

Chapter 1

A Deeper Hunger

Filling the spiritual void with food

*You formed my inmost being;
You knit me in my mother's womb.
I praise you, so wonderfully you made me;
wonderful are your works.*

Psalm 139:14

When was the first time you looked in the mirror and didn't like who you saw staring back at you? Were you still in elementary school, fighting back tears from the constant teasing over your weight, your eyeglasses, or your hair? Was it high school perhaps, when the prospect of getting a date for the prom shifted the feelings of inadequacy into high gear? Maybe you're one of the lucky ones who managed to make it into adulthood before you began to cringe every time you caught a glimpse of your reflection in the bathroom medicine cabinet.

Now for what is likely the more difficult question: When was the *last* time you looked in the mirror and didn't like who you saw staring back at you? Twenty years ago? Two years ago? One week ago? Today?

I can remember walking into the confessional in our little parish chapel when I was no more than ten years old, kneeling down, and including among my list of very innocent sins: "I hate myself."

Despite my up-close-and-personal relationship with that feeling, I'm still dumbfounded by the fact that a child or teenager, or adult for that matter, can look in the mirror day after day and see only the flaws. And yet that feeling comes so naturally for some of us.

For far too many of us, learned feelings of inadequacy have led us to where we are today, fighting a daily battle to love ourselves for exactly who we are—for who God made us to be—and, more often than not, losing that battle to the very things that only take us deeper and deeper into our feelings of self-loathing. We attempt to feed our hunger—for God, for others, for love, for understanding, for success and more—with momentary bites that never satisfy.

On some level we imagine we can fill up all the empty places in our soul with other things, often fattening things—French fries and burgers, ice cream and cookies, bowls of pasta and bottles of wine. But after we wipe our mouths and throw away the evidence, all we have left are deep feelings of regret, guilt, sadness, and anger.

One morning not that long ago, when I was battling a boatload of disappointment and doubt in my own life, I found myself stealing jellybeans from my kids' candy collections. As I paced around my house, trying to ward off a downward spiral, I'd make periodic passes by their individual boxes of jellybeans sitting on our dining room sideboard. Although I was only semi-conscious of what I was doing at the time, I had the wherewithal to take some from each box so that no child's candy would be noticeably lower than the others'. It was only a few hours later, as I was getting ready to go out, that I realized the seemingly desperate hunger for food—candy, in this case—was really about a desperate need for something else, something that was missing in my life.

Every time I contemplated a particularly difficult work situation, I grabbed a handful of candy. When I thought about ways I felt

I was failing as a mother, I grabbed another fistful of candy. When I reflected on my spiritual life and stalled attempts at real prayer, you guessed it, I grabbed yet more candy. Not because I was hungry. Not because the candy was particularly good. But because there was a void in my life begging to be filled, and food is my go-to, all-purpose filler.

Even as I popped the jellybeans in my mouth, as if they were a magical cure for my emotional hangover, I knew I'd be sorry in the morning when my waistband felt tighter and the scale inched upward. And still I felt powerless to simply stop eating.

That scenario, unfortunately, is not an isolated instance in my life, or in the lives of so many other people, particularly women. From my earliest teenage days, I can remember starvation diets and candy bar binges during times of celebration or strife. If a pool party or school dance was coming, I'd exist on cans of Tab and sugarless gum. Literally. But more often than not I'd head to McDonald's with my super skinny best friend for French fries and shakes, or I'd walk over to the pizza parlor across the street from the card store where I worked part time to grab two slices and an orange soda, sometimes with a couple of pink snowball cupcakes on the side.

Although I've never been seriously overweight, I have still battled the dual demons of mindless eating and high-calorie habits on a regular basis. The older I get and the further along my spiritual path I walk, the more I have come to see these bad habits for what they are—ways to avoid what I really need, what I really want, what I crave and fear all at once.

Sometimes a Cookie Is Just a Cookie

Of course, not every bite of extra food we put into our mouths is a statement on our emotional or spiritual well-being. Sometimes we eat out of boredom or stress or without even realizing we are

scarfing down handfuls of Goldfish crackers as we simultaneously help the kids with homework, cook dinner, and check email. We live in a society that pushes us to go faster and faster, to multitask our multitasking. Food just gets caught up in the mix.

I realized that fact in a big way after making my first silent retreat at the Pyramid Life Center in New York's Adirondack Mountains. This retreat was a little more intense than your typical silent retreat because we weren't allowed to read, write, or make casual contact. When you are sitting in a dining room with twenty other silent people, some just a few feet across from you, and you cannot distract yourself with a book or an iPod or a crossword puzzle, you suddenly come face-to-face with your plate of food, sometimes for the very first time. And it can be a little unsettling.

There is no place left to hide, when you are silently staring into a bowl of corn chowder with no access to all of the usual emotional crutches. And that's a good thing when we're talking about coming to terms with bad eating habits and unhealthy attitudes. Peering into my bowl that weekend, I began to see that the way to God is paved, at least in part, with more mindful eating, more mindful talking, more mindful living. Unfortunately, that lovely idea didn't last long after I returned to the real world and the insanity of home life, where even Grace Before Meals is fit for a circus tent.

The first "regular" day after my retreat, I sent the kids off to school and made myself breakfast. As I set it on the table, I began looking for a newspaper or magazine or laptop or phone. No sense wasting valuable eating time not getting something else done, right? And then I stopped. And listened. Quiet. Something that is so rare at our house. I could hear the tap-tapping of rain on the fallen leaves. I could hear the cats batting a toy around the basement. I could hear myself think. And I wondered, what exactly am I trying to drown out when

I insist on multitasking even while eating a meal in peace? It's one thing if the kids are home and I've got my mommy hat on. But when I have time to eat breakfast alone, why would I want to clutter it up with meaningless stuff? Because eating mindlessly is one of the ways I avoid thinking, one of the ways I avoid listening to God, one of the ways I get out of living in the moment. I'm much better at living in the next moment or the next year.

So that morning I put away the newspapers. In fact, I removed them from sight. I cleared the space around my seat of any clutter. I put the phone in the other room. I even lit a prayer candle in the center of the table. And I sat down, said a blessing, and slowly and quietly ate my oatmeal with walnuts and dried cranberries, tasting every bite. I found, as I did on my silent retreat, that eating in silence is a lot like praying in silence. I had to keep bringing myself back to that spoon of food every time my mind wanted to craft an email in my head or think about what was up next on our family calendar.

When you slowly and prayerfully taste every bite of your food, you do not overeat, and you don't go looking for something else five minutes later. It clears a space inside and allows God to enter into the picture, which, I can tell you from experience, is a powerful way to shift eating from mindless to mindful, something we'll discuss in very practical terms in chapter 7. Obviously silent meals are not the norm and they never will be for those of us living out in the world, but there are important lessons to be learned there, and we'll explore them as we journey toward wholeness.

Are You Willing to Be Radical?

Best-selling author Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, writes about her battle with both bulimia and alcoholism. She confesses her realization, after finally getting sober,

that the binging and purging that controlled her life were never really about the food but about something much, much deeper.

“I felt when I got sober, God had saved me from drowning, but now I was going to get kicked to death on the beach. It’s so much hipper to be a drunk than a bulimic,” she writes, speaking of the internal “voice” that would haunt her until she went to the store and bought Cheetos and chocolates and laxatives.

Lamott goes on to explain how she eventually reached her limit and sought help, finally coming to terms with what it feels like to be truly hungry, as opposed to eating mindlessly when something inside—whether we call it a voice or a feeling or a habit—urges us to forage in the pantry or stare into the refrigerator or run to the store. She calls her ability to accept herself as she is and overcome her bulimia a “miracle.”

“I know where I was, and I know where I am now, and you just can’t get here from there. Something happened that I had despaired would never happen,” she writes. “Whatever it was, learning to eat was about learning to live—and deciding to live; and it is one of the most radical things I’ve ever done.”

There’s no doubt that any major life change requires a radical shift in thinking. If we have always thought of ourselves as fat or ugly or invisible or all of the above, learning to see ourselves with new eyes can feel more dangerous than skydiving or swinging from a trapeze without a net. Even if we aren’t facing anything close to the devastating and dangerous condition that Lamott battled, it’s still not easy to change the negative tape that has been on continuous loop for years, maybe forever.

So it comes down to asking ourselves the questions we’ve probably been trying to avoid: What do we want from life? What are our hopes and fears? Where is God in the mix and how do we relate to our Creator in contemplation, in action, in the mundane details of

daily life? Are we willing to be radical, willing to accept a miracle in our own lives?

As you work your way through this book, try to become more aware of your eating habits. I'm not talking about counting calories or carbs. I'm talking about a general, guilt-free awareness. Don't attach judgment to anything. Just observe. If you find yourself eating chips straight from the bag as you talk on the phone, make a mental (or actual) note of who you're talking to and what you're talking about. If you're sitting at your desk popping chocolate chip cookies like they're peanuts, make a note of what you're working on or what might have transpired in the minutes before or what is coming up on your agenda that day. If you're sitting home alone on a Friday night with a gallon of ice cream and a spoon, think about what you'd rather be doing at that moment. Chances are there's something happening on a spiritual or emotional plane that's coming out in a physical way—in this case, through eating.

At the same time, reflect on where you are in your spiritual life. Is your relationship with God what you want it to be? If not, what's lacking and what can you do to bridge the gap? Start to look at your body and spirit as two parts of a whole. We cannot attempt to pursue one piece without impacting the other. Are we always rushing and seeking? Slow down and breathe. Before you reach for that next cookie, sandwich, chip—stop. Try to decipher whether you are really, truly, physically hungry or starving for something else. Pray. Talk to God. Lean on Jesus. Make a spiritual Communion, taking the nourishment you need from the Source of all fulfillment.

When we begin to connect prayer lives to physical lives, when we look beneath the surface, we often discover just how deeply intertwined the two are and how our food issues are wound around our spiritual needs and longings. We're not hungry for a carton of ice

cream or a bag of chips. We're hungry for acceptance—from ourselves even more than from others—for love, for fulfillment, for peace. We're hungry for a life we think we don't deserve or can't have, for the person we know we can be if only we'd give ourselves the chance.

Often, it is not the fear of failure that holds us back but the fear of success. We cling to the comfortable rather than step out into the possible. So we sit at home with a container of Cookies and Cream rather than take a chance on getting our heart broken again, or we down an entire bag of chocolate-covered pretzels rather than work on that resume that might get us out of a dead-end job. Or we eat cold pasta right from the refrigerator rather than sit down in silence and listen for the whisper of the Spirit speaking to our hearts.

In her beautiful poem “The Summer Day,” Mary Oliver asks the question that really lies at the heart of our battle to reclaim our lives from bad habits, escapes, and addictions: “What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”¹

How would you answer that question right now, without overthinking it? What do you want to do with your “one wild and precious life”? With each chapter of this book, we'll attempt to answer that question by peeling back layers to expose the core of our true selves, the beings so wonderfully made by our Creator God. In doing that, we make the radical decision to live fully, just as we are, and to learn to love what we see in the mirror, not in a vain or pretentious way, but in a healthy, holistic, and holy way.

You may be thinking that this plan sounds difficult, or next to impossible. For sure, it won't be easy, but the road we've been walking until now hasn't exactly been problem-free. So how do we start? By taking the time to pay attention to the world around us. By learning to be idle without needing to fill up the empty space with noise or busyness—or food. By digging down into our souls to discover our

real reasons for filling up on cookies and potato chips and candy when we want to fill up on God and goodness and joy. By becoming more mindful of how we eat, where we eat, when we eat, and what we eat.

We'll talk about all of this in detail, step-by-step, as we journey through this book, so don't feel overwhelmed and don't feel as though you are doing this alone. Countless people, myself included, have been on this same path or are on it right now with you.

What Are You Hungry For?

A few years ago, when I was preparing for a presentation I was to make at a women's retreat, I spent time reflecting on Psalm 139, which is partially quoted at the start of this chapter. When I first read the psalm, I could feel walls going up. I bristled at the idea that I could be "wonderfully" made. I was reading and shaking my head, no, no, no. There's a good chance you may feel the same way when you soak in the full version of the psalm below.

Read it now, not as a psalm written thousands of years ago but as a poem written for you, *by* you, today. Quiet everything around you and rest in the words of this psalm. Let the beautiful images wash over you and carry you along, and if you feel the walls starting to go up, acknowledge the feelings and then let them go.

Lord, you have probed me, you know me:
 you know when I sit and stand;
 you understand my thoughts from afar.
My travels and my rest you mark;
 with all my ways you are familiar.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
 Lord, you know it all.
Behind and before you encircle me
 and rest your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is beyond me,
far too lofty for me to reach.
Where can I hide from your spirit?
From your presence, where can I flee?
If I ascend to the heavens, you are there;
if I go down to the depths, you are there too.
If I fly with the wings of dawn
and alight beyond the sea,
Even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand holds me fast.
If I say, "Surely darkness shall hide me,
and night shall be my light" —
Darkness is not dark for you,
and night shines as the day.
Darkness and light are but one.
You formed my inmost being;
you knit me in my mother's womb.
I praise you, so wonderfully you made me;
wonderful are your works!
My very self you knew;
my bones were not hidden from you,
When I was being made in secret,
fashioned as in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes foresaw my actions;
in your book all are written down;
my days were shaped, before one came to be.

Psalm 139:1–16

After I'd spent some serious time with that psalm and really started to believe it was something written for me, something that was not just meant to be read with my head but instead experienced with my heart, I felt a subtle shift inside. It was as if someone had

gently nudged the skipping record of negative thoughts that had been so much a part of my internal conversation, enabling me to hear the next line of my life song. That's not to say all the negativity vanished in a flash, but a door opened up and a slant of light slipped in.

What if God really does love me unconditionally? What if I really am wonderfully made? What if it's possible to turn around all those years of thinking I was "less than"? What if . . . what if . . . what if?

If we believe we are made by our Creator to be exactly who and what we are—nothing more, nothing less, nothing better, nothing worse—we can begin to let go of some of the shackles that bind us to false ideas of physical beauty and outward appearance. We can finally look inside and discover our true selves and the wellspring of love that is the Spirit of God within us. And when we connect with that Spirit, we can face the mirror and believe, really believe, that we are *more than* because we are loved by a God who wants to give us everything we can imagine and far more.

When we do that, or even take the first baby steps in that direction, we find, almost without realizing it, that our need for other things, whether food or alcohol, shopping or obsessive cleaning, suddenly begins to lessen. The good feelings we tried to obtain through an extra slice of pizza or a hot fudge sundae are now suddenly there for the taking. No spoon required. No calories to count. And the news gets even better. When we finally see ourselves for who we really are and not for who we imagine ourselves to be, or who society tells us we should be, we discover we can eat the foods we love and be healthy and happy all at the same time. It's not an all-or-nothing proposition; it never was.

Food for Thought

1. How did you feel when you read Psalm 139? What feelings came up? Can you see yourself as “wonderfully” made?
2. Have you seen yourself as “less than” at any point in your life? If so, what brings that feeling up for you?
3. Are you more inclined toward emotional eating or mindless eating?
4. Can you pinpoint triggers that send you looking for the nearest box of cookies or bag of chips? Is it work-related, relationship-related, spiritual, physical?
5. Are you willing to consider that you are perfect just as you are and begin to look at yourself and your life with new eyes?
6. Think of at least one friend who could share this journey with you, someone who will listen when you need to talk, encourage you when you’re losing ground, celebrate and pray with you when you’re making strides.
7. Get a notebook or journal and begin to record your reactions to what you’re reading—your food habits, prayer habits, triggers, urges, anything that will help you uncover what’s at the heart of your relationship with food.

Practice

Begin to look at yourself as a “wonderfully made” whole—body and soul, two critical pieces working in cooperation. Reflect on how you nourish your spirit compared to how you nourish your body. Do you overfeed one and starve the other? How can you add more spiritual food to your daily life to balance out the equation? Can you do more