

Food Makes Me Happy

(and that's my problem!)



By Michael Sortino

EARLY RENAISSANCE SUPER-MODEL ENVY





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Food Does Not Make Me Happy

(Time to face the music)

Just like any other drug or addiction, there's always the promise, beforehand, of fulfillment, of satisfaction. Do you get this violently strong feeling sometimes? For example, when someone offers dessert after a meal, do your legs start shaking, palms get a little sweaty? Do you find your pulse quickening a little as you walk through the frozen treats aisle at the grocery store?

Is there an adrenaline rush as you dig through the ice cream shelf like an Eskimo hunter, searching for that special flavor? You suffer frost-bite. Maybe you're even willing to lose a finger in order to find the right one, the cherished one. At last, you tear off the lid and there it is, that perfect, unblemished surface of silky pleasure. You dig right in. Hopefully, this isn't on the way to the check-out counter. Hopefully, you haven't locked yourself in the freezer to guard the remaining few gallons of your precious treasure as you eat through them all right then and there, afraid someone might cart-jack you on the way to the cashier.

Fast-forward five, ten, minutes. Maybe thirty, depending on how well you can "put 'em down." The high

begins to fade. That feeling of, “I never thought something could taste so darn good in all my ever-loving life” starts to change into something else.

Here, we enter the let-down phase: “Um, you know, that triple layer fudge brownie ice cream with mint chips, caramel waves, toffee shell and cookie core didn’t really taste as good as I remembered.”

There’s also the guilt. You’re at someone’s house and you find yourself confiding in them, even if you don’t know them that well. “Why did I do that? I shouldn’t have had that last piece of pie.”

“You had the last half of the pie.”

“Okay, it was a big piece! What’s wrong with me?!”

There’s the sick feeling. “I can’t move. Someone’s going to have to carry me from the table to the couch. Careful when you lift me, boys! My belt’s unbuckled! Easy! Easy!”

“No, not so easy, bub!”

Or, have you ever found yourself saying this one after you’ve overindulged? “I feel like I’m going to throw up, I ate so much!” Hmmm. Sound like any Romans you used to know?

The raw truth of the matter is that food does not a happy person make. It gives nourishment and, when used properly, it sustains life, working together with other factors to make a whole and complete person. When it is abused, however, it can make you sick. Certainly, it can

make you feel gross at the time, but its misuse can also cause serious health problems: obesity, diabetes, heart problems, vision problems, high blood pressure, eating disorders . . . and these are just the ones you hear about.

These things are undeniable, scientifically speaking, and most people know them. Why can't we stop, though? If we know our car is low on brake fluid, we don't generally take a pleasure trip through the mountains at speeds up to 90 mph, do we? No, we know better. We exercise some control there.

So, why is it so hard to get a grip on the food situation? I think the answer is that it is not merely a physical, mechanical, cause and effect relationship. Food is entwined with our emotional and mental state to such a degree that it becomes not just one aspect of our life, but a main focus. Whether we realize it or not, we are obsessed with it. It has a strong hold on us that we're usually not aware of.

Let's take a look at a case study. I'm not a doctor or a psychologist, so I can't refer to a patient. I will, however, refer to someone I know very well. In fact, I'll combine myself along with people I know and/or have observed in my life and I'll make an amalgam. Since I don't want to name any names or even do the acronym thing (because, no doubt some genius will figure out who I'm talking about), I'll give this example a fictitious name: Fatty Johnson.

Okay, that's not very nice. Let's try a more common name: Baluga. No, um, that's the name of a

whale. Sorry, I'm really bad with names. Let's use one that's not gender specific, too. How about Sam? There you go—could go either way.

Now, Sam worked at a very stressful job. Sam, being a great manager, brought donuts in every morning to improve office morale. Sam usually ended up eating all of them throughout the day, even the plain one without chocolate or anything on it, because Sam felt sorry for it being left in the box all by itself. Sam thought about Sam's meals a lot. Before Sam was barely finished with breakfast, Sam was wondering what the meal for lunch would be.

Sam needed a snack before lunch and did not feel guilty about this, since no human being could be expected to last four hours without eating something. Thus, a coffee and three Danishes were generally well justified. Sam tried to be sensible with lunch. Just a salad and maybe a bag of chips with a diet cola. Problem was, Sam craved something sweet after lunch. It distracted Sam to no end. Sam couldn't move on with life or work or even bare existence without satisfying that craving. Chocolate was needed, for the good of Sam, for the good of Sam's work and personal circle, as well.

Sam would find sweet relief and then, after struggling to stay awake the rest of the afternoon, Sam would suffer through until dinner. This was feast time that served as a reward for the day's work, with large portions that stretched the limits of Sam's already overstretched stomach. However, oddly enough, only an hour or two after

dinner, Sam was hungry again. Maybe Sam was reading. Most likely, Sam was couched in front of the TV watching an unending offering of favorite shows. Naturally, for stamina and even company, Sam had a bag of chips and/or a bowl or two of ice cream along for the ride.

Sam would fall asleep on the couch if Sam couldn't break through the fog and stumble into bed before collapsing. Strange dreams and frequent trips to the bathroom dotted Sam's night due to eating so late, and so, sluggishly and somewhat disgruntled, Sam would awake the next day to start the process all over again.

Now this isn't to say that Sam didn't get anything accomplished at work or maintain a relationship or two. That's the great

deception, here. Food is the quiet controller. You don't realize it has a hold of you until one morning you look in the mirror and you're twice the person you used to be.

I've often wondered what would happen if today's societal perceptions changed back to those of the Renaissance times, when fullness was fashion. Would the issues with food simply fade away or not? Is it really all the media's fault? Is it really just a matter of self-perception and comparison?

You can't go into a grocery store nowadays without seeing a dozen or so magazine covers of human sculptures

Food for Thought:
Am I Sam? (or, for all of you Dr. Seuss fans – Sam I am?)

seemingly carved with an artist's knife (or airbrush) to perfection. They're all smiling and happy, successful and strong. Consciously or subconsciously, we compare ourselves, and the message is clear: you can't be happy unless you look like those people on the covers.

Was it this way, post-Middle Ages? Did someone walk through the Sistine Chapel and think, "Man, if only I was

Food for Thought:
How do I feel about myself when I see supermodels?

as plump as those people in the frescoes, then my life would really turn around!" Well, on some level, I'm sure it was. Usually, if you were that full-figured, it meant you could

afford a decent meal or three per day, and this was always good. It's funny how looking well-fed was a positive reflection back then, and, today, looking starved or barely nourished is "in."

Turn on the TV and it's inhabited by skinny, fashionable people. Unless, of course, your show is a satirical, sad look at how a fat person tries to fit in or lose weight. Why do most, if not all commercials feature thin people to sell the products?

There's no denying that, straight up from grade school there's a new class warfare in this country, between those who are the "hottest" and those who don't come close. Why do kids pick on their chubbier classmates? Do their parents send them off to school with a clear directive on this?

“Okay, now, son. Have a nice day. And, remember, if you see someone who’s on the plump side, be sure to mock them without mercy.”

That’s absurd! But, why is it that even children know about weight distinction? Sure, it’s the media they’re exposed to. If all they ever see as normal and happy is the trim person, they don’t know any better. And, yes, parents play a role. Their attitudes rub off on their children in ways they never imagined.

I remember when my son was around seven, one day he was excitedly telling me about a candy bar he’d eaten earlier. “And it had 300 calories!” was the last in a list of feverish, gooey descriptions.

I was really careful in my reply, because, first of all, how on earth does my little son know to count calories?! Never mind that, he’s picked it up from us. Nothing to do now except set his mind straight and lay the foundation of a good attitude toward food.

“Son,” I said. “First of all, that’s a big candy bar! Second of all, you should be ashamed of yourself!”

No, I didn’t say that. In reality, I was just excited for him. And, as he talked on, he told me how he split the large chocolate bar with a friend, since, in his words, “I know too much sweets aren’t good for you!”

Of course, I told him he was right, and I smiled to myself, hoping this level-headed attitude of his would last.

The other reason I think some kids pick on the heavier child in class is because they want to make

themselves look and feel better. Sure, this isn't a ground-breaking thought, but it's important to note. Maybe it's just my kids, but I haven't "seen" any of the four of them show any tendency toward discriminating against anyone for any reason. We've tried hard to instill an all-encompassing, "love thy neighbor" mentality in them.

I believe kids start out this way. Then, when you throw them into a socially competitive environment, suddenly, whether they realize it or not, they are vying for position and power, and suddenly (not my kids, of course!) they're putting someone down to make themselves look better.

Food for Thought:

Do I see people around me as my competition or as companions along the way of life?

The reason I bring this up is for us to be aware, as I'm sure we've all seen, that an attitude like this can continue on all through middle school, high school, college, and even clear into old age for some people. They are so insecure with themselves that these people must find a way to feel better, even at the expense of others. And, whose expense is it all too often? The person who doesn't fit the social norm (as dictated by media and fashion trends, and conditioned into our minds). They are the easy target.

Nothing new here. But, here's a point you may not have considered before: Many people, including myself at times, are both the bully and the victim. I don't mean in

separate instances, though that happens, too. I mean, at the same time. *We pick on ourselves*. We make fun of ourselves. God forbid, but we even HATE ourselves.

How can this be, you ask? Well, no one ever said a man's best friend is himself. And no one would even dare suggest it about a woman. It saddens me to no end how women especially tend to despise themselves because they don't look the way they think they should.

Here it is, again. We all want to fit in and feel like we belong. Intentionally or not, the media powers have created an "in" group. You look like this and act like this or you don't belong.

Don't belong where, you ask? I mean, for adults, we're not at school anymore, so . . . yeah, well, there's work, and that's as bad as grade school sometimes, certainly, but I'm talking about *life*! Some people believe they don't belong in life itself because they don't fit in to the norms of society!

This is heartbreaking. They believe that, everywhere they go, the grocery store, the bank, walking down the street, they are being judged. Somewhere, someone is thinking to themselves, "Wow, that person is really disgusting! What's wrong with them?"

Now, there may not be an actual person standing there doing that. If there is, all I have to say to that person is, "What's wrong with you?! Take a look inside yourself and spend the rest of your life working on *that*, why don't you!?" Sorry, but I'm taking the gloves off now. Look out!

Regardless of whether the person is there or not, the comment is said or not, the side-long glance or the snobbish dismissal has occurred, the self-loathing person still feels the way he or she does. It's conditioning of the worst kind. (Don't worry, we're going to discuss ways of rinsing it out a little later, you can bet!)

Food, in these cases, becomes the enemy. But, it's an enemy that's easy to love. Yes, we've entered into that old love-hate relationship, here. A self-deprecating person, stuck in the dreadful mind-trap of societal norms, will curse food for making them so miserable. But then, since they are so miserable, they can't help but run back into the arms of food to relieve their pain. Remember, it's the next legal drug, after all.

People who are obsessed with their weight or body figure (and believe me, I've been there at times) often find themselves looking at the fit jogger or the nearly transparent woman ordering the latte and wishing upon every star that they were them. Yes, like their Renaissance counterpart, they're in the great, neighborhood Coffee Chapel and they're fantasizing about how much better their life would be if only they had the perfect body.

It's my firm opinion though, that the coffee isn't always blacker on the other side . . .