

Rachel's Story submitted by Rachel

There was a time when this part of my talk—introducing myself to you—would have been the hardest part. Why? For the simple reason that I didn't know myself at all. When people asked me who I was, what I liked, I drew a blank. The only thing I could think of was, "I have an eating disorder" ...not typically the lead-in to great conversation. Now, thankfully, there is a lot that I would want to tell you about me: I teach third grade and think it is the best job in the world; I love to hike; my music tastes range from country, the Indigo Girls, and Dar Williams to random Israeli pop songs; I'm an introvert but relish being connected; and I enjoy photography even though I have no technical skills. And, I'm in recovery from an eating disorder. I still think that's important, but I'm glad to say I'm finally able to put it at the bottom of the list.

There were many years in which that wasn't so much at the top of the list, as it was the only thing on it. In 2003 I began my senior year at Tufts University, by all accounts a great school, and I had very little to show for the previous three years other than an outstanding transcript and a full-blown case of anorexia. Clubs and extracurriculars? Didn't have those. Fun memories of shared experiences with friends? Didn't have those, either. So what had I been doing with myself all that time? I studied. I exercised like a madwoman. And I had systematically memorized the nutrition information of everything that passed my lips.

The roots of my eating disorder started to sprout when I was very young—I can actually remember wishing I could have a different body type when I was probably about 10 years old. Like many girls of that age, I took gymnastics classes and quickly chose the sport as my favorite. I watched the 1992 Summer Olympics and was mesmerized by the female gymnasts from the U.S., China, Russia, and Romania. I wanted to *be* them. This was completely unrealistic for several reasons, chief among them being that as a timid, harm-avoidant child, I did not possess the mindset necessary to be an outstanding athlete in any sport, let alone one that required me to hurl myself through the air and land on a four-inch-wide balance beam. But at age 10, I wasn't particularly self-reflective, and this simple truth evaded me. All I knew was this: I wasn't flexible and I was too tall. My body didn't bend the way I wanted it to, it wasn't particularly aerodynamic, and it definitely didn't look like the bodies of my Olympic heroines. Never mind that those girls, at age 15 or 16, were the size of typical 9-year-olds. That was what I wanted to be, and I couldn't make it happen. And so I embarked on a path marked by discontented resentment and anger toward my body. It wasn't overpowering—but it was always there.

Then there was the persistent desire to be *the best*. That was another quality I never seemed able to achieve. I wasn't the best artist, or the best athlete, or the best singer, or even the smartest—although I excelled in school, I knew it was because I worked hard, not because I was brilliant. My inability to be *the best* was yet another reason I had to dislike myself. And then there was the whole friendship thing. I always seemed to end up as the odd girl out, the one who would do just fine until someone better came along. I couldn't figure out the secret to being *in*. I never had a best friend, and I wasn't sure exactly why, but I did know one thing and took it as truth: *I am not good enough. There is something wrong with me.*

A final piece to this puzzle was made up of three little letters that had enormous power over my life: O-C-D. As far back as my memory extends, I have had rituals and compulsive behaviors that soothed and reassured my very anxious self. Of course, no one knew what this was, and until I was 23 it was brushed off as me "being weird." I knew my compulsions were irrational and that no other kids I knew did them. But I couldn't stop. Add the OCD to the body resentment, perfectionism, and general disapproval

of self, and the eating disorder gun was loaded. All it took was for something to pull the trigger, and that was...

...college. During my freshman year at Tufts the eating disorder took over with a vengeance. What happened? Well, transitions have always caused me a considerable amount of uneasiness, and going to college was a HUGE transition. Unlike many of my peers, I actually looked fondly upon my high school experience. I'd been a big academic fish in a relatively small pond, my plate of extracurricular activities was quite full, and although I'd not been "popular," I'd had a solid group of supportive, similarly focused friends. What I hadn't realized was that going to college meant giving all of this up in the name of furthering my personal development—trading familiarity and a secure identity for a place defined by unknowns, where I had no readily available way to define myself. Looking back on my college experience, it is obvious to me why this period of my life was such a struggle. In the moment, however, I had no such understanding. It seemed to me that everyone around me was relatively well-adjusted and at ease, and I was not. I felt I was the only person incapable of enjoying what everyone else found pleasurable. Through the clarity that only comes with hindsight, I can now see that at the time, there was so much I didn't understand about myself, so many questions I didn't know enough to ask, so many thoughts and feelings for which I had no language. But the anguish was genuine, and I needed a release—and I found one in anorexia. The physical pain of abusing my own body through starving and over-exercising was infinitely preferable to the emotional bleakness those behaviors masked. While I didn't realize I had an eating disorder, I was somehow cognizant of the fact that these coping strategies upon which I had stumbled were the only things making my life manageable. I rebuffed others' attempts at outreach, dismissed their concerns with the indignant words, "I'm *fine*." It wasn't until midway through my junior year that I even admitted I had a problem, and not until the beginning of my first semester as a senior that I finally said, "I need help." And so, on October 9, 2003, I withdrew for the semester, packed up my things, said goodbye to my suitemates, and entered a residential program for the treatment of my eating disorder.

Being in residential treatment was a major shock to the system in every way imaginable. All of a sudden, I was surrounded by other people who functioned just the way I did. I had the constant support and supervision of VERY attentive staff people, which was both comforting and irritating. And of course, there was the food, and a lot of "sitting with emotions" that I felt come up as a result of eating. I'd love to say that I was the model patient, completely compliant and enthusiastic about recovery from day 1. But that wouldn't be true. Early into my stay in the program, I began to keep a journal, and it was inside that little black book that a lot of the internal struggles revealed themselves.

For one thing, "real life" as I saw it was too overwhelming. The eating disorder was easier—it protected me from engaging with people and experiences that intimidated me. I felt paralyzed at the prospect of living an adult life with real responsibilities, and an active eating disorder was the perfect excuse not to have to do any of that. I wrote in my journal, "I can't deal with living my life. I am too afraid." Fear—in many forms—would be a repeating theme in my journals over the next several years.

A second thing was, in my eyes, my eating disorder had been my only life preserver at a time when I was completely miserable. Being in intensive treatment was like having a constant companion and security ripped away, and I missed it. And so, even though I went with the program and did nearly everything asked of me, I found little ways to hold onto pieces of my eating disorder that were small enough to escape eradication by my treaters, but significant enough to make me feel that I wasn't really, truly, giving it up completely.

Which brings me to, ambivalence. When I first started treatment, I didn't really know how ambivalence fit into my recovery. It didn't make sense: given the choice between a life of sickness and a life of health, who *wouldn't* choose health? Logically, I didn't get it, which led me to not want to admit that I felt it. I thought it wasn't okay to admit that even though I was supposedly "committed to this process," there was a part of me that wasn't ready to get well. I didn't think that would win much approval from my team, and people pleasing was my mission. I was often faced with demands that I knew, for whatever reason, were out of my realm of possibility, but rather than be honest about my ambivalence, I became skilled at concealing the truth from the very people who were best positioned to help me. It took me a long time to be able to say, "I'm not ready for that." But what I did learn was that given enough time, I would *become* ready—I just couldn't be rushed.

There was, for me, a tremendous amount of risk associated with recovery. *What if?* became the constant refrain in my head. What if I followed my meal plan and ended up with a body I hated? What if I gained weight and was still unhappy? What if I tried something I thought I wanted, and then found out that I hated it? I knew that I was unhappy in my life as it was, but making any changes seemed impossible. I was, to put it simply, terrified. If there was a theme for my eating disorder, I would probably say it was "misguided self-protection." All I wanted was to never be hurt. Breaking the rules of the disease meant that I was making myself vulnerable to whatever bad stuff was out there. To me, every choice was heavily weighted with significance—every decision had the potential to "make or break" my life. I used to get angry with my treatment team when they suggested behavior changes in a way that sounded casual. My argument was always, "I am the one who has to live with the consequences of my choices. You don't understand how big of a deal this is."

For a long time (we're talking years), I harbored this fantasy that maybe I could have both, that I could enjoy the benefits of a full life while also still experiencing the perks that come with an eating disorder. But the thing about that is, you really *can't* have both, not if you want to do either of them well. So eventually it came down to, which did I want more? The eating disorder worked in the short term, but was that what I ultimately wanted for myself? No, it wasn't...but that begged the question, what *did* I want?

I think "life-building" has been the key to my recovery. I could never understand why I should give up my eating disorder in favor of *nothing*. What was the point of taking up more physical space if there was no one home inside? Once I started asking this question, is when I began to really envision myself in recovery—what did I want for myself? What did I want to do? Where did I want to live? These questions had once totally overwhelmed me, but now they were exciting. So I started setting some goals and experimenting with different experiences. I got a job as a teacher's aide and discovered that I had a passion for elementary education. I put myself in situations where no one knew about my eating disorder and where I really wanted to seem "normal." I went to graduate school; I got my first teaching job. And what I have realized is, it is possible to be a teacher and have an eating disorder. I tried that. But it is not possible to have an eating disorder and be the kind of teacher I want to be. I can have an eating disorder and have superficial relationships, or relationships based solely on shared behaviors and treatment experiences. But it is only in recovery that I have found myself truly available to connect with others in a way that feels lasting and genuine. And if I'm really going to be honest with myself about my priorities and visions, I have to admit that while the eating disorder did step in to fill a void at a critical point, it is no longer useful or supportive of the kind of life I want to lead.

It has also taught me invaluable lessons. I now accept that my body is not perfect, but it is mine. While on some days I feel like there are things that I would change about my body if I had the chance, I know deep down that I wouldn't trade my body for any other. My body is resilient and loyal. It has endured years of pounding and deprivation but has never abandoned me. It works as it should; it gets me through the day with energy to spare; and it allows me to experience the physical joys of life. Despite my tireless attempts to rule my body with an iron fist, it has reasserted itself proudly. Where I once regarded my body with the cool detachment of indifference, I now feel some combination of tenderness and awe toward this physical manifestation of myself. Instead of insisting that my body be silent, I now try to listen to what it is telling me. This is not a science, and has been hard for me to learn; in fact, it's something I'm still working on. But where it used to be Me vs. Body, it is now my body and me as a team.

As for perfection? Forget it. I've given up on that, because let's face it, it's just not possible. That doesn't mean I've given up trying my best. I work hard and am my own harshest critic. My standards are high, and if I fall short, I do feel badly. But I now understand that it is unrealistic to expect that I will excel at a skill without having to go through the (often frustrating) process of learning it. Furthermore, I've realized that there is a lot to enjoy in the exceedingly wide chasm between total incompetence and perfection. This is the zone of discovery, and while it is sometimes messy and imprecise, it is also often a lot of fun.

I have also learned to value myself. I used to believe wholeheartedly that the only way for me to have friends was to do things for people. Better to be used than ignored, I always said. But now, I have a different perspective. I have friends who genuinely like me for who I am, and I've begun to trust that, and also see myself through their eyes. It is no longer acceptable for people to use me as their own personal doormat. And I don't have to prove my worth to anyone, including myself. Are there things I want to improve about myself? Absolutely. But I also know that I am enough, just as I am.

I feel I have to give a disclaimer, here. I am not here talking to you as someone who has figured everything out and who has no struggles. I'm not done with my journey, and there are still things I'm working on. But I have also come to believe that recovery isn't a destination you arrive at, it's a method of travel. There is no end point, but that's okay, because the journey is where all the discovery happens. Also, let me just say, I totally disagree with the idea that there is one definition of "full recovery." That term used to cause me so much anxiety, because I didn't really know what it meant except that I was pretty sure it implied a perfection I would never reach. After talking to enough people who've been through this process, I've come to believe that recovery is different for everyone. What qualifies as full recovery for one person might not be fulfilling for another, but that doesn't negate either of their journeys. To me, full recovery just means living my best life, the kind of life I want to live, free of my own personal eating disorder symptoms. For me, that may mean one thing, and for you it may mean something completely different, but they both work. We can both be recovered. Am I 100% satisfied with my life as it is? No. As I said, I'm still very much in process. But am I happy with the direction I'm going, and with what I'm learning on the way? Absolutely.

Here are some concrete things that have helped me so far: 1) journaling. Keeping a journal has been an evolutionary process all its own, one I really resisted starting but now cannot imagine being without. There was a time when I refused to put my thoughts in writing, because committing them to paper would make them real. Now, I view writing as the way in which I can express myself most authentically. 2) having compassion for myself. The word "compassion" used to literally make me cringe. Now, I'm seeing how much sense it makes to be gentle. Emotions and reactions are tough

enough without adding all the judgment. If I'm having a difficult day, I try to do things that make me feel better. I vent to people, I distract myself, I go outside. I validate my struggles without wallowing in them. It doesn't always go smoothly, but I've found that extending compassion to myself when I'm having a hard time is much more effective than self-punishment. 3) moving my body in ways that actually feel good. Physical activity is invigorating, but only if it's something I really enjoy...and for me, that's hiking, NOT the treadmill. 4) having visual reminders of what my goals are. This helps me make recovery-oriented choices: "Well, if I want X, I have to do these things to get me there." 5) have a mentor, or two! Recovery is a very individual process, but I have found that there is nothing more powerful than hearing "I know you can do it" from someone who has already been there. My mentors are the ones who have truly made me believe in myself, and in my ability to live in what I envision as MY full recovery.

I always knew that I wanted to speak at Hope & Inspiration, but I couldn't really envision the day that I would be ready to do that. And yet, here I am, not at the end of my path, but rather one step closer to living the kind of life I want to lead. For a long time, I used to go to sleep every night with the thought, "If I don't wake up in the morning, I'd be okay with that." Now, when I do wake up in the morning, I feel blessed to have the chance to experience a new day, regardless of what it brings. I no longer believe that "appetite" is a dirty word, and I am discovering the benefits of honoring my hungers for food, rest, connection, and excitement. When I was starting out on this recovery journey, I never thought I would be able to say that, but I can. So, my wish for you is that you be patient with yourselves. Find the support you need. Don't rush. Have faith. Be active—don't just expect that recovery will happen; you have to work for it. It's hard, definitely the most challenging thing I've ever done, but I've come to the conclusion that I deserve joy in my life. I'd like to end with lyrics from the song, "After all," by Dar Williams, a song that has kept me company throughout this journey:

*'Cause when you live in a world
Well, it gets into who you thought you'd be
And now I laugh at how the world changed me
I think life chose me after all.*