on myself and hit my head with such force into the kitchen and dining room walls of my home—using my head as a battering ram—that I put holes in them. Later, after personal and home remodeling, I put the buttons over the plastered and painted holes to remind me where I have come from and to remind me that one day at a time I CAN

make new choices, that the incredible force of aliveness in me and others always supports and encourages us to achieve our greatest sense of personal exuberance. In my case, my body, mind, and spirit have resisted my best attempts to kill them in every way possible and have blossomed into my present, miraculous life.



Attitude is everything.
Keep your face to the sunshine
And you cannot see the shadows.

There are two ways to live your life.
One is as though nothing is a miracle.
The other is as though everything is a miracle. Albert Einstein.

A DAILY REMEMBRANCE:

See your unborn wholeness and trust it to emerge.

The fundamental nature of my mind is pure.
Within me is an inexhaustible source of love, wisdom and power.
The purpose of all spiritual practice is to uncover and make contact with this.
When ignorance is removed unlimited wisdom, compassion and power arise.
It is the mind's conditioning that limits our understanding of who we are and what we can become.
I will cleanse my mind of faults and develop beneficial qualities.
This removes obstacles to my progress and creates beneficial conditions.
Recognizing the interconnectedness of all I will strive to be my best and to manifest my potential, ever dedicated to benefiting all people.
I will think, speak and act as a loving person. By Lama Yeshe

May all people have happiness and the causes of happiness.
May all people be free of anguish and the causes of anguish.
May all people not be separated from the great happiness that is beyond all misery.