This Messy Magnificent Life

A Field Guide

GENEEN ROTH

SCRIBNER
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To my teachers

Contents

CONTENTS

PART THREE: INTO THE SUBLIME

Introduction by Anne Lamott

Just once, I'd like to read a piece on Geneen Roth that does not mention food.

All those thousands of articles over the years have driven home the radical message she carries, embodies, exudes—that food and weight are not the problem or the solution to the wound, or to the losses of so long ago that we try to numb or redeem by stuffing or starving or weighing or rejecting ourselves.

Yes, her pioneering books were among the first to link compulsive eating and perpetual dieting with deeply personal and spiritual issues that go far beyond food, weight, and body image. She changed my life twenty-five years ago when I read my first Geneen Roth book—the same day I swallowed ipecac in an effort to lose just five more pounds, which would make all of life spring into Technicolor, like when Dorothy lands in Oz. I had never before made the connection that the way we eat is the way we live—and that our relationship to

food, our bodies, money, and love is an exact reflection of the amount of joy, presence, and oxygen we believe we are allowed to have in our lives.

Never before had someone expressed so brilliantly, and with such wit, that curiosity and self-love were the way home—not the latest diet, kale cleanse, or fair-trade coffee colonic.

So I discovered Geneen's writings on food, and was hooked. Yet there is just so much more to her.

For starters, there is the exuberantly real, and the cranky.

Geneen is brilliant about psychological and spiritual matters, the deepest levels of healing. She can speak with profound honesty before a thousand people who are moved to tears by her radical acceptance of who they are, and what they have thought and tried—sometimes for decades, often as recently as that morning. But she can also be a goofball with a wild imagination. Somehow she manages to be hilariously self-deprecating while also being militantly on her own side, moment by moment. She also invents new languages. Passages in this book made me laugh out loud.

There is her life with her pets, with whom she shares great comfort and joy, and gleans wisdom about restoring our primal connection to Love. I think she might

have a pet disorder, though. You may have read her book about the sainted Blanche, her two-hundred-pound cat, or heard of her darling and elegant poodle Celeste. Or perhaps you've encountered Izzy, her current dog—who, ironically, has disturbing food issues, including anorexia. Izzy is the only dog I know that I can leave in my kitchen with the cat's bowl. (A portrait of Blanche, who was male, still hangs in a place of prominence in Geneen's living room, as might, in other homes, a painting of the Queen.)

There is her beloved Matt—her husband and best friend and foil, who conveniently shares the disorder regarding pets. I never think of one without the other. Astonishingly, Matt is very loving and gentle about her other fixation: fancy sweaters. As far as I know, he has never said a word when she has brought home the latest, although he does make a quiet keening noise. (None of us—including Geneen—knows what the sweater thing means, and I do not feel prepared to discuss it further here. I'm just saying.)

There is her smile, which is huge and irregular—one of a kind, almond-shaped, toothy, and frequent. She not only laughs at all my jokes, which I love in a girl, but laughs with infinite compassion at herself and her foibles, failures, victories, silliness, and ordinary human behavior.

There are her tears of empathy—for the child she was, for us all, for how hard it is here, for how deeply weird and impossible life and families can be, and for the world.

There is her contagious delight in the sensuous. I have seen her nibbling a bit of exquisite dark chocolate for whole minutes, as if it had to last her the month, savoring it as if God had given her and only her this one and only piece. Some of the essays in this book will help you learn to do this, too—while also teaching you radical forgiveness if you have recently set upon a sack of Halloween candy like a dog.

I love the depth of her spirituality, and her absolute, total commitment to it (along with the pets . . . and the chocolate . . . and the sweaters). I also love her plainsong erudition, which is in equal proportion to her thrilling humanity.

I can tell Geneen any horrible secret I may have, one that I believe reeks of depravity or madness or general loathsomeness, and she will hear me, and say the three greatest healing words on earth: "Oh, me too." She will reach out to stroke the back of my hand and smile that almond smile.

And man, can that girl pay attention. And so she knows. She knows our hearts, because she listens

to hers. She pays attention to her best friends, to strangers, to God, to pets, to Matt, to her spiritual teachers, to the grasses and birds, to the cats, the dogs, the child.

Many pieces in this book, and in fact in Geneen's life's work, center on developing the trust and intimacy with one's own deepest self that are necessary for practicing radical self-care, awareness, and good boundaries. Perhaps as a result, Geneen is as generous as anyone I know. A few weeks ago we were on the phone and I mentioned that I was frantically cleaning my house because people were coming by for a fund-raiser for a village school I support in Myanmar. A few days later, her huge check arrived in the mail.

Geneen reads the same way she did as a little girl: as an act of devotion, discovery, salvation, meditation, and joy. This has helped her to hone her God-given gifts as a writer—her innate curiosity, her elegance and truth-telling, her brilliant or hilarious turns of phrase, her care.

Forgiveness is the center of her being, of her life. From that springs a deepening awareness of It All—one's tummy, the physical hunger; one's skin, longing for gentle touch and accepting eyes; one's body and its incarnational realms; one's heart, the umbilical link to

God; and what e.e. cummings called *the gay great happening illimitably earth.*

Oh, yes, the food stuff. Has anyone else's writings on compulsive eating and the healing of the heart, mind, and body thrown the lights on for more people, or changed the lives of more of us when we sit down to eat? Or pull up a chair at the fridge? Or open the half-pound bag of M&M's in the 7-Eleven parking lot? Has anyone else helped so many of us develop the muscles to keep ourselves company—loving company—when we're halfway through a sack of Cheetos, or starving ourselves yet again, or purging, or crying in a fluorescent-lit dressing room while trying on swimsuits?

Some of the stories in this book will give you insight and encourage self-forgiveness around money. And here is the scariest thing of all: this book will encourage you to become big and juicy and real, no matter what your parents, your teachers, and your culture have told you over the years.

There is a lot in this book about learning to make (or let) food be about food, and love be about love. There are also stories about the path of learning to trust yourself alone in a room with a cake—or, for that matter, a pile of bills, a clutch of memories, a

family, or a set of deadlines. There are stories about true love, loneliness, and the places in between. There are stories about God, and writers, and parents, and gardens. But mostly these are stories about us, as told by Geneen.

I'd tried versions of not fixing myself before, but always with the secret hope that not fixing myself would fix me.

PROLOGUE

Dropping the Me Project

From the beginning, I was always more anxious than the average bear. I was told at various times that I was too sensitive, too emotional (i.e., too female), too big, too curious, too demanding, too intense. The adults somehow forgot to mention that I was also sassy, silly, and keen-eyed. Regrettably, gaining and losing the same fifteen pounds every few weeks did not improve my self-worth. So at age twenty-four, I started looking for a way to handle "the full catastrophe," as Zorba the Greek described living.

At the start—during the 1980s—my focus was on untangling misguided beliefs about food. Along with most women who struggled with their weight, I believed that if I could resolve what seemed to be the source of my self-hatred, I would be thin, happy, free. It made so much sense: take away the source of the pain and the pain will go away, leaving a bright spirit in its place.

As I lost weight, I quickly understood that issues with food were cover-ups. Yes, they needed to be addressed on the physical level, otherwise they could turn into more serious illnesses. And yes, most of us needed to learn what our bodies longed for and needed, because we'd been brainwashed into craving junk, but the genesis of compulsive eating was not physical, and unless its source was addressed, a range of equally painful behaviors would emerge.

When my misery with food ended—and didn't change anything except the size of my thighs—I kept trying to fix other broken parts of myself by immersing myself in therapy, intensive meditation retreats, and rigorous spiritual practices. Now, I think of these last thirty years as similar to the wandering period in the Buddha's life, minus a few essentials like his willingness to sleep on nails and eat one measly grain

of rice a day. Furthermore, it took him twenty-nine years less than me to catch on to the truth. In my own case, it was only recently that I was willing to relinquish the Me Project and stop trying to fix what had never been broken. I'd tried versions of not fixing myself before, but always with the secret hope that not fixing myself would fix me. This time I only wanted one thing: to be at home in my mind and life as I knew it.

I used the same practices I'd used to end my suffering with food. If being vigilant about stopping the harshness with which I treated myself had unraveled the most obsessive behavior pattern of my life, if allowing my full range of feelings without acting on them had dismantled my suffering with food, why wouldn't it dismantle what caused it: the ongoing, low-level discontent of what it felt like to be me? And finally, if being resolute about feeding myself with awareness and a large dose of kindness changed how I ate, why wouldn't it change how I lived? What if, as I once did and still do with food, I could live as if nothing was broken, nothing was wrong, while nonetheless questioning the constellation of beliefs that led to anxiety, isolation, and self-hatred? What if I believed what Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki said: that we are all perfect and that we

need some improvement? Or, as they say in Texas, God loves you exactly the way you are; and she loves you too much to let you stay like this.

★ ★ ★

Freedom from mental suffering is not a mystery, but a willingness to examine what keeps us from directly experiencing the deep-blue peace and quiet joy that are always accessible and forever unaffected by the passing show.

This Messy Magnificent Life is about the path I followed and the obstacles I encountered along the way. It also challenges the conviction that everyday ease and freedom, no matter what the external situation, are reserved for the very few—that is, not for poor doomed Little Match Girl *moi*.

The book starts where *Women Food and God* ended: around the table, because the way we eat is always a primary gateway to the mind that creates the suffering about it. My ongoing work with retreat students—their stories and their breathtaking changes—continues to provide a groundwork for not only the work with food but also with an assortment of everyday doorways like illness, anxiety, hatred, misogyny, intimate relation-

ships, and the guy paying with change in the express line.

This Messy Magnificent Life chronicles the shift from feeling as if we are secretly defective, helpless, and too often walking on the barbed wire of our thoughts, to waking up with the ever-present, always-sublime freedom from our incessantly restless minds, right in the middle of ordinary life.

Freedom from mental suffering is not a mystery, but a willingness to examine what keeps us from directly experiencing the deep-blue peace and quiet joy that are always accessible and forever unaffected by the passing show. If the drama and chaos in the outside world are expressions of the minds that create them, then naming and questioning the way we live in these minds, and on this earth, is the only way that true change can happen.

And so, we begin.

PART ONE

Around the Table

Attention is everything. Without it, all else is a temporary fix and no long-lasting change is possible.

CHAPTER ONE

Manna

I am making a cup of tea in my favorite purple-flowered mug when I smell smoke. I look through the windows behind me and see plumes of smoke through the trees. I call the fire department and they tell me there is a fire down the road, that it's not contained, and that we might have to evacuate our home. They'll let me know. My husband, Matt, is away—he never seems to be around during the panoply of biblical California disasters (earthquakes, fires, mudslides)—so I will have

to deal with this myself. My heart races. I feel panicked. But then I think, "This will be fine. Sometimes bad is good." I remember a haiku by Zen teacher Masahide that I read just yesterday: Barn's burnt down, now I can see the moon.

Since I have the luxury of time, I walk around the house looking at the things we've accumulated—my mother's antique Bombay chest, doors from Bali, a cabinet from Japan. The photographs of Matt and me at our wedding, of my mother and me at my twin nephews' bar mitzvahs last year. I put five framed pictures and three photo albums in a pile near the front door.

I walk into my closet and I look around, a bit dazed. All these clothes. The only time my father hinted that he knew he was dying was a few weeks after he was diagnosed with stage-four lymphoma, when we were walking past his closet. He said, "My clothes. What's going to happen to all my clothes?" As if they had lives of their own and would miss his legs, his arms, his wrists, or had meaning beyond his insatiable hunger for things and his inability to understand the meaning of enough.

I look blankly at my shoes, my sweaters, my pants. If our house burns down and I am left with only the clothing I take now, what would I want? What can't I live

without? I finger an embroidered jacket, think about throwing it in my car, but then I realize I haven't worn it in a year and although it was once my favorite piece of clothing, it isn't now. I leave it hanging next to the black wool jacket with the short sleeves and the distressed gray corduroy jacket.

I call my neighbor Susan—whose husband is a volunteer firefighter—to find out if she knows anything more about the fire. "What fire?" she asks, voice rising. And then Susan begins to scream. "I'm in a wheelchair! I'm alone! I've just had back surgery! I can't move!" I find myself thinking of the movie *Sorry, Wrong Number*, when the wheelchair-bound Barbara Stanwyck overhears a plan to commit a murder that turns out to be her own, but I keep this thought to myself. I tell Susan I will pick her up if we need to evacuate.

I move slowly, as if underwater. I put jewelry in a backpack—my wedding ring, my father's Masonic ring that he wore until the day he died, my grandmother's earrings, my mother's enameled snake bracelet, my father's first watch. I zip up the backpack, walk out to the car, and put the bag in the trunk. I can't decide if I am numb or if I am enlightened because I've taken nothing else besides my purse, a computer, the stuffed toy pencil my first editor left me when she died, medicine,

some underwear, the photograph albums, my favorite sweatshirt, our house insurance policy, our dog.

I call the sheriff's office. They tell me they are going door-to-door and asking people to evacuate; it is not yet mandatory for our particular road, but soon may be. I decide to preempt the evacuation order, take the dog, call and pick up Susan, and leave, grateful that the flames I saw haven't cut off my escape down our one-lane road. At least I am alive. I dial Matt's number from the car and remember the call I placed to him on a Russian icebreaker in Antarctica a few years ago. (Hi honey, no one died, but Bernie Madoff's been arrested and we've lost every cent of our money.)

As I drive I keep thinking about my jackets, my father, our stuff. About what enough actually is. Then, for some reason, I remember my college friend Linda. It was my senior year and I was a dinner guest at Linda's mother's house. Linda and I were bingeing buddies. She was the one who shared a gallon of Breyer's vanilla fudge twirl ice cream with me, and mined for the chocolate veins with her fingers. The one who, when making a batch of Toll House chocolate chip cookies, used the entire recipe to bake two huge cookies. That way, she told me, we only eat one cookie apiece.

At her mother's house, Linda was sitting at the head

of the table, scooping out ice cream into delicate porcelain bowls with violets and geraniums painted on their lips. Each one was passed around the table until everyone but me had their dessert. I looked at Linda and said, "This one's for me." She nodded her head. "I get it," she said, and proceeded to pile so much ice cream in the bowl that it began to drip down the red dahlias painted on the side of the bowl. The fact that I was already full from the dinner of fried oysters and gumbo didn't factor into my desire for that ice cream, not for one second.

My motto was that if some was good, more had to be better. I was haunted by a wild hunger for something I couldn't name, and while food didn't fill it, having more of what I didn't want was better than having nothing at all.

The word *manna* comes from the Hebrew word *mah*, which means "what," or "what is it?" In Exodus the Torah says, ". . . in the morning there was a fall of dew about the camp. When the fall of dew lifted, there, over the surface of the wilderness, lay a fine and flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?'—for they did

not know what it was" (16:13–15). And, a few verses later, ". . . and so the House of Israel named it manna" (16:31). Each day, when they awoke and greeted the day, they would say "What is it?" for every day this manna was new, fresh, different from the day before. And no matter how much manna each person gathered, it was always exactly what that person needed—and although it tasted different to each person, it left each one satisfied and nourished. They couldn't store manna, hang it in their closets, or put it in the refrigerator like leftover pizza. They couldn't buy it, barter it, or use it against each other; there was only enough manna for that day. And no one had more than anyone else. But somehow, manna miraculously appeared each morning for forty years of wandering in the desert.

Man, oh man. From that perspective, refrigeration and closets sure messed things up. Because now we are wandering in the desert again, but this time, it's the wilderness of too much. Of feeling perpetually discontent and hungry for more, even when our bellies and our houses are stuffed.

Halfway into an eating meditation at a retreat, a time when most people are no longer hungry, I ask people to put down their forks, take a breath, and stop eating. "Jesus," I hear someone mutter, "just when I was getting going."

I look around the room. Donna's fork is in the air, ready for the next bite. Her mouth is still filled with food. After she swallows the current bite, she says, "I am hesitant to mention this but I am really full—like a twelve on a scale of one to ten. But I don't want to stop. Period. And you can't make me."

I tell Donna she's right. I can't make her stop. And in any case, force, cajoling, and exerting willpower have all proved incredibly ineffective where compulsive eating is concerned. But, I tell her, I am nonetheless curious about two things: who she is taking me to be at the moment, and what she hopes that continuing to eat will give her.

"My mother," she answers, almost before I finish speaking. "You are definitely my mother. She put me on a diet when I was two, and I've been on one ever since. And the answer to your second question is more. Just more. If I put the fork down, if I stop eating, I feel deprived. I'm not sure if I'm feeling sad or lost or empty when the food is all gone, but I'm sure I want more."

We don't know what we're feeding, but we know we want more. We're not sure what the sadness is about or

why we feel inconsolable, but we're sure the solution is to take more, have more, eat more. As if the answer to everything that makes us uncomfortable is more. As if it's a choice between having more of what we don't want or nothing at all.

A beloved spiritual teacher once told me that I kept protecting myself from losses that had already happened. I kept dragging the past into the present, and carried it into the future. The deprivation of childhood, the scarcity of tenderness and of belonging—and my attempts to rectify them—kept repeating themselves because that's all I knew. I had no language for sufficiency, no way to see it, no way to recognize what was actually in front of me. "If a pickpocket had stood before Jesus," another teacher said, "all he would see is pockets." We see what we believe. When we look at the world with hungry eyes, we only see lack; everything—people, meals, situations—looks like food we are desperate for. But the second we name what we are doing, the second we pay attention to it, we are no longer merged with it. We are no longer wandering in the desert or hoarding bowls of ice cream or starving for love. We are the awareness that notices that we are

wandering in the desert, hoarding ice cream, starving for love. Attention is everything. Without it, all else is a temporary fix and no long-lasting change is possible.

Most of us already know this; we've tried hundreds of quick fixes: diets, affirmations, workshops that promise abundance, instant changes. Sometimes I ask a group of people how many of them have been on a diet. They all raise their hands. Then I ask how many people lost weight on that diet. All hands are raised again. Then: How many people gained weight on said diet? Again, everyone. Finally, the last question: How many people believe that another diet is the answer now? Everyone. We don't want to know what we already know.

This is the part about having enough that has nothing to do with food. And this is the harder part because we live in a culture that worships more. We are so brainwashed into believing that more is better that we no longer question what it costs or whether it adds anything to our lives. We keep believing that there is an elusive tipping point when more will finally become enough, but no matter how thin we get or how much money we make, that point doesn't get any closer. And in the meantime we spend our days riding the roller coaster of dissatisfaction, discontent, and

disease. (Or, as one of my students said, "I would die to be as thin as I was five years ago, when I would have died to have been thinner.") Until a disaster comes along, like being given a terminal diagnosis or evacuating your house because there's a fire down the road. Then, suddenly, the urgency of what is happening breaks the trance of more. And after the panic subsides, we find ourselves right smack in the middle of the fragile, unrepeatable, never-ending now—which, it turns out, is the only place from which we can ever know what enough is.

When my husband, Matt, and I lost almost every cent of our money in 2008, I was terrified, then I was ashamed, and then I panicked. As I wrote in *Lost and Found*, upon hearing my financial news, my teacher Jeanne said that "nothing of value was lost." To which I replied, "Now is not the time to be spiritual." But I soon realized that just as I'd had a choice with food (to suffer or not), I had a choice at that moment as well. I could keep panicking and focus on the fact that Matt and I had just lost thirty years of life savings and didn't have enough money to get through the next month, or I could realize, as the Zen teacher John Tarrant puts it,

that "the sun still shines and you can still drink your coffee and the birds still call in the morning . . . and you can find out that what you came to this planet for is not necessarily your apartment."

In the end, I did both. But each time I descended into the hell realms of shame, I knew I would feel worse. And each time I made a choice to bring my attention back to the fact that I could still breathe, walk, and drink tea from my favorite purple mug, I felt lighter and happier than I'd been in a long time, even before we'd lost all our money.

That seemed magical to me. But then I realized that before we lost our money I was entranced by lack and the worry of not enough. And after losing our money I kept choosing to focus on this breath, this step, because when I listened to my thoughts—and focused on all we'd lost, and on what we were going to do, and how dumb we'd been to put all our money in one place—I felt as if I was going insane. The difference wasn't the money, since I'd felt we didn't have enough when we did, and that we did have enough when we'd lost everything. The difference was where I chose to place my attention, and that I became fierce about not descending into the nightmare of my thoughts. Having enough came down to moment-to-moment choices of attention.

A woman once asked a spiritual teacher why she could remain so uninterested in her thoughts (and, therefore, remain present) during a retreat, but when she got home and started washing the dishes, her mind wandered into the past and future. He responded that "At a retreat you think what you're doing is important. But once you get home, you forget what you love more than your thoughts."

★ ★ ★

It's as if we slide back and forth between the desire for more (love, earrings, experiences) and fear that we will lose what we already have.

In biblical moments—when there's a threat of a fire, or you lose your money, or you get a life-threatening diagnosis—the urgency forces you back into the present moment and you suddenly realize how much you've been missing. You see the extraordinary in the ordinary. You pay attention to what has been here all along. The purple teacup. The trill of the whip-poor-will outside your window. The sensation of your feet touching the floor in the middle of the night. You look, as the poet

Mary Oliver says, "on the deeper level, from the heavenly visibles to the heavenly invisibles."

Later in the afternoon on the day that Susan and I evacuated our homes, we were notified that the fire was contained. After helping her back into her house, I walked (back) into mine with the dog, photograph albums, sweatshirt, computer, and jewelry. The awe at having a home and for all the things—heat, roof, walls, showers, refrigerators, food—I take for granted burned through my usual trance of managing "one damn thing after another" (as Churchill described history). For that evening and the many weeks that followed, I was awash in thank you, thank you, thank you. For being alive, for being given another day with a roof over my head. For having love, sky, breath.

My teacher Jeanne once said, "You do very well in catastrophes, Geneen. You notice what's important. The fact that you are alive, breathing, sensing, taking in what's around you, becomes primary. But the challenge is doing that on any old day, every day. You have to want this more than you want anything. You have to keep paying attention to the effulgence of every day."

It's as if we slide back and forth between the desire for more (love, earrings, experiences) and fear that we will lose what we already have. In the movement

from one pole to the other, we are always whirling in the trance of deficiency in which we equate being alone with loneliness, restraint with deprivation, being silent with being empty. Or at least I do. I get seduced by the promise of adding yet another ornament to the tree of myself and forget to pay attention to the heavenly invisibles. And then I remember. And then I forget. And remember again.

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