

Fighting the Constant Hunger

Years ago, when I worked at a church in Grand Rapids, I drove in early on Sunday mornings, when 28th Street was still silent and gray, as the pale morning sun rose over the pawn shops and used-car dealerships. I worked all morning, talking with people, holding a thousand tiny details in my mind, and when I left in the afternoon, head spinning and feet tired, I always hoped I was in the car in time to hear *The Splendid Table* on NPR.

It was a good day if I made it to the car in time for it and a bad day if I missed it and turned on the radio only to hear *A Prairie Home Companion* instead, because it meant I'd stayed longer than I'd intended and because, to be honest, I really don't like *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Lynne Rossetto Kasper, the host of *The Splendid Table*, says there are two kinds of people in the world: people who wake up thinking about what to have for supper and people who don't. I am in the first camp, certainly. But it took me about 20 years to say that out loud.

I've always been hungry. Always. I remember being hungry as a small child, as an adolescent girl, as an adult, and just after I locate those feelings and memories of hunger, in my peripheral vision another thing buzzes up, like a flash of heat or pain: shame. Hunger, then shame. Hunger, then shame. Always hungry, always ashamed.

I have always been on the round side of average, sometimes the very round side and sometimes just a little round. I was a round-faced, chubby baby, a little girl with soft, puffy cheeks, a teenager who longed to be skinny and never was, who routinely threw all her pants on the floor and glared at them like enemies.

A woman who still longs to be skinny and never is, and who still, from time to time, throws all her pants on the floor and glares at them like enemies. After all these years, the heaviest thing isn't the number on the scale but the weight of the shame I've carried all these years – too big, too big, too big.

I've always wanted to be thinner, and I've always loved to eat, and I felt betrayed by my appetites.

Why couldn't I be one of those people who forgets to eat? Or who can't eat a bite when she's stressed or sad? When I'm stressed or sad, I eat like a truffle pig, hoping that great mouthfuls of food will make me feel tethered to something, grounded, safe. And I eat when I'm happy too—when the table is full of people I love, when we're celebrating.

My appetite is strong, powerful, precise, but for years and years, I tried to pretend I couldn't hear it screaming in my ears. It wasn't ladylike. It wasn't proper. So I pretended I wasn't hungry, pretended I'd already eaten, murmured something about not caring one way or the other, because I was afraid that my appetites would get the best of me, that they would expose my wild and powerful hunger.

I learned something about hunger from my friend Sara. Sara was one of the first women I knew who ate like a man. When she was hungry, she announced it. And then she ate. A lot. We were traveling through Europe together in college, when I was in the throes of a deep and desperate hatred toward my body. I watched Sara with confusion and fascination, the way a child watches an animal he's never seen—wide-eyed and kind of nervous. If Sara was hungry while we were on our way to a play, she'd ask us to stop. Because she was hungry. All of us stopped because she was hungry. I would have sooner lost consciousness on the sidewalk than draw attention to my hunger and, therefore, my body.

I realized that even most of the thin women I knew had learned to demur about food and hunger—*I already ate; I couldn't possibly; I'm absolutely stuffed*. But Sara loved to eat and believed it was her right, and a pleasure. She didn't overeat or undereat, cry or hide food. She just ate, for sustenance and enjoyment both, and I was fascinated. Still, it took almost a decade more for me to say those words—those words, “I'm hungry”—without feeling ashamed.

It took becoming pregnant to finally say to the world, out loud and without embarrassment, “I'm hungry.” My first pregnancy shifted so many aspects of my understanding of my body and, with it, shifted my view of hunger. Even if at 29 years old I couldn't claim my own hunger without experiencing a shiver of shame, I could claim hunger on behalf of my baby, and that small step might as well have been a mile for all it unlocked inside me.

Several years later, I'm learning to practice gratitude for a healthy body, even if it's rounder than I'd like it to be. I'm learning to take up all the space I need, literally and figuratively, even though we live in a world that wants women to be tiny and quiet. To feed one's body, to admit one's hunger, to look one's appetite straight in the eye without fear or shame—this is controversial work in our culture.

Part of being a Christian means practicing grace in all sorts of big and small and daily ways, and my body gives me the opportunity to demonstrate grace, to make peace with imperfection every time I see myself in the mirror. On my best days, I practice grace and patience with myself, knowing that I can't extend grace and patience if I haven't tasted it.

I used to think the goal was to get over things—to deal with them once and for all, to snap an issue closed like slamming a locker door, washing my hands of it forever and always. What I know now after all these years is that there are some things

you don't get over, some things you just make friends with at a certain point, because they've been following you around like a stray dog for years.

That's how this is for me. I've been catastrophizing about my weight since I was 6. I've lost the pounds and gained them, made and abandoned plans and promises, cried tears of frustration, pinched the backs of my upper arms with a hatred that scares me. And through all that, I've made friends and fallen in love, gotten married and become a mother. I've written and traveled and stayed up late with people I love. I've walked on the beach and on glittering city streets. I've kissed my baby's cheeks and danced with my husband and laughed till I cried with my best friends, and through all that it didn't really matter that I was heavier than I wanted to be.

The extra pounds didn't matter, as I look back, but the shame that came with those extra pounds was like an infectious disease. That's what I remember. And so these days, my mind and my heart are focused less on the pounds and more on what it means to live without shame, to exchange that heavy and corrosive self-loathing for courage and freedom and gratitude. Some days I do just that, and some days I don't, and that seems to be just exactly how life is.

Back to Lynne Rossetto Kasper. I wake up in the morning and I think about dinner. I think about the food and the people and the things we might discover about life and about each other. I think about the sizzle of oil in a pan and the smell of rosemary released with a knife cut. And it could be that that's how God made me the moment I was born, and it could be that that's how God made me along the way as I've given up years of secrecy and denial and embarrassment. It doesn't matter at this point. What matters is that one of the ways we grow up is by declaring what we love.

I love the table. I love food and what it means and what it does and how it feels in my hands. And that might be healthy,

and it might be a reaction to a world that would love me more if I starved myself, and it's probably always going to be a mix of the two. In any case, it's morning and I'm hungry. Which is not the same as weak or addicted or shameful. I'm hungry. And I'm thinking about dinner, not just tonight, but the next night and the next. There are two kinds of people, and I'm tired of pretending I'm the other.

Nigella's Flourless Chocolate Brownies

Adapted from Nigella Express

I have a serious thing for Nigella Lawson's cookbooks. I read them like novels, and at the end of especially long days, I read them in bed before I go to sleep—comfort food for my brain. She writes about food in a way that connects with me, that captures appetite and passion and celebration and flavor in a way that moves me. Back when I couldn't admit my own hunger, Nigella's books became very dear to me because she did just that in a way that I wasn't yet able to do. She's not at all daunted or afraid of her appetites, and she has been a guide for me along that path.

I'm not always wild about flourless chocolate cake, and it's not for lack of trying. Because Aaron eats gluten-free, we've tested lots of flourless chocolate cakes and tarts and brownies, and often they seem kind of egg-heavy to me, kind of like a not-so-good custard. But the almond meal in these brownies makes them heavy and dense in such a good way, and the addition of almond extract makes them even more fragrant and rich. I cut them into quite small pieces, almost like fudge. Heavenly.

And I've found that almost any good chocolate works for these—semisweet chips, a dark chocolate bar cut into chunks, anything. You really can't go wrong.

Ingredients

1 cup semisweet chocolate chips
1 cup butter
1 cup sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 teaspoon almond extract
3 eggs, beaten
1 1/2 cups almond meal or ground almonds
1 cup walnuts, chopped

Instructions

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. Melt the chocolate and butter over low heat in a saucepan, stirring until glossy and smooth.

Take the pan off heat, mix in the vanilla, sugar, and almond extract, and let it cool for just a few minutes.

Stir the eggs into the saucepan, then add the ground almonds and chopped walnuts and stir again. The batter will be a little grainy at this point because of the almonds, but don't worry a bit.

Pour batter into an 8 by 8 pan, and bake for 25 to 30 minutes, until the top has set but the brownies are still a little wiggly. Let cool completely, then cut into 16 small squares.

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