

Unwanted Voices (in Four-Part Harmony)

Part One

I hear voices. All the time. They call to me. They are not my friends, but they pretend to be. I am told that many of you do not hear voices like these. I can't imagine your life, any more than you can imagine mine. If you don't, go back to what you were doing. This is not for you.

A few months ago, our little community of Saturday morning Weight Watchers engaged in a discussion of holiday traditions, ideals, and stress. So many (of all three) center on food. Then, a few days later, my buddy Sharon recommended *The End of Overeating* by David Kessler. After a quick "hold" request to the library, it showed up in my reading pile a few weeks later.

Kessler does a masterful job of describing both the science and the personal anguish of eating out-of-control. He hears those voices as well. Leftover pizza in the frig. Candy jar on a desk down the hall. Ice cream and giant pretzels at the Mall. Their voices are beautiful, and they seduce us. But they are not our friends. They override our rational minds and sabotage our best interests. Learning to tune out the voices (or at least reduce the volume) is a life-long project. Kessler tells us why. He also tells us how.

"Conditioned hyper-eating" is a technical term for our urge to obey those voices. It arises in the complex circuitry of the brain—where stimuli have been paired, by evolution and experience, with euphoric reward. The two are linked directly, stimulus and response, without passing through the filter of reasoned choice. The more it is used, the stronger the connection grows. *And Grows. And grows.* With disuse, the connection weakens (gradually). It never breaks completely.

Understanding brain biology motivates me to curb unwanted eating. I don't like obeying orders from the "reptilian brain" while my human frontal lobes stand by, helplessly looking on. However, while awareness may lead to frustration, it does not automatically lead to change. For change, we must meet the brain on its own terms. True, we are subject to its conditioned reflex of hyper-eating. It is also true that we can engage the power of reason and choice to build alternative conditioning, one step at a time.

Part Two

The voices are angry. They don't like it when we shine a light on their shadowy faces. They were alarmed by the recognition that arose from our last reflection. They depend on anonymity for their power in our lives.

The first step toward mastering uncontrolled eating is to recognize it for what it is. It is an involuntary reflex built into our synapses and mediated by neurochemicals. It is a false but compelling link between food and happiness. Significant, sustained effort is required to weaken that link, and the initial effort is to see it more clearly. In *The End of Overeating*, David Kessler devotes his final two chapters to the theory and practice of "Food Rehab." I recommend that those who want more depth on this subject read his book. In the following, I will share a few key messages that make a difference for me.

The connection between certain foods and the reward they represent may be rooted in evolution and is strengthened each time it is used. Our ancestors faced a very different array of food choices than we have today. Their systems developed over the millennia to binge on rare food groups (sugar, salt, and fat) when they were available. Early humans were also designed to over-eat in times of plenty, to prevent starvation in times of scarcity. We too have primitive urges to eat out of control, and crave some foods more than others.

For most of my life, I have tried to eat chips and cookies in moderation. I have succeeded and I have failed, but in times of success the voices have become ever louder and more insistent. If I have stopped at one, I have obsessed the rest of the day with a desire for more. If I ate a brownie at afternoon break, a blur of food fantasies obscured the rest of the budget meeting and stood in the way of rational decisions, whether about food or figures.

I few years ago, I experimented with abstinence. I swore off chips and cookies for ten weeks as part of a wellness challenge at work. I was amazed that the voices softened and faded. They were still there, but the volume turned way down. Seven years later, I rarely eat those foods. I no longer consider them a treat, because life is more enjoyable without the cacophony of food fantasies raging out of control. The better I understand the theory, the more reasonable it feels to take this step, as drastic as it seems.

Part Three

And more holidays. Just six weeks into the new year, and here comes Valentine's Day. The voices demand something sweet for—and from—your sweetheart. They remind you that a treat is a measure of devotion. The voices and a heart-shaped box of chocolates convey a deeply conditioned, conspiratorial message: food is love. Sweet food is the best kind of love.

It begins at the beginning. As infants we depend on loving adults to provide for our needs. We learn from early-on that love and sustenance come as a package deal. It

starts with the basics of food for survival, and evolves quickly into food as reward. “Welcome home, I baked your favorite cookies.” “Great report card, let’s stop at Dairy Queen.” “What kind of cake do you want for your birthday?”

As we grow into adulthood, food is entwined with courtship and the identity of eating and affection grows stronger yet. In our early years, Lyle and I not only saw eating as shared pleasure, but relished the chance to choose indulgent foods. On emerging from a long hike, we gravitated to beer and ice cream. We still do.

Dinner out was a “supreme” pizza—large, split two ways. We relished the rush of eating to excess, and enjoyed the mildly stimulating guilt that resulted. We gleefully observed all the candy festivals, from Halloween through Easter, and gifts to one another were often coated in sugar.

More than thirty years older and wiser, we have (with great effort and many false starts) re-crafted the link between our love and our eating. Connecting over a single beer has become a daily ritual that we honor and appreciate. Going out for dinner means vegetarian pizza, small, split two ways. Ice cream is a monthly indulgence, and a single scoop or small sundae fills our need for a sweet. A shared, high quality chocolate dessert for Valentine’s Day replaces the giant Costco pie designed for a family reunion. Best of all, our love for one another has evolved into mutual support for taking the moderate road, rather than serving as an excuse to throw wise choice to the winds.

Food and love are, indeed, connected on Valentine’s Day and for the rest of the year as well. As love matures, it recognizes that food is not only an important source of short-term pleasure but also a source of long-term health and well-being. True love looks to the long term and chooses the balance accordingly. The voices can, with time and persistence, be persuaded to agree.

Part 4 (The End)

Reader feedback on *Reflections* about food shows that the unwanted voices of overeating speak to many of us. We have different ways of responding successfully to their call. In some cases, it works to turn down the volume. In others, it helps to dial another station, replacing voices of excess with voices of moderation. In yet others, we may be able to persuade the voices to join us in the quest for a better way.

I loved Jamie’s comment two weeks ago; she associates eating with joy. Her voices are able to distinguish the passing pleasure of over-eating from the genuine joy of eating within the bounds of healthy happiness. She also pointed out that voices shriek in outrage when they feel deprived. A choice to abstain from particular foods must find the inner calm without triggering deprivation. Tricky stuff indeed!

Today I want to highlight one more insight from *The End of Overeating* by David Kessler: planning, structure, and ritual can be tools for to healthy eating.

Our brains do not make wise and mindful choices in the emotional heat of the moment. When we are tired or stressed, involuntary responses overwhelm the rational mind. It is, therefore, most effective to call on reason when reason is most available—when we are calm and alert.

We can plan our meals, snacks, and treats in advance. We can prepare healthy foods so that they are as convenient to “grab and go” as less healthy ones. We can develop specific strategies for restaurants, potlucks, and happy hours. The key to planning and structure is to use our rational brain to build alternative paths of stimulus and response, then to use those paths consistently enough to build new habits.

Eventually, the healthier choice will become almost as easy to make as the unhealthy one. There will be new voices, and they will advocate on your behalf. “No thank you.” “Just water, please.” “Hold the cheese.” The process of change can take years to become automatic. The old wiring never really falls apart. The old voices may sound pitiful, but they are never silent.

When the balance tips toward healthier automatic behavior, the opportunity for eating with joy expands. We can move beyond food as poison, food as trickster, food as enemy and embrace food as nourishment, delight, and friend.