

Surviving the Predatory Lies of Anorexia, by Abby Kelly

Introduction

As I sort old journals, cull memories and query friends and family, I realize how little I actually knew about my own battle with an eating disorder. Writing about it is kind of like taking a shower, an effort to cleanse away the day's dust, and discovering a birthmark I had never seen before.

Obviously, it's been a part of me forever. Since opening the womb, my "me-ness" has been as God sketched it. My soul has born the same imprint. Surely, culture and family and circumstances ebb and flow across each life and erode some things faster than others, while sifting silt and revealing precious stones. But I had hardly seen it.

I was told that in writing my book, I must "bleed on the page and be saved in the process." Often bleeding hurts. And when you're being vulnerable, raw and honest, even the smallest prick can make you bleed.

I WANT.

You see, I grew up the oldest of four girls. I remember the anthems that echoed through our home, "Abby, you're the oldest, can you please just give in this time?", or, "Be the mature one," or, "I expect more out of you."

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And I tried to do more. And I tried to be self-sustaining. But denying want does not erase it. In fact, denying want, dug a deep, subversive pit in my heart. Inside, I greedily demanded all my desires while on the surface, others observed a starving little girl denying even her need to eat.

Now, I can clearly hear the melody of my heart all those years, the percussion to which I kept time: *I want you to want me. I want you to think I am the smartest, the thinnest, the most beautiful. I want you to want to be me. I want to be enviable. I want to be impervious. I want to need nothing. I want you to know that I am strong. I want to think I am better than everyone else. I want others to think I am self-disciplined. I want, I want, I want. I want all of my parents' attention. I want to be your favorite. I want you to notice me. I want you to think I am spiritual. I want your sympathy. I want your touch. I want to be able to have everything I want. I want you to tell me I can eat anything I want. I want to be safe. I want to be independent. I want, I want, I want.*

It was so sneaky that even I did not recognize my greed. An anorexic appears to be in need. The life of an anorexic is an exercise in asceticism, self denial, ultimate self control. But for me, it was a ploy to get everyone else to condescend to all my demands.

Now, lest you think I am unnecessarily berating myself, or attempting to beg pardon, let me tell you the TRUTH. I am needy and I do want things. And I've come to understand that all wanting is not selfishness.

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I have learned to ask for things - both my needs and wants. I am learning to be attentive to the needs and desires of those around me. And lastly, I have stopped looking for others to notice and fill my emptiness. I have found the bottomless source of gifts. I have found the unquenchable fulfillment of all my desires. I have found the solitary source for the satisfaction of all my needs. And He loves for me to come to Him HUNGRY. However, my satisfaction and fulfillment are not the end game.

In his book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren says, “The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness (and I might add, your health). It’s far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions.”

I have discovered, in my own walk toward complete freedom from anorexia, that true recovery wasn’t so much about me, my issues, my family, my illness, my health, my fitness, my bone density, my depression, my happiness, my weight or even my future, but true freedom was found only by looking away from myself, upward to my Savior and outward toward those He has called me to love.

“I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” Ps. 121:1-2

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Between the lines of my starvation story, I am inserting words of hope and peace that come from a recovered woman who is today basking in the ever growing light of Christ's freedom for me. I pray that you see the progression, the steady resurrection of a life and believe with all your heart that recovery is possible.

I was given a book, *Beyond the Looking Glass*, on my first day of treatment at Remuda Ranch, a book of devotions for those struggling to loose themselves from the grip of an eating disorder.

Almost Nothing, these chapters, are images from my looking glass. I hope you glean encouragement from these pages and that they point you directly to Jesus.

“The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works. The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them.” Ps. 145:15-19

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Chapter One, Flight

“You will never see me again!” I screamed. I knew I was running out of time as we approached the airport. “I’ll die there! I’m never coming home.”

“Abby, stop. You’re getting yourself all worked up and we have to go inside now.” My father parked the car in the dismal parking garage. Ignoring my residual choking on tears, he got out of the car and began to extract the suitcases, careful not to get any grease on his jeans.

Daddy always looked sharp, one more thing I hated about myself. In the last several years I had become more of a skeleton freak show than an attractive daughter he could be proud of. My face was gaunt and haggard, the look of a aging smoker, but my breasts were flat and my waist curveless like a prepubescent boy. I wore sea-foam green sweat pants with the word “Spirit” in block letters down my right leg. They hung around my thighs like a tent missing poles, but I liked them because I felt small inside them. A sloppy, white t-shirt blaring “Spirit” as well, topped the ensemble.

“Abby, get out of the car.”

I debated for a moment, but knew that I’d never win. The wildest of my tantrums were no match for Dad’s strength, but until now, at least in the battle of wills, I had triumphed. Two days ago, my parents played their trump card.

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“We’ve tried everything.” My parents had me cornered in their bedroom. Mom spoke because I listened more calmly to her. “We’ve been patient while you’ve promised over and over to try. We are really, really worried about you.”

Mom’s voice broke there. Dad turned and glared at my little sisters eavesdropping from the bedroom doorway. Two sets of chocolate brown eyes and one blue pair ducked back into the hallway. Then he shut the door and stepped forward.

“You promised to gain 10lb in two months.” Dad’s voice was taut. The six-foot-four man that I once thought invincible, slouched beneath a heavy burden. “Over a month ago, you agreed to the ultimatum that you would gain eight pounds. You’re nowhere near that. You need help and this is not a discussion. Remuda Ranch agreed to admit you, and we need to be there the day after tomorrow.” Daddy turned and left the room.

I slumped to my knees on the floor. “Please, please, please, Mom! Don’t send me away. I can’t be gone for two months. You might as well disown me. I’ll die there!”

Forty-eight hours later, Daddy and I walked silently into the Oklahoma City airport. I had begged for Mom to take me. She was more compassionate and not fully convinced that inpatient treatment was the only option for my progressing eating disorder.

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Dad carried both suitcases; he knew all my tactics: Burn extra calories by carrying extra weight. That morning I had snuck in 500 jumping jacks and 500 sit-ups in the bathroom. I knew that all exercise would be forbidden when we reached the ranch.

“Is she okay?” the flight attendant eyed me suspiciously, then turned her gaze toward my dad. We had settled into row 17. Dad always sat in the aisle seat because it accommodated his long frame. Glancing at me, he waited for me to answer for myself. Crying had accentuated the perpetual bags beneath my eyes, and they glared red from both anger and the effort to dam up my tears.

“Yes, she’s fine,” Dad promised. “May I get a Dr. Pepper? She’ll have an orange juice.”

As soon as the stewardess walked away, I shot Dad a look that said, “How dare you! I’ll never drink those 120 calories and you can’t make me.”

All food represented a number to me. Dad often commented that I ate only nuts and twigs, but truthfully, I couldn’t tell the difference styrofoam or steak. The only criteria for consumption was a low value in my calorie counters handbook. Flavor was a non-issue.

Many times in the years since my recovery from anorexia, I pleaded with God to erase my knowledge of calories. He has not seen fit. I know the stats of nearly every item in the grocery

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store and I am so good at estimating the calories of any given food that it's almost a game. But freedom has emerged the victor.

It still tickles me when I pick up peppermint mocha coffee creamer and toss it thoughtlessly into my cart. It isn't sugar-free or the lowest calorie option. Even so, my mouth waters with anticipation for my morning joe. I smile to myself when I taste the samples offered at the grocery store or steal a sip of my husband's chocolate shake from McDonald's, and I don't count the French fries. Yes, freedom emerges.

The stubby plastic cup containing 120 calories arrived and I set it on the tray. I could tell the stewardess wasn't the only one peering at me from behind her thick-rimmed glasses. Everyone stared at me these days; it made me feel uglier than I already did. I snugged the flimsy red airline blanket high around my neck, hoping to hide the sharp angles of my chin and my craggy, bony shoulders.

Crying makes my face look pudgy. I sucked in my cheeks.

"I'm freezing." I whispered the first civil words to my dad. I knew he wasn't angry with me, but I prayed my tone conveyed how furious I was at him and how much he was hurting me.

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In a silent gesture of love, Daddy took off his casual bomber jacket and tucked it around my shoulders. Tears that I had finally corralled when we entered the hubbub of the airport threatened to ooze down my cheeks again.

“Do you want a section of the newspaper?” He flapped the pages lightly to spread the paper open. I only ever cared to read the comics, but I resented his effort to lighten the mood. He sat rigid next to me, like a stoic sentry, guarding his captive until he could deliver me to this place I didn't want to go.

“Is the program really 60 days?” I meant to remind Dad of how long I would really be gone.

“Sixty days is the minimum amount of time for a minor.”

“What if I gain weight faster than that?”

“It's not just about your weight, Abby. That's the first important thing, you can't survive like this much longer. But you'll meet with counselors there who specialize in eating disorders. You can't come home and do this all over again. Do you know what it is doing to our family? Do you have any idea how your sisters feel?”

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I did have an idea, but I wished I didn't. Reaching down, I plucked three handwritten notes from the top of my purse. Promises that my sisters wouldn't forget me, that their daily lives wouldn't go on as usual without me.

A yellow envelope from Rachelle was on top, identified by her first-grade, shaky penmanship, as if she paused between each letter to make sure the next one was formed perfectly. The teepee shape of the "A" in Abby was perfectly symmetrical, both "b's" were smooth and round like bubbles.

At the time, Chelle was my favorite sister. Barely six years old, she didn't understand the gravity of why I was leaving and I envied her ignorance. I kissed the top of her head goodbye before I left, and she grinned up at me showing the wide window where she'd lost a tooth the night before.

"See you soon!"

I hope so, I thought.

The next note was Jennifer's. I traced the outline of the single initial scrawled hastily in the middle of the plain, white envelope. Two-and-a-half years younger than me, she fully understood what was going on. She was angry with me for the stress I was causing our parents. Her note was bound to be brief, an indication of the stiffness that permeated our relationship.

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Kelsey, ten years old, smack in the middle between the other two sisters, was the dispassionate one among us. She'd folded a piece of notebook paper in thirds, no envelope. Tilting the paper, I read the single sentence from the back side.

"I love you."

Nothing more, but certainly nothing less. Her sideways hug at home before Daddy and I drove away was sincere, but as much emotion as she was known to display.

I already ached for them. How I wanted them to miss me.

"Dad, this is about me! I am the one being shipped off and abandoned!" I turned to glare out the window.

"You need to stop saying that."

"It's true!"

"It is not true and you know it."

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He was making an effort to keep his voice down. I, on the other hand, already knew that everyone was staring at me, the grotesque stick-figure girl, so I didn't care who heard.

“We love you. We are only doing this because we love you.” Dad's eyes flooded with emotion.

“Do you remember what the admissions person said on the phone? Even she said that your weight is at a critical place. Abby, don't you see? You have to eat!”

“I'm fine,” I said and turned from his tears. It was a pointless argument, but desperation was closing in around me, pressing on my chest with each second we drew closer to our Arizona destination.

“I'm fine but you don't think so because I'm making waves in your perfect, Christian family. I've become the problem child and you have to get rid of me. Daddy, don't you love me anymore?”

Leaning my head back against the too-straight headrest, I closed my eyes, determined to ignore Dad for the rest of the flight, harboring the satisfaction of the last word. But inside, my mind tossed and turned like it would never find rest again.

How on earth did I get here?

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Memories are one of the casualties of anorexia, recalled only faintly when prompted by a friend, a song, a scent, a story. I culled my journals to piece together this story, to remind myself where I came from, from whence I was rescued and to extend a hand of encouragement to you. This is what I remember...

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Because He Lives!