

Eating Disorders as a Source of Meaning, Religion and Ritual

In my almost 30 years of treating eating disorders, I have noticed that these conditions serve purposes that are not always obvious. In our commercial, materialistic world where value is determined by looks and wealth, many people are hungry for meaning and direction and eating disorders can come to fill that void.

For example, humans are creatures of ritual, which can be defined as “a set of actions, performed mainly for their symbolic value, prescribed by a religion or by the traditions of a community.” We are comforted and soothed by the repetition of familiar activities in a set order. Every culture has its rituals but in our culture many significant ones, such as family meals, celebrating Sabbath, or football-free holidays have fallen away. When I listen to many of my clients, the behaviors of their eating disorder are the only intense, dependable and significant rituals in their lives.

People with bulimia usually describe their binges as a set series of thoughts, feelings and actions. These begin with the desire to binge, followed with fantasies about what to eat and where to get the foods. What follows is a relatively predictable routine of where the foods are purchased and eaten, as well as how, such as while watching TV or reading fashion magazines. The ritual often concludes with purging, which is frequently described as bringing a sense of order and purity after the rewarding feeling of freedom to eat any desired food in any amount. Eventually this evolves into guilt feelings and an oft-repeated promise to “never do it again, starting tomorrow.” It is, in effect, a ritual, and a very potent one.

Also, for people who restrict or attempt to, the attention given to calories, fat or carbohydrate grams, weight loss or gain, and exercise rituals often give a sense of control, order and meaning. Foods are categorized into “good” and “bad,” much like the precepts of religions. People can judge themselves as better or worse depending on their food choices, which, even when punishing, can be reassuring to someone who craves certainty. People who are starved are known to make elaborate rituals of eating, stretching very little food into long meals. Because the rest of their lives, time, attention and activities are shrinking while the eating disorder takes precedence, the sequence and “ceremony” of the eating disorder gradually become the only meaningful source of ritual and purpose.

An eating disorder thus becomes a perverse sort of religion: one’s ideas about food and weight are the dogma; the allowance of calories or carbohydrate the commandments; and the familiar routine of eating disorder behaviors the ritual. A low weight on the scale might elevate one to a momentary heaven of certainty while a higher weight plunges one into a hell of terror. It can afford a level of drama and intensity unmatched by anything else in the person’s life.

Recovery: A Time When Real Meaning Can Emerge

People with any type of eating disorder, as they begin to recover, will often say, “I don’t know who I will be or what I will do with my mind and time without my eating disorder.” When I hear words like this, I feel excited, because from experience I know that this is when I will begin to see who my client actually is. This part of recovery is like watching a treasure hunt, as people discover or rediscover parts of themselves that were never expressed, or were lost to the eating disorder. It is always fun to see the real, unique person emerge from the disordered eating, like a phoenix from the ashes.

I became a Spiritual Director in 1996 because for many of my clients, this period of recovery of the true self often involves spirituality, and I wanted language and to know what questions to ask to be able to participate in their self-discovery. This phase can include an exploration of what the person’s true religious and spiritual views are, as well as whether or not he or she feels drawn to sharing observance with a community and/or having a personal

spiritual practice, and what these might look like. This has been true even for ordained clients whose view of their religious orders, vows and creeds may have changed over time.

As my client, Miriam, was recovering she began to want to experiment with meditation. She sampled several methods and discovered that she wanted and needed a religious tradition to frame her practice and give it meaning. She had left her Jewish faith after finding the conservative practices of her parents and Hebrew school confining and not consistent with the way she views reality. She tried some Jewish meditation methods, but found a Buddhist technique more compelling, and the Buddhist teachings more coherent with her experience of truth. But sometime into this phase of her healing, she began to yearn for something more, and was surprised when a Jewish discussion group with people her age satisfied that. She now happily practices Buddhist meditation and attends a thriving reform Jewish temple in her neighborhood. She has described the meditation as having trained her mind to be calm and observing without judgment, while the lively services and debates at her temple fulfill her need for community and ritual while fitting her view of cosmology.

However, this search for meaning isn't always spiritual. Sometimes it is a rededication to family, to the arts, a cause, or other sources of meaning. Judith, an administrative assistant whose eating disorder was the only source of color and drama in her life typifies this. Her mood, as for many with disordered eating, swung wildly depending on her weight or what she had eaten. As her bingeing waned, she saw a handmade cloth-covered journal in a shop and was inspired to take a craft class to learn how to make them. Her psychologist and I were the happy recipients of two of her brightly colored journals. Around the same time, she attended a locally produced play, loved it and gradually became involved in community theatre. These passions and others took the time, thought and emotion formerly consumed by her eating and weight obsessions.

Eating disorders are easily seen as merely negative conditions, but it is difficult to recover if we don't look for their benefits so that these needs can be met in a healthier, more positive way. Anyone, with or without an eating disorder, will profit by reflecting and wondering, "What is it that gives my life meaning? How can I find or create rituals that nourish my authentic self? To what purpose do I long to direct my life? What are my true views of transcendent reality—do these views fit a religious tradition or spiritual path? How can I allow these truths to fill more of my time, attention and energy? What kind of life do I truly want to live? What will it take to start living that life now?"