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NAME OF AUTHOR:

Margaret Maureen Farah

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ST. STEPHEN'S COLLEGE

A DEEPER KIND OF CRAVING  
HEALING FOOD AND BODY ISSUES THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF PRESENCE

by

Margaret Maureen Farah

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of St. Stephen's College  
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I dedicate this to all who have ever struggled with loving your body;  
may you reclaim your home and truly experience every beautiful moment.

## ABSTRACT

*A Deeper Kind of Craving; healing food and body issues through the practice of presence* is about understanding what is at the heart of overeating. Despite the attention on the obesity crisis there is little discussion of the spiritual underpinnings of overeating. This research explored the spiritual practice of presence and how it reconnects us to our bodies and results in healthier eating and relationship with the body. The researcher, who has a history of overeating and chronic dieting, embarked on a heuristic self-study exploring the experience of healing food and body issues through the practice of presence rather than dieting. The researcher engaged a process of practicing mindfulness, mindful eating, meditation, art making etc. Four distinct healing processes were observed: *illumination, embodiment, connection and emergence*. *Illumination* involved heightened clarity and insight, resulting in a compassionate curiosity towards the body and eating behaviors. *Embodiment* involved embracing the body and learning to hear and respond to its needs appropriately. *Connection* was characterized by a sense of oneness with one's body, with others and with the world at large. *Emergence* was an experience of transformation in both eating behaviors and the relationship with the body. The researcher discovered that the obsession with dieting and the ensuing rejection of the body is more hurtful than the weight itself. The researcher experienced presence as a profoundly spiritual practice that unites one with alienated aspects of oneself. The researcher concluded that presence offers what one is truly craving when one overeats: a wholeness that offers peace.

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Finally, I honor the Sacred Mystery, the Light that is continually here; in each and every moment.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Literature Review	11
Chapter Two: Methodology	37
Chapter Three: Results	58
<i>Illumination</i>	59
<i>Embodiment</i>	72
<i>Connection</i>	83
<i>Emergence</i>	91
Chapter Four: Discussion	107
<i>Illumination: Clarity and Insight</i>	114
<i>Embodiment: Reclaiming Home</i>	123
<i>Connection: Strands of the Web</i>	134
<i>Emergence: Becoming who we are</i>	142
Chapter Five: Conclusion	157
References	165
Appendix	

*We have difficulty remembering that we are alive in the present moment; the only moment there is for us to be alive. Every breath we take, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy and serenity. We need only to be awake, alive in the present moment. (Nhat Hahn, T., 1992)*

## **The Topic**

It is no secret that obesity is on the rise in our society. The signs are everywhere, from television series dedicated to the subject to daily stories in the news. According to a study published in 2010 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* it is estimated that 68% of Americans are overweight or obese (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Curtis, 2010). What is more disturbing is that The Center for Disease Control estimates that 16.9% of our children are obese. This represents an increase of 13% amongst school age children over the last 30 years (Ogden & Carroll, 2010). Meanwhile, the multibillion dollar dieting industry continues to grow. In 2010 Americans spent an estimated \$68 billion on diet related resources and products (Lelwica, 2010, xvii). With increased access to diets, meal supplements, information on food plans, nutritional labels on food products and a multitude of exercise programs and products on the market how can it be that we are continuing to get fatter as a society? I propose that all the focus on body weight is not the right starting place to address the issues.

There is a collective awakening currently taking place. Experts in the field are beginning to link overeating with unmet emotional and spiritual hungers. In 2010, author Geneen Roth published *Women Food and God* which critiqued the diet approach to weight loss and gave women an opportunity to explore the emotional issues that are leading to their compulsive overeating. Roth points to how, for many, overeating is a response to a spiritual void.

Oprah Winfrey dedicated two full television programs to discussions with the author. “I just know this will ignite a revolution” said Winfrey (Oprah, 2010). This was an accurate prediction. What followed was an explosion of intrigue. Women who had spent years, even lifetimes, dieting and obsessing about their weight were suddenly left to question the entire paradigm that their relationship with their body was built on. In the days following Oprah’s review, the book propelled from number 81 to number 1 on the best seller’s list. (Donahue, Memmott & Minzesheimer, 2010).

Women are hungry for a new approach to dealing with their body issues and to losing weight. The key difference in Roth’s approach is teaching women how to develop a kinder relationship with their body by becoming very present within their bodies. She introduces a spiritual framework that involves meditation and body based inquiry. Roth asks women to focus on eating food with the utmost presence. She further instructs women to eat without distraction and to focus on each bite. She claims that a healthy relationship with food can be achieved by becoming present enough in the body to hear and respond to the hunger and satiety signals and to know what particular foods the body is calling for at any given time (Roth, 2010).

This way of thinking is, in many ways, the complete reverse of dieting. The hidden promise in the diet industry is that if you follow what their doctrine asks and begin to change the size of your body then happiness and peace will follow. Roth’s approach invites us to shift our focus from ‘fixing the outside’ and rather to put our energy on doing inner work. Having a spiritual framework for looking at the issues related to body weight encourages us to connect to our Life Force with every bite, to forgive ourselves and make peace within our former battleground; our bodies. This approach invites us to be present to our emotions and to find the joy in being connected in the moment. Then, once we fill ourselves up with the gift of being alive, our

relationship with food will shift and inevitably we will achieve connection with our body and increased health.

### **The Research Question**

Through this research I have explored the following question:

**What is the experience of healing food and body issues through the practice of presence?**

The rise of obesity in our society is a complex problem and requires complex, multi-faceted solutions that include looking at social and economic factors such as food access, food regulation, enhancing food quality and increasing education. While there are many possible contributors to the problem, my research supports that that healing the broken relationship with food and one's body at the individual level is possibly a critical part of the solution. Regardless of the social changes that are made, achieving and maintaining a healthy relationship with one's body lies within the domain of the individual.

In the last few years, I have begun to ask new questions about the origins of the weight problems that exist for so much of the population. I am particularly interested in exploring paths to healing the issues that do not involve dieting. I have become very curious about the role that disconnection with the body and with the present moment has played in contributing to problems with eating and body acceptance and what results when one restores that connection through the practice of presence.

Much research has been done recently on the effectiveness of present moment awareness through interventions that utilize the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness has been applied to a range of physical and psychological health concerns, including eating issues. What is equally important, however, is to study the mechanisms within

mindfulness that contribute to its effectiveness (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, Freedman, 2006). This research intends to understand the experience of healing food and body issues through the practice of presence, primarily the practice of mindfulness and mindful eating. I will closely explore the mechanisms involved in creating healing through practicing presence.

The term mindfulness originates from Buddhism. Mindfulness is considered one of the ten paramitas or transformational practices for optimal living within that tradition (Suryadas, 2007). Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003) defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). For the purpose of this thesis, I would like to build on the concept of practicing presence and further describe the term mindfulness. I will also articulate the connection between the two terms.

Presence can be defined many different ways. Eckhart Tolle (1999) refers to presence as a state of “no-mind” (p.20); a state when you are free of the incessant stream of thought and deeply rooted in your body. I define presence as a way of being fully aware of your senses and your surroundings, being incredibly wakeful and alert and completely engaged non-judgmentally in the now, free of any distraction. I experience the practice of presence as a highly spiritual encounter. It is not merely a cognitive experience but a practice that engages our entire body. I believe that when we enter into the present moment in this way we can access what the Tibetan Buddhists refer to as the consciousness that is our true Self (Hansard, 2001). Through cultivating presence, I am aligning with the presence within, what I refer to as my Divine essence.

It is important to state that by no means do I see presence, defined in this way, as an easily achievable or permanently sustainable way of being. In my experience, this kind

of perfect pure encounter with the present moment only lasts for very brief instances, sometimes fractions of a second, before a thought or distraction enters in. It requires great effort to recognize the distraction or thought, then to return to the present state. However, it also requires releasing attachment to the outcome and welcoming whatever experience occurs, simply noticing what is in acceptance. This cycle can repeat over and over again sometimes several times within each minute.

The terms ‘food and body issues’ within the research question specifically refers to people who misuse food through overeating and have issues with body acceptance due to feeling they are overweight. Many people have ‘food issues’ that pertain to an unwillingness to eat or specifically controlled eating patterns such as in the case of those struggling with the eating disorders of anorexia nervosa or bulimia. Likewise some people have issues with body acceptance due to feeling they are too thin and being unhappy with their inability to gain weight. The scope of this paper will not be to address those types of ‘food and body issues’. However, there is likely also an application for the practice of presence within those arenas as well. The purposes of this research will be to strictly look at food issues related to overeating and body issues related to the experience of feeling overweight.

Throughout the thesis I will use several interchangeable terms to reflect the spiritual experience of presence. Essentially, all of these terms refer to an experience of God. The term ‘god’ has many layers of meaning depending on the context and culture in which it is used. Often times God is portrayed in our culture as a sort of grandfather in the sky, who is judgmental and condemning, qualities that do not resonate with my personal experience of God. The terms used here such as: Divine Self, Source Within, True Nature, Authentic Self, true Self, Divine Essence etc. refer to my experience of unity with God within; which to me is an experience of only love and light. I choose to

use these terms because they have evolved over time as a more accurate reflection of my personal experience of encounters with the Divine.

I believe that we each have what I call a Divine essence at the core of our beings that is our soul or spirit. This pure consciousness is what the Buddhists refer to as our “luminous Buddha-nature” (Surya Das, 1997). While the structures of the self - personality, emotions, beliefs etc. - are continually evolving as we move through life shaped by all our experiences, what I refer to as the true Self, points to the unchanging Divine essence that I believe is at the heart of each of us. I conceptualize the Self as having three interwoven but distinct parts; body, mind, spirit. The interwoven nature means that they are each deeply affected by the other and our well-being is dependent on these parts acting in alignment with one another. For example what happens in the body can be a strong reflection of the health of the rest of the being. My own body has spent years heavy and tired, which I believe was an accurate reflection of how out of alignment my body, mind and spirit were operating.

### **My Personal Interest**

This topic is particularly meaningful to me because, like many women in our society, I have spent much of my life in a struggle with my body. I have been classified as overweight for as long as I remember and although I rarely admit it out loud or even within myself I was an overeater much of my life. Since childhood my body has weighed anywhere from between twenty to seventy pounds more than I would have liked depending on the year. I had never felt that I was the ‘right size’. I tried and failed at countless diets over the years and became very disheartened and hurt in the process.

The prospect of losing weight on a diet has occupied more mental space than I care to admit over the last nearly thirty years. I have spent innumerable hours obsessing about what I should or should not eat and daydreaming about what life will be like at

whatever I imagined was my perfect size at the time. Over the years, I have subjected my body to: rejection, shame, verbal loathing, deprivation, starvation diet regimens, and neglect. It has been a very private battle, one that I share with millions of people, running in the background of an otherwise normal and fulfilling life.

Now, nearly thirty years later, I have realized that the physical solution of a diet could never have been enough to make a lasting change for me. I am seeing how the impact of this struggle has been crushing to my spirit and how the healing that is needed requires a much deeper solution. My overweight body and weight obsession results from, I believe, a disconnection with the present moment. For so much of my life I have been completely disconnected from my body's cues related to hunger levels, the food on my fork and the bite in my mouth. I have also been largely out of touch with the emotions that were at the forefront of driving the eating experiences.

Since first reading *Women, Food and God* in 2010, I have begun a process of transforming the way I view my body and food. I have been invited to embrace the body I have for so long detested and to begin to view my body weight and food issues as a doorway to living a more vibrant life. Coming into this understanding has marked a radical shift for me. I now believe that presence is the key missing component to restoring my relationship with my body and shifting my eating behaviors. I am practicing presence in all aspects of my life; not only in my relationship with food but also while doing the dishes, cutting vegetables, playing with my son and walking up the stairs. The result has been shocking and beautiful. Through presence, I am beginning to be with my body and experience food in a whole new way. Such simplicity has opened the door to instantaneous connection. I have discovered that presence reconnects me to the moment and awakens me to an endless beauty in life.

I have become deeply curious about the process unfolding within me. As such, I have chosen the heuristic method described by Moustakas (1990) and built upon by Sela-Smith (2002) to research my experience of food and my body in relation to cultivating an intentional practice of presence over a specific timeframe. I will delve into my experience of the phenomenon of presence, exploring the impact it has had on the healing of my body and food issues.

An interesting personal aspect to the timing of this research is that following the decision to embark on this journey I became pregnant with our second child. This was meaningful to me in a few ways. In my first pregnancy I gained close to seventy pounds and found the experience to be very triggering for me both in relation to overeating and body acceptance. I saw this pregnancy as an added opportunity to explore my food and body issues. Although while pregnant I was not on a path to lose weight, I was still faced with the same issues of learning to eat according to my body's signals. I believe that the practice of presence and the work of this research was a huge contributor to the fact that in this pregnancy I felt much healthier and more connected to my body.

A second reason that being pregnant during the research was significant is that pregnancy is such an embodied experience; my body was changing and communicating with me daily. Being present within my body and to this miraculous unfolding within me offered the chance to embrace the beauty and capacity of my body in a whole new way.

A third, and to me most important reason that being pregnant was meaningful is that I have often worried about how my own issues with food and my weight could be transferred to my children. I have been particularly concerned regarding how to model a healthy relationship with my body for a daughter when my own relationship with my body in childhood, adolescent and adulthood had been so broken. Being pregnant and

subsequently giving birth to a girl held particular poignancy for me regarding the importance of achieving a healthier connection with food and my body.

This research is not only timely for me personally but I believe this is an incredibly timely issue for our society.. I am convinced that presence holds an important part of the answer to the rise of obesity in our culture. Offering a window into one experience of practicing presence to heal food and body issues could open the door for others to consider exploring how presence could help them in their situation. Not only can practicing presence address food and body issues but it can have a positive impact on the co-occurring issues that people experience as a result of their struggle with food and their bodies; social anxiety, depression, low self-esteem etc.

Marianne Williamson (2010) calls overeating “an act of spiritual starvation” (p.64). This idea resonates with me. By keeping my body heavy, I have been dimming the light of my spirit. This newly found acceptance of my body and appreciation for the *now* through practicing presence feels like finding a buried treasure. It was there all along but hidden beneath years of faulty thinking. Every time that I step into my skin, inhabit my body, and experience life in the present moment it feels like a direct and powerful connection to God, my Source. It is in those moments that it feels like a veil has been lifted. The world feels clearer. In those moments there is tremendous peace, beauty and opportunity for healing.

In the pages that follow I will present an overview of the current literature related to this topic. This literature review is organized around the three central concepts in my research question: presence, food and body issues, and healing. I will first explore the literature as it pertains to the general concept of the practice of presence and the current research that points to the healing properties of presence. Then I will explore food and body issues, including a brief look at the systemic pressures that contribute to the

development of these individual problems. In the last section of the literature review I will look at healing, specifically the healing of food and body issues through practicing presence. Some of the key words that I have used to guide my search are; presence, spirituality, mindfulness, consciousness, awakening, body based inquiry, meditation practice, overweight, obesity, body acceptance, self-esteem, compulsive eating, food addiction, emotional eating, overeating, Binge Eating Disorder, mind-body therapies, mindful eating, intuitive eating, diets and weight loss.

The following chapter on methodology will describe in detail how I selected the Heuristic method to approach this research. It will include a description of the philosophical underpinnings that have led me to the heuristic research methodology as well as an in-depth account of the steps I took in my research method.

Chapter three will describe the results of my research with chapter four offering a discussion of my findings. In both of these chapters I will explore in detail the four major processes I discovered that I encountered through my experience of using presence in the healing of food and body issues. They are *illumination*, *embodiment*, *connection* and *emergence*. Within each process I will articulate several themes that emerged, fifteen in total. I will conclude with a brief discussion regarding implications for clinical practice and suggestions for furthering the exploration of the power of presence.

## Chapter One: Literature Review

### Presence

*The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, not to worry about the future, and not to anticipate troubles, but to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly. (Buddha, as quoted by Albers, S., 2003, p. 31).*

Many of us are completely disconnected from our present moment experience and, in particular, from the sensations and experiences of our bodies. We live almost entirely in our minds often ruminating on thoughts about our future or reflecting on the past. Renowned Spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle (1999) asserts that when we learn the magnificent gift of being *present* and experiencing the *now*, a new world opens up to us. We then begin to feel the animating presence that is within our bodies that is our Life Source. Connecting to this energy lends itself to a whole new appreciation for what it is to be alive.

Brown (2005) offers an interesting description of presence. He writes that it is “a state of being in which we effortlessly integrate the authentic and Divine Presence that we are with each God-given moment that we are in so that we are able to respond consciously to every experience we are having” (pp.13-14). Brown asserts that a defining characteristic of presence is gratitude; however it is the kind of gratitude that emerges out of simple joy of being, not based on life unfolding according to our wants and not in comparison to another’s experience. Brown notes that if we find ourselves without gratitude it is a clear indicator that we have strayed from the experience of presence.

I would agree that a defining marker of presence is appreciation. When fully present there can be a calm joy in even the simplest of life's experiences. Brown (2005) believes that very few of us regularly encounter life from this state of presence. He says that the alternative way of being is living in a state of being continually distracted by either thoughts of the past or the future. He contends that we are so used to living in this way that it feels natural although it is greatly lacking and leaves us searching and empty. He writes; "We do not know what it is that we are missing because we cannot remember what it is that we have lost...we are turning every piece of this planet over in our desperate search for peace" (p. 11). What he is addressing is a general longing in so many of us that stems from a lack of presence. Peace is available to each of us through learning to awaken to the moment.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005) the founder of the effective and popular therapeutic technique, Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) shares a similar view on how the majority of us operate most of the time:

By simply observing our interior and exterior lives from time to time, it soon becomes quite apparent just how much of the time we are out of touch. We are out of touch with our feelings and perceptions, with our impulses and our emotions, with our thoughts, with what we are saying, and even with our bodies. This is mostly due to being perpetually preoccupied, lost in our minds, absorbed in our thoughts, obsessed with the past or the future, consumed with our expectations, fears, or cravings of the moment, however unconscious and habitual all this may be. And therefore, we are amazingly out of touch in some way or other with the present moment (p.118).

The experience of presence is a profound shift from the distracted state we are usually in. When one is fully present, in the moment, there is a sense somehow that one is more alive, more awake.

As mentioned previously, the concept of mindfulness is much more prevalent than the term presence in psychology literature. Mindfulness has been described as a process of observing one's immediate experience in an open and non-judgmental way (Bishop, S.R., Lau, M., Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., Anderson, N.D., & Carmody, J., 2004).

According to Smalley and Winston (2010) another important aspect is that the awareness be non-conceptual, meaning that there is not an idea or concept forming and that the experience can unfold without labeling it.

Smalley and Winston (2010) say that mindfulness is about cultivating a skill. It is not about seeking a permanent state of present moment awareness and forsaking thought processes such as: problem solving, planning for the future or reminiscing about the past. Rather it is about developing an ability to experience present moment awareness so that we can be purposeful in our application of our thoughts and decide when pure present moment awareness would serve us better than being caught in our past or future thinking. So much of what we do is as though we are on autopilot, going through the motions but asleep to what is actually happening. While I value the cognitive processes mentioned above, presence returns me to my true Self; the strongest version of my being, my deeper wisdom. Presence offers an incomparable opportunity to experience life as it is unfolding; beholding the beauty of the moment.

Shapiro et al. (2006) offer a model for conceptualizing mindfulness. Their model is also aimed at helping us understand the central mechanisms involved. They propose

that there are three central axioms that are necessary for true mindfulness. They consist of intention, attention and attitude. Intention refers to taking up the state intentionally or ‘on purpose’. Attention refers to the importance of maintaining pure, concentrated attention. Attitude refers to the types of qualities one brings to the mindfulness experience; particularly curiosity, non-striving and acceptance. I have also had spontaneous accounts of moments of pure presence. In these instances I was not deliberately trying to become present but I would find myself there, in that connected state. Kabat-Zinn (2005) acknowledges both types of mindfulness through his distinction between deliberate mindfulness and effortless mindfulness. Deliberate mindfulness is cultivated intentionally whereas effortless mindfulness is available to us spontaneously. Perhaps it is with the experience of deliberate practice that the effortless mindfulness comes more naturally.

The concept of achieving presence is not exclusively rooted in Eastern thought; it has also long existed within the ancient contemplative and mystical traditions of Christianity. Rohr (2009), a contemporary Christian scholar, describes mystical awareness as “knowing God directly through God’s enveloping Presence” (p.200) and goes onto describe presence as having an existential character that is difficult to describe with words. He states; “...it is living, vivifying Presence” (p. 200). When I experience this type of presence it is most certainly a spiritual experience where I have a heightened sense of the Sacred in life. It is a distinct shift in my way of being and knowing. I can transition from a mundane moment, caught up in the thoughts of my daily life to a sudden awareness of the present moment that includes a pervasive sense that I am connected to Source. I feel and sense Divinity in, through and around me.

The practice of presence also existed in Sufism within the Islamic tradition. Nicolson (2002) describes Sufism as resting in the understanding that when the individual self is released the “Universal self is found”. Sufis are on a journey to ecstasy and illumination and believe that the cessation of all conscious thought is the highest stage to be reached on that path. For the Sufi, this is believed to be the only way the soul can directly communicate with God.

Rohr (2009) is critical of modern Christianity for not maintaining an emphasis on the contemplative aspects of its tradition. He believes that the future of the church depends on people beginning to cultivate a practice of presence through personal mystical experiences. He also believes that presence and returning to a contemplative way of seeing and experiencing God on a widespread level throughout Western religion could unlock the strife that exists amongst the religions. He argues that if we could see and experience one another in the present moment rather than being fixated on past transgressions or worried about the future then we could achieve peace.

In addition to our Western Religions, practices of presence can also be historically found in Western philosophy and psychology. Heidegger (1962) describes presence as a rich and complex phenomenon and uses concepts of presence to illustrate his understanding of the nature of ‘being’. Husserl (1977), known as the grandfather of phenomenology, discussed aspects of presence in his work. He discussed this form of consciousness as an opportunity to suspend the conceptual ways of interpreting experience and rather attend to the experience itself.

Within the field of psychology Fritz Perls (1969), founder of Gestalt therapy, pointed to the power of presence by suggesting that just the very act of attention itself can

be healing. The theoretical foundation for Gestalt therapy is the here and now, the present moment experience. The existential psychologists and in particular Rollo May, also emphasized presence. In the last book May authored before his death, *The Psychology of Existence (1995)*, co-authored with Kirk Schneider, he emphasized the importance for training therapists to maintain a state of presence in the therapeutic encounter. There are also a host of body oriented therapies, such as Focusing and Hakomi that utilize present moment physical experiences as information for the therapeutic process.

Although the practice of presence is not new, we are becoming more aware of the possibilities it offers in western medicine and psychology, largely through research on mindfulness. Many of the mindfulness interventions currently being studied are based on the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. He is a key figure in bringing mindfulness and meditation to the mainstream medical community in North America. He first developed Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in 1979, a technique shown to help medical patients cope with the mental and physical pain resulting from their illness (2003).

Kabat-Zinn (2005) attributes the surge of interest in Eastern thought to the beat poets of the 50s and 60s who brought Buddhist practices to the West, and to the publication of Alan Watt's (1961), *Psychotherapy East and West*. The momentum has been building ever since. Kabat-Zinn writes, "We are beginning to realize the power of the present moment to bring us greater clarity, insight, greater emotional stability, and wisdom...It has arrived. And none too soon either, given the state of the world and the huge forces impinging on our lives."(p. 37). Over the past thirty years mindfulness programs have made their way into mainstream medicine. Mindfulness interventions are

successfully being used to support patients with aspects of dealing with cancer (Speca, Carlson, Goodey & Angen, 2000), cardiac conditions (Griffiths & Camic, 2009), depression (Teasdale, Segal, Williams, Ridgeway, Soulsby, & Lau, 2000), obsessive compulsive disorder (Wilkinson-Tough, M. Bocci, L., Thorne, K & Herlihy, J, 2010), eating disorders (Douglass, 2011), borderline personality disorder and addiction (Linehan, Schmidt, Dimeff, Craft, Kanter & Comtois, 1999) to name a few.

There is still relatively little research on the phenomenon of mindfulness and its application in medicine as compared to other health treatments such as diet and exercise. However, the interest is growing at exponential rates. In 1990 there were some 80 papers published that specifically looked at the benefits of mindfulness as compared to over 600 papers published by the year 2010 (Smalley & Winston, 2010). Research has shown strong evidence for the health benefits of meditation, mindfulness and other mind-body therapies (Lake, 2007). There is currently even interest amongst medical researchers to understand the relationship between mindfulness and specific neurological states to further delineate the unique properties of this very specific state of being (Raffone, Tagini & Srinivasan, 2010).

Marsha Linehan developed Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) an effective intervention targeting people with Borderline Personality Disorder combining aspects of Zen Buddhism with conventional cognitive and behavioral therapies (Linehan et al., 1999). She was supportive of the work of Kabat-Zinn and spoke to her colleagues Teasdale, Williams and Segal about the potential for an application of mindfulness therapy with patients suffering from depression (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). As a result of their collaboration with Kabat-Zinn, Teasdale and his colleagues developed a mindfulness

based therapy for treating major depression called Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). Their intervention combined key components of mindfulness practice with elements of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). In randomized controlled trials the participants of the MBCT program had a significantly greater reduction in their major depressive episodes as compared to the control group who received a CBT only therapy (Teasdale, Williams, Soulsby, Segal, Ridgeway & Lau 2000). In addition to the physical and psychiatric conditions mentioned above, interventions utilizing mindfulness as a key component have shown to be successful in the areas of drug addiction and smoking cessation (Tapper, Shaw, Ilesley, Hill, Bond & Moore, 2009).

Schoormans & Nuklicek (2011) argue that the psychological well-being that has recently been associated with mindfulness may have more to do with general components of many forms of meditation such as increasing attention, building acceptance, disengaging from typical thought patterns etc. In their study comparing different forms of meditation, the results suggested that the frequency of meditation is a more important factor than the type of meditation when it comes to well-being. These results were not surprising in that there are many avenues to presence and mindfulness is but one, albeit powerful, of those avenues. Any form of meditation or practice that draws an individual fully into the present moment could bring about similar benefits.

Tolle (1999) describes that at the core of the experience of presence is a deep-rooted sense of oneness, unity, and connectedness to God. Richard Rohr (2009) writes; “When you can be present, you will know the real Presence” (p.12). Even though our modern concepts of mindfulness have come largely out of the spiritual practices of Buddhism, in our medical and psychological literature the spiritual aspects of

mindfulness are often not emphasized. This is due to the difficulty of empirically describing and delineating the spiritual dimension inherent in becoming attuned with the present moment. However without understanding this aspect of mindfulness we risk missing some of the important healing potential of becoming present.

Food and body issues prevent us from embracing and inhabiting our bodies, our earthly home and therefore they can stand in the way of us experiencing the beauty of presence. Thich Nhat Hahn (1992), a prominent Vietnamese Buddhist monk and teacher, uses this simple and beautiful meditation to help people connect with the present moment through their body: “Breathing in I calm my body. Breathing out I smile. Dwelling in the present moment, I know this is a wonderful moment.” (p. 10).

### **Body and Food Issues**

*We must treasure everything that belongs to the body and not despise it. It is our very vehicle to awakening. We can find all aspects of the path to enlightenment in our own body. (Hanh & Cheung, 2010, p.76).*

‘Compulsive overeaters’, ‘food addicts’ and ‘binge eaters’ are some of the words used to describe people who have broken relationships with food and conditions that can lead to obesity. Food sustains life, it heals, it helps us thrive, grow and be healthy, but there is another side. Eating has recently been aptly described as having the potential to be “very violent” to both the individual and to the planet when done unconsciously (Hanh, 2011). It can be a powerfully destructive force in our lives when used for purposes other than basic sustenance.

Research suggests that obesity is often closely linked with emotional eating (Van Strien, Schippers & Cox, 1995). Emotional eating refers to the tendency to overeat as a

reaction to negative emotions. Eating to sooth or avoid the pain of difficult emotions is one strategy for emotional regulation (Hayes & Feldman, 2004). Eating can be an escape; however, once the binge is over, the pain of the eating behavior is layered on to the initial difficult emotion (Koenig, 2008). Mindfulness is theorized to be effective through providing people with an alternative for dealing with negative emotions. Mindfulness allows an individual to develop a distanced or ‘decentered’ relationship with their internal emotional landscape (Hayes & Feldman, 2004).

The *Intuitive Eating* movement within nutrition science has articulated an emotional eating continuum ranging from mild to severe symptoms. At one end of the scale is eating for sensory gratification, from there follows eating for comfort, then for sedation and at the extreme end is eating for punishment (Tribole & Resch, 1995). People can have so much rage and contempt for themselves that they can eat to the point of extreme discomfort as a way of expressing anger towards themselves. The range of emotions that are thought to lead to this continuum of emotional eating includes rage, mild depression, anxiety, frustration, love, excitement, procrastination and a sense of permissive freedom. People have also been shown to overeat out of boredom (Gast & Hawks, 2000) and stress (Tanja & Epel, 2007). There is some research to suggest that for girls, in particular, perceived stress is the strongest trigger for emotional eating (Levitan & Davis, 2010).

Although there is no category in the current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (APA, 2000) for food addiction, the experience of this relationship with food takes on the qualities and properties of any other addiction (Loring, 2010). Taylor, Curtis and Davis (2010) propose that “core diagnostic constructs and neurologic

findings linked to substance abuse are shared by some individuals with weight problems” (p.327) and that there may be utility in applying aspects of addiction treatment to manage weight related issue. Although there is no official description for this type of addiction, many people refer to themselves as “food addicts” and struggle with their relationship with food in a similar way as alcoholics struggle with their addiction. There are even twelve step programs based on the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) model designed to help people recover from their addiction to food (Overeaters Anonymous, 2011). One critical difference in the recovery from food addiction is that the strategy of complete abstinence is not an option. Food is necessary for survival and cannot be avoided and so a food addict must learn the necessary skills to navigate a more appropriate relationship with food and practice these skills several times a day.

Even if one can find ways to better manage their emotional eating, according to Kabat-Zinn (2005) there are other factors that contribute to distorted relationships with food, such as: “social pressures, the advertising industry, agribusiness, food processing, and by conditioned taste preferences and portion sizes” (p. 231). The process of eating is seemingly a simplistic and basic aspect of being human; however, our relationship with food can be incredibly complex. Our conditioning around food runs very deep and, in our food abundant and commercially driven society, with easy access and unlimited choice, changing these established patterns can be incredibly difficult (Kristeller, 2003).

Gould (2007) points out that using food for reasons other than sustenance is found within most cultures. Food is used to show care and concern when brought as a gift to those that are grieving. Food is used to express hospitality and welcoming when we receive guests. In childhood food is often used as a way of showing approval through it

being used as a reward or taken away as a punishment. It becomes problematic when those patterns become so entrenched that we have over-identified relationships with food and can no longer decipher body signals. In childhood, many of us were taught to 'clean our plates', sometimes in the context of guilt inducing statements about people starving in other countries. This is one example of a cultural narrative that may contribute to the vast majority of people in North America who use external cues rather than body cues as a means of determining when to stop eating. Eighty percent of people stop eating due to the cue of an empty plate versus their own body cues (Bays, 2009, p. 68).

Women often become more conscious of body weight as they move into adolescence as a response to the enormous cultural pressure to conform to the socially constructed ideal. This can lead to a very conflicted relationship with food that may take on a love-hate quality. As girls are growing up, food represents love but it also represents failure in terms of their inability to have control over it when they begin to participate in dieting (Kristeller, 2003). Not only are diets hard emotionally, they are also largely ineffective at producing the desired effect of long-term weight loss: it is estimated that less than 5% of those who lose weight on a diet will maintain their loss after a 4 to 5 year period (Kramer, Jeffery, Forster, & Snell, 1989).

In a recent study at the University of Minnesota, researchers found that girls who received messages about dieting or their bodies from their parents are likely to actually gain weight (Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Haines, Story, Sherwood, & Van den Berg, 2007). These findings beg the question; if we are teaching our children to lose weight what is driving them towards food? My curiosity is around whether this stems from emotional eating and coping with the pain of shame and guilt. Children seek approval, especially

from their parents. Implicit in the message about losing weight, even when it is delivered with loving intentions from worried parents, is the message that ‘you are not okay as you are’. What cannot be comprehended by a child is that, by virtue of being part of this culture, their parents have received the very same false messages about weight and value at one point as they are now delivering (Bacon, 2010).

A woman’s damaged relationships with food and her body takes on a cyclical function, the two play off one another. She feels as though her body betrays her and lures her into consuming the food she “should not” eat and in turn the eating contributes to a body she does not want to be in and does not trust. Similarly, in *Women, Food and God*, Roth (2010) states;

Weight is what happens when you use food to flatten your life...It’s about the fact that you’ve given up without saying so. It’s about your belief that it’s not possible to live any other way – and you’re using food to act that out without ever having to admit it (p.53).

Roth goes on to explain that making peace with our bodies is a critical step in healing our relationship with food. The anger towards our bodies can run deep. With that anger our body is subjected to constant negative messages sent from our thoughts and this dynamic is bound to stifle healing.

For many people the excess body weight represents large emotional wounds from the past. Fat can form a symbolic protective barrier or ‘armor’ against painful abuse experiences which may explain the high correlation between adult obesity and early childhood sexual abuse experiences (Northrup, 1998). Normandi and Roarke (1998), founders of Beyond Hunger, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping women end

their obsession with food and body weight (Beyond Hunger, 2009), believe that behaviors reflect deep seated beliefs. They propose that bodies talk: they express the messages that we often cannot.

In addition to our own personal and individual beliefs and experiences, there are also key societal influences that affect our relationship with our body. In *Body Wars*, Dr. Margo Maine (2000) looks at how our culture has fostered a climate of body hatred. She asks women to take an activist stand, become critical of the social structures that have led to their disordered beliefs and behaviors about their bodies and begin to see the beauty inherent in the body. She writes “what a women’s biology can do is awesome: menstruation, ovulation, pregnancy, lactation, childbirth – all miracles of life. So why instead do we reduce a woman’s value to a number on a scale? We must honor nature” (p.12). Bacon (2010) proposes that at no other time in history have women been more liberated in terms of opportunities and freedoms but also they have never been as dissatisfied with their own bodies. Bacon points to a correlation saying that the ramped up pressure to maintain a physical ideal is an insidious way that women have stayed oppressed despite the increased social equality.

Suzie Orbach (2009), psychotherapist and social critic, blames the fashion, beauty and diet industries of our society for creating a ‘homogeneous visual culture’ that has eradicated variety within the acceptable limits of the human body type. She writes; “The supersized, digitally enhanced images of airbrushed and Photoshopped individuals which penetrate into our public and private spaces are reshaping the way we regard bodies” (p. 168). She believes that people are now driven to conform to a few body types that are culturally constructed. She too uses the term ‘violence’ and writes that the onslaught of

images women are exposed to has created a sort of violence that women perpetrate in the form of hyper-criticism against themselves and one another.

Gould (2007) writes that at the root of overeating and body hatred is a yearning that goes beyond our thoughts, emotions and behaviors. I believe that what we are yearning for is an intimate connection to the Divine; that at the level of our spirits, there is an emptiness that we are trying to fill. We may not even consciously know something is lacking and we certainly do not have a clear sense of why we keep eating and punishing our bodies. Meyer (2006) believes we are currently in a *spiritual famine*. She states that it is when we feel spiritually empty that we then use food inappropriately due to spiritual hungers being mistaken for physical hunger.

Marianne Williamson (2010), a contemporary spiritual writer, describes how being disconnected from our Source drives us on an unconscious search to fill the void through food. She writes, “By reestablishing your right relationship to your Source, you reestablish your right relationship to yourself – in mind and in body... Your deepest desire is not for food, but for the experience of home” (p.49). This is where presence comes in: presence returns us home.

Many of us are completely disconnected from our body due to body hatred. We tend to not feel at home in our body and therefore become very ‘cut off’ and cerebral living in our thoughts (Smalley & Winston, 2010). Mindfulness helps us to remove the cognitive filters that do not allow us to see our body objectively and simply look at the image in the mirror offering description rather than judgment (Stewart, 2004, p. 792). Mindfulness returns us to our body. One cannot become fully present without learning to

connect to and be in one's body. We long to be *home* and the body is the only physical home there is in this life.

## **Healing**

*We cannot depend upon food to fill the empty place in our heart. Ultimately what must nourish our heart is intimacy with this very moment. We can experience this intimacy with anything that presents itself to us, people or plants, rocks, rice or raisins. This is what being present brings us to, the sweet and poignant taste of true presence. When this presence fills us, all hungers vanish. (Chozen Bays, 2009, p. 56).*

In Buddhism, mindfulness is considered to be the way to happiness (Gunaratana, 2001) and Buddhists believe that the body is the doorway to mindfulness. Within Buddhist teachings there are the five mindfulness trainings based on an ethical code called The Five Precepts. The fifth precept in mindfulness training asks one to become aware of the suffering that is caused by unmindful consumption (Hanh, 2009). Broken relationships with food and our bodies are causing millions of people daily pain and suffering. The destruction caused by overeating goes beyond the individual: on a global level we are also killing our planet by our misguided consumption. Think of the resources cultivated and the waste produced in the fast food industry alone, for example, in supplying the collective supersized demand for calories that are not actually required by the bodies that are consuming them. How can there be true peace at the individual level when we are continually, intimately involved in global destructive process; harming the very foundation of what sustains us?

We may not fully have the answers but at least we are finally asking the right questions. My research suggests that it is not the food itself that is craved but the temporary relief that food can offer from the dis-ease within us. After contemplating this issue from many angles, I now understand that using diets to address obesity is like prescribing aspirin for the headaches caused by a brain tumor. The aspirin may be effective for treating the current pain but while we are busy treating the symptom the cancer that caused it is growing. It is the same with diets. When followed, diets can lead to temporarily losing pounds on the scale, but they cannot address the underlying problem that led to the weight gain in the first place. This may explain why 95-98% of diets fail in the long term (Matz & Frankel, 2005). Even weight loss surgery very often results in patients gaining back more weight than they initially lost (Christou, Look, & MacLean, 2006). In her discussion of the reasons for overeating Bays (2009) argues that “The true source of this dissatisfaction is spiritual, and thus the only true cure for it is also spiritual” (p.146). Mindful eating and achieving Presence alleviates the dis-ease and dissatisfaction within us, connecting us with the spiritual dimension that we are missing.

Normandi and Roark (1998) promote the cultivation of a relationship with our body in order to protect it from the violence of our past: the overfeeding, starving, rejection etc. They write, “We can expand our relationship with our bodies to include the incredible spiritual, emotional and physical wisdom that we hold in the feminine body” (p. 72). They believe that integrating spirit into the recovery of eating issues is essential if we are to get beyond the entrenched negative behaviors. In order to integrate spirit, they say one must reclaim a lost sense of self through becoming present (p. 135).

Through their Beyond Hunger program Normandi and Roark have developed a model to show the pathways of healing one must go through to move from unhealthy relationships with food and the body to a connection with, what they call, the “Spiritual Self.” At the first level are the symptomatic thoughts and behaviors related to dieting such as thoughts about being fat, under and overeating, overexercising, purging etc. Progressing from there, at the next level the person begins to develop compassion for oneself leading to “the development of nonjudgmental observer” (pp. 136-137), otherwise stated as becoming *present*. The next level is becoming conscious of behaviors leading to an awareness of emotions and physical needs such as hunger. They propose that once that occurs one can begin to identify their physical, spiritual and emotional needs. According to the authors, this process culminates in the development of the Spiritual Self.

I appreciate how Normandi and Roark have articulated the process and agree that all these steps are essential in the healing process. However, rather than seeing the linear progression presented in their model, I conceptualize the healing as a process where the entry point could change depending on the individual. I see the various elements as engaging one another in a more iterative and dynamic process. For example, in my experience it is through becoming present, developing the nonjudgmental observer that I connect to the Divine Self and following that, I am guided to the awareness and truth about my emotions, body cues and deeper needs.

At the core of Tibetan Buddhism is the teaching that freedom from suffering is possible for all beings through reaching nirvana or enlightenment and recognizing that states of desire, anger, pride etc. are “delusions” (Dalai Lama, 1994, p.5). The Buddha’s

pivotal insight was realizing that enlightenment was not something far away from us but rather it is a way of experiencing bliss in our actual reality available in every moment (Thurman, 2005). Buddhists believe that every person has the potential to achieve enlightenment. Surya Das (1997) writes: “Actualize your Buddha-nature, your innate perfection, and you too will achieve enlightenment” (p. 55). What I am calling our Divine essence is therefore not something that is outside of us that we need to strive to develop, rather it is something that each of us possesses inherently that we need only to remember to access. When we are overeating or having obsessive thoughts related to dieting we are not acting from the place of Divine Self, we are disconnected from our innate perfection. I see presence as a way to access the Divine Self which leads to full and healthy living. The practice of mindfulness and the state of presence are ways to return us to our Buddha-nature, our true Selves, the Divine within us.

In this view, presence is not merely the starting point of healing; it is the central element in the healing process. All the other necessary steps and skills stem from the experience of presence. In *Women, Food and God*, Roth (2010) provides a set of eating guidelines that she believes will lead to the development of healthy eating behaviors, the end of the obsession with food and eventually achieving a healthy body weight. The key element she describes within her guidelines is being present. She requires women to eat sitting down in a calm environment and to remove any distractions such as television, music, newspapers, and stressful conversation. This enables women to really *be* with themselves and the food on the plate, preventing the function of food as an escape or a function of escaping, through mindlessness, from the food itself. These guidelines are about asking women to be still with the process of eating even though it may be painful.

This is because often the underlying goal and the result of overeating is to become unconscious (Bays, 2009). Mindful eating is about becoming aware of the hidden desire to be unconscious and make better choices so that we are living life more fully.

It is through presence that one can begin to hear their body's signals. The natural tendency of our body is to strive towards survival and health (Chopra, 2000). We have a perfect internal mechanism to signal to us when, what and how much to eat if we could only recognize and follow the signals. In a small proportion of the people there is a medical condition blocking internal cues of satiety (Martin, State, Koenig, Schultz, Dykens, Cassidy, & Leckman, 1998). There are also medications that can artificially affect the appetite resulting in people eating more than their body's functions require. However, millions of overweight and obese people are overriding their body's signals or simply not hearing them. Roth (2010) teaches women how to wait long enough to feel, and recognize, hunger and how to be present enough to catch the very moment when their body tells them they have had enough. Presence allows for greater self-regulation if we can step back and make a conscious decision rather than mindlessly overeating (Shapiro et al., 2006).

The Intuitive Eating movement, which has been in the field of nutrition for over a decade, is based on similar concepts of teaching one to hear body cues and eats what the body is asking for. Tribole & Resch (1995), the authors of the seminal book on the subject help people struggling with food and body issues to recognize that they have and always have had an internal mechanism that when adhered to will perfectly regulate their diet and therefore their weight. Fain (2011) promotes self-compassion as a critical component in achieving a healthy body weight in a sustained way. She encourages a

combination of hypnosis, mindfulness and social support. Like Roth, they also reject the traditional diet mentality and teach the importance of honoring hunger and making peace with food and the body. Roth's (2010) work expands on these concepts by incorporating the explanation of the spiritual connection that develops when we pay attention to our eating which facilitates the process of healing.

In addition to her eating guidelines, Roth promotes the skills of meditation and inquiry to help women succeed in their journey. Body based inquiry, which she takes from the Diamond Approach developed by A. Hameed Ali (2011) is about becoming deeply curious about something felt in your emotions and experienced in your body. If we can listen to our bodies, then the emotions come more clearly into focus and give way to underlying faulty beliefs that might be driving the desire to eat. It is through repeating this process over and over that people begin to gain an understanding of what is going on when they have the urge to eat. Developing a practice and committing to the process is essential in order to result in the reframing required to affect these types of lifelong conditioned responses. However, once they understand what is driving the behavior they may be empowered to make different choices. The sense of power and trust that can develop through presence has a positive effect on their self-concept and therefore leads to greater happiness.

Brown (2005) describes forty five distinct changes that one can expect to experience from entering into full present moment awareness. Several of these changes have to do with how we care for our bodies. He writes, "Naturally, as we accumulate present moment awareness, we begin to tend gently, lovingly, and responsibly to this attribute of our life experience" (p. 283), our bodies. He, like Roth (2010), claims that

without much focus on eating or effort in food planning our diet will begin to change through paying attention to the body in the present moment. We will naturally choose the foods that enliven our bodies and make us feel good and are, therefore, better for us. He also writes that body weight will adjust because the emotional issues that have caused excess weight will be addressed through living in the now and achieving the peace that the present moment affords.

Thich Nhat Hahn (1991) believes peace is available only in the present moment. Peace cannot be found in our hopefulness about tomorrow, in fact, he says hope can create suffering through non-acceptance of the present. Consider how this applies to the concept of a diet: the central motivation in a diet is hope for a different body tomorrow; a thinner, better you. Does this not create more pain by further alienating us from our bodies in the present moment? According to Bays (2009), if we are always on the way to some point in the future,

...we can never be in wise relationship with this moment and love ourselves as we actually are...we might miss the actuality of the life that is ours to live because we are so distracted, preoccupied, and driven by attempting to attain some mind-constructed ideal in some other time that is often also, sadly, shaped by unexamined desires, aversions and illusions (p. xii).

It follows that embracing the present, including the body, as “imperfect” as it may be according to societal standards, would lead to the peace and acceptance that is required to make positive transformations in behaviors.

In 1999 Jean Kristeller developed Mindfulness Based-Eating Awareness Training (MB-EAT), a therapeutic technique for treating Binge Eating Disorder (BED) based on

MBSR (Kristeller, 2003). This therapeutic method has been shown to significantly reduce the number and severity of binge eating episodes in obese women suffering from BED (Kristeller & Hallett, 1999). Baer, Fischer and Huss (2005) found some promising results in terms of the reduction in bingeing amongst women with BED in their pilot study of an intervention using a modified version of Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). Binge eating behavior was also significantly reduced in a non-clinical population in a large (n=553) study of the effects of mindfulness on health behaviors of undergraduate students (Roberts & Danoff-Burg, 2010). Some promising results have been seen in a mindfulness intervention developed for weight loss based on a modified version of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Tapper, Shaw, Ilsley, Hill, Bond, & Moore, 2009).

A study conducted in the Netherlands demonstrated the effectiveness of a mindfulness intervention in responding to cravings (Alberts, Mulkens, Smeets, & Thewissen, 2010). Usually the regulation of cravings relies on suppression or distraction but through mindfulness training the participants were taught how to observe and accept the uncomfortable feeling of the craving but not act on it. This resulted in significantly reduced cravings in the experimental group as compared to the control group.

Not only have studies shown the effectiveness of mindfulness training on weight loss and eating behaviors, but Foreman, Butryn, Hoffman, and Herbert's (2009) study on Acceptance Based Behavioral Therapy, an intervention targeting obesity based on the principles of mindfulness, showed positive effects on quality of life and overall emotional well-being of participants.

As shown above, there is a growing body of evidence supporting the idea that practicing presence works to change behaviors and attitudes towards food but there is little research aimed at understanding why or how it works. Smith, Shelley, Leahigh and Vanleit (2006) attribute the reduction in binge eating amongst the subjects in their study of a mindfulness intervention to increased self-acceptance and a reduction in anxiety. Mindfulness has been related to a reduction in mood disturbance and stress (Brown, K. & Ryan, R., 2003). Being that stress is a key trigger emotion in binge eating, there may be some explanation in terms of its impact on that emotion.

In Brown and Ryan's (2003) examination of the psychological benefits of mindfulness, they propose that it is the unique quality of consciousness that mindfulness offers that allows individuals to choose behaviors that are more aligned with their desires. They state that: "Mindfulness may be important in disengaging individuals from automatic thoughts, habits and unhealthy behavior patterns and thus could play a key role in fostering informed and self-endorsed behavioral regulation" (p.823). It may be this type of behavior regulation that is important for addressing over-eating.

Shapiro et al. (2006) propose "reperceiving", a term they have coined, as the core of how mindfulness causes change. They write:

Reperceiving can be described as a rotation in consciousness in which what was previously "subject" becomes "object." ... to the extent that we are able to observe the contents of consciousness, we are no longer completely embedded in or fused with such content (p. 378).

The act of observing the content of the mind and viewing it as something to be observed, rather than being identified fully with it and believing it to be integral to one's being, is

enormously powerful. This process creates enough space around the thoughts and feelings that are within the mind to allow them to be examined, and this can stir a new action within us, we can assess if it is food we are hungry for when we are reaching for something to eat or if we are hungry for something else. We are then freed to act in a way that is more aligned with our true Self.

According to Baer, Fischer and Huss (2005) the theory behind how mindfulness works differs based on perspective. From a cognitive behavioral perspective, it is thought that mindfulness works based on the introduction of a decentered view of thoughts, whereby thoughts are taught to be regarded as transient and fluctuating versus believed as fact. From an emotional regulation model it is thought that mindfulness is effective due to its role in helping people cope with negative emotions through exposure and acceptance.

While I agree that mindfulness has powerful effects on both thoughts and emotions, I propose that the reason mindfulness is effective in creating change is its impact on us at a deeper level. Mindfulness cuts beneath the realm of thought and feeling and allows us to enter a state of presence where we reconnect with our essence, our true Spirit. In my experience, the act of becoming present shifts everything. It creates incredible connection, if only for a split second, somehow the world is changed in that moment and we are returned to our inner wisdom. From this place, we act in accordance with promoting health, and vitality, not only for ourselves but for our world. The acts of self-sabotage that go along with the misuse of food and negative views of the body are a result of a severed connection with our true Selves.

As seen in the literature, coming into the now and truly *being* with oneself allows for many levels of healing on a myriad of issues. I propose that one of the reasons for this

is that the detachment and objectivity afforded through presence allows for heightened clarity and a return to our internal deepest wisdom. Where food and the body are concerned, we can begin to decipher whether or not the perceptions we hold about our bodies are true or if they are an antiquated construct from our past. We can learn to tolerate uncomfortable emotions, and respond to them in the way they are actually calling us to rather than stuffing them with food. We can begin to hear our heart's true desire and realize that it is not the food that we crave. Rather it is a deeper kind of craving, a craving for Spirit, a craving for home.

In my research endeavor I will explore in-depth the experience of presence. I hope to build upon Shapiro et al's (2006) work to uncover the mechanisms of how presence heals through gaining a better understanding of the experience of presence. Specifically, I hope to utilize my own experience to answer the question: 'What is the experience of healing food and body issues through presence?'

## Chapter 2: Methodology

*I think the deeper you go into the personal, the more universal you are,*

*If you can go deep enough, that's the thing. (May Sarton, 1982).*

### Selection of Methodology

The majority of the current research in the area of the practice of presence attempts to demonstrate the effectiveness of applying mindfulness to various circumstances through objective, scientific research structures. However, Rohr (2009) writes, "presence is experienced in a participative way, outside the mind. The mind by nature is intent on judging, controlling, and analyzing instead of seeing, tasting and loving." (p. 54). Personal experience of the state of presence is difficult to measure with numbers and even more difficult to compare between two people. How can you truly determine if one person is more aware, more awake within their being than another? Smalley and Winston (2010) note that, "Putting mindfulness under the lens of science removes it from what it actually is - a subjective experience...no matter how well science describes mindfulness, it cannot capture the experience of it." (p. 3).

As I considered appropriate methodology to explore the topic of the practice of presence and the healing of food and body issues I explored the idea of using phenomenology as a way to better understand the experience through second hand accounts. What I did not realize was that by that time I had already entered into a self-study by reflecting on and questioning my own personal experience of presence and how it was impacting my relationship with eating and with my body. Once I began to explore the possibility of doing a form of self-search I realized it would be the best fit for my

research area. This topic and this question, to my thinking, required a methodology that fully engages the researcher into the experience. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005) is very clear that one cannot use mindfulness therapeutically with patients/clients unless they themselves have a mindfulness practice. He feels mindfulness cannot be reduced to a technique: rather it is a way of being, seeing, sensing and feeling. In a similar fashion, I believe that first-hand lived experience is critical if one is going to try to truly understand the experience of presence. As such, I have chosen to use the heuristic research method.

Dave Hiles (2008) asserts that we are embarking on a participatory turn in human science research: there is a growing interest in the development and use of participatory methods. He argues that human psychology makes little sense without participatory knowing adding to the theoretical body of knowledge since the fields of counseling and psychotherapy are premised on this type of knowing.

Autoethnography was explored as one possible method for this research. McIlveen (2008) describe autoethnography as a reflexive means of research in which “the researcher-practitioner consciously embeds himself or herself amidst theory and practice, and by way of intimate autobiographic account, explicates a phenomenon under investigation or intervention.” (p. 13). However, this approach was set aside due to the reliance of the socio/cultural context as a key component of the research (Hiles, 2008). While the socio/cultural context most definitely plays a critical role in the development of food and body issues and is explored in the literature review and in parts of the discussion, it is not a central focus of my interest in the topic. For this topic, I am much more interested in the experience of the individual.

## Heuristic Inquiry

When I read Clark Moustakas' (1990) seminal book *Heuristic Research, Design, Methodology and Applications*, I knew immediately that I had a fit for this piece of work. Heuristic Inquiry, developed by Moustakas, is a process of internal search. The word 'heuristic' stems from the Greek word *heuristic*, which means "to discover or to find" (p.9). Heuristic research invites the researcher into an open exploration of an aspect of their own experience. The process is an expedition of sorts, into the core of one's being, with meaning and direction set as the destination.

Through the heuristic process one enters into the tacit dimension of knowledge, the place where feeling, experience and meaning join. (Sela-Smith, 2002). The researcher then allows this information to "lift into awareness the experiences that are felt and trigger the *being* of the researcher. In this lifting, an awakening, a greater self-understanding, and personal growth occur" (p. 64). Heuristic research therefore, involves self-search, self-dialogue, and self-discovery. (Moustakas, 1990).

Moustakas (1990) outlines six phases of heuristic research; engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis (pp. 27-37). They are summarized by David Hiles (2001) as follows:

### *Initial engagement*

The task of the first phase is to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher, one that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications. The research question that emerges lingers with the researcher, awaiting the disciplined commitment that will reveal its underlying meanings.

*Immersion*

The research question is lived in waking, sleeping and even dream states. This requires alertness, concentration and self-searching. Virtually anything connected with the question becomes raw material for immersion.

*Incubation*

This involves a retreat from the intense, concentrated focus, allowing the expansion of knowledge to take place at a more subtle level, enabling the inner tacit dimension and intuition to clarify and extend understanding.

*Illumination*

This involves a breakthrough, a process of awakening that occurs naturally when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition. It involves opening a door to new awareness, a modification of an old understanding, a synthesis of fragmented knowledge, or new discovery.

*Explication*

This involves a full examination of what has been awakened in consciousness. What is required is organization and a comprehensive depiction of the core themes.

*Creative synthesis*

Thoroughly familiar with the data, and following a preparatory phase of solitude and meditation, the researcher puts the components and core themes usually into the form of creative synthesis expressed as a narrative account, a report, a thesis, a poem, story, drawing, painting, etc. (from

<http://www.psy.dmu.ac.uk/drhiles/HIpaper.htm>).

**Limitations of Moustakas' heuristic method.**

Moustakas has been criticized for a contradiction between his theoretical description of heuristic research and how he presents the application. Throughout the first two chapters of his book he maintains a very consistent view that the subjective self is paramount in the research. However, as he further describes the research design and methodology there is a marked shift and the focus moves to a more objective stance with the involvement of co-researchers.

Similar to Sela-Smith (2002), I also observed this incongruence when I reviewed his material. It felt somehow disappointing that Moustakas created a stage for the researcher to engage fully in the material only to seemingly retreat with his introduction of the heavy involvement of co-researchers. What more, he offers no apparent explanation of the shift. Sela-Smith (2002) says that a true heuristic process, as described by the opening chapters of Moustakas' book, would only involve co-researchers in a very limited way to further assist the researcher in delving into their own experience. In accordance with this view, I have intentionally chosen not to interview co-researchers for this study as it would be a diversion from the work of delving into the heart of my current question through my own experience with presence.

Another key limitation in choosing the Heuristic method is that the very process of self as subject is sometimes called into question in terms of the possibility of such a personal and individual piece's ability to capture results that are truly generalizable to a broader population and therefore relevant to others. Although it is true that it is one person's experience the broad themes of disconnection, lack, longing, emptiness that are present in this inquiry are very much universal but beyond that as noted the more specific

themes of negative body image, weight obsession, compulsive overeating etc. are deeply embedded in our social context, particularly for women. While the particulars of my individual situation and path are unique in the depth inquiry into the experience of being released from these societal shackles provides an encouraging possibility of hope that is worth exploring for generalizability. The feminist expression ‘the personal is political’ comes to mind in that one woman’s personal story has relevance for a collective that shares the same cultural expectations and conditioning. As Moustakas (1990) states the “process is autobiographic, yet with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social - and perhaps universal – significance” (p. 15).

#### **Rationale for the selection of this method.**

Engaging in the healing work of my own food and body issues is exciting. However, that is not the reason I embarked on this study. Healing and transformation were an outcome, but they are not what brought me to this methodology. My real drive for going into the depth of this issue has to do with what I believe is the universal significance of the matter. The prospect of lending insight into a phenomenon that could provide one piece to the puzzle toward healing the emotional, physical and spiritual suffering of countless people in our weight obsessed culture is inspiring and demands a call to action. The action I was able to undertake was to begin with the ‘Self’ and hopefully share a greater understanding of the issues from the closest possible vantage point.

## Method

For my research I followed the six stages of heuristic inquiry outlined by Moustakas in 1990. However, Moustakas presents his stages in a linear, sequential order. I could not find in Moustakas' writings or in the other literature on the heuristic method the suggestion of a less linear process. It was not my intention to follow these steps in a linear fashion as I suspected from the beginning that the different stages would emerge naturally as they needed to. It was my experience that elements of illumination and explication happened throughout the immersion process. Also several periods of incubation occurred spontaneously for myself during my immersion time and I had to bring myself back to the action of the research in a purposeful way.

I propose that a more accurate description of the stages would be to refer to them as more of a spiral. For example, in the immersion phase there were periods of both planned and spontaneous incubation. Illumination occurred throughout the research endeavor and in fact, *illumination* was one of the four central processes that I articulate having gone through in this journey. I have discovered that the nature of presence is a process of awakening, which speaks to the idea of illumination. Explication began to happen during the combined immersion/illumination/incubation phase and then in a more focused way in preparation for the creative synthesis. To summarize, my actual process more closely followed what I have depicted in Figure 1 below:

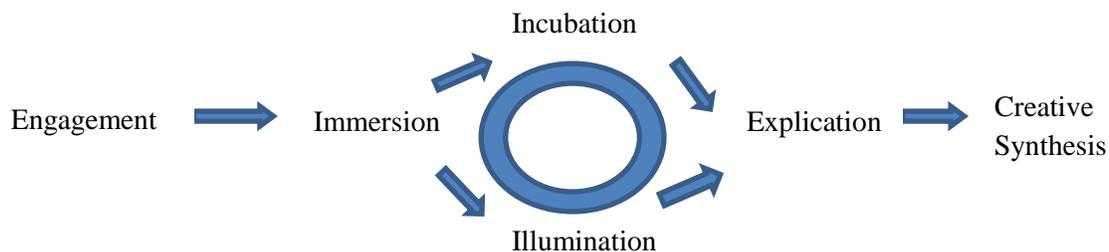


FIGURE 1. Application of the six phases of heuristic inquiry.

### **Engagement.**

When I first began to apply the experience of presence to my relationship with food and my body a couple of years ago I believe I entered into the engagement phase with this issue then, even though I had not formulated a specific research plan at that time. I was engaging with the topic within my own thinking and discovery and this drove the curiosity that resulted in the decision to pursue this research.

### **Immersion, incubation and illumination.**

I shifted into the immersion phase through the reading of the literature and the process of preparation for submitting the thesis proposal. This immersion continued for several months: however I did identify two month timeframe from early April, 2011 to early June 2011 to comprise my in-depth documentation of my experience in the *immersion* into the topic. Although I refer to this phase as the formal immersion phase I do recognize, as mentioned above, that incubation and illumination occurred throughout this time as well. Furthermore the in-depth recording of observations that formulated the results occurred over what may seem as an all too brief period of two months but my actual immersion in the topic has occurred over more than two years and I continue to feel immersed in this topic to this day. The two month period is reflected in the results

chapter but the material for the discussion and resulting conclusions have been shaped by the totality of the experience.

During formal immersion I engaged in and recorded observations on several activities that drew me deeper into understanding and achieving the practice of presence:

***Journaling.*** Throughout the two month period I kept a dedicated research journal where I recorded all my general thoughts and observations about the experience of the practice of presence and the healing of food and body issues. These reflections took the form of a type of self-dialogue (Moustakas, 1990). In addition to these general reflections, I also frequently recorded specific experiences with food illustrating the eating experience in relation to the experience of presence. I noted the progression of incremental changes in my eating behaviors as well as changes in my thoughts, attitudes and beliefs, particularly in relation to my body. This journal also served as an important vehicle for self-care through the process. I found it therapeutic to process my experience through the creative outlet of writing.

***Daily mindfulness practice.*** As I have mentioned previously, I see mindfulness as a central vehicle in the practice of presence. I engaged in both a daily intentional mindfulness practice and experienced periods of spontaneous mindfulness during the two month immersion. For the intentional mindfulness practice, I essentially focused my energy on coming fully into the present moment as many times as I could remember to each day. I found that I was more successful at engaging in this practice in the mornings and afternoons, likely because for much of that time I was alone with my young son. I found it easiest to be mindful while doing household tasks such as cleaning and food preparation and in periods of spending time with my son. In addition to this intentional

practice I experienced periods of spontaneous mindfulness each day, often times while noticing nature or being with loved ones. When I would notice these spontaneous occurrences I would then try to maintain the mindful state through shifting to an intentional practice.

***Mindful eating.*** Yuen (2006) proposes that mindful eating encompasses the entire experience of eating from how we look at, serve, chew, taste and swallow the food. Over the two month period I tried to engage in mindful eating for as many eating experiences as I could remember to do so. Reminiscent of Geneen Roth's (2010) eating guidelines, I also extended Yuen's definition to incorporate the mindful selection of type of food through listening to what kinds of food my body needed at a particular moment. I would estimate that I mindfully selected foods both in type and portion for approximately fifty percent of my eating experiences within the two month timeframe. I succeeded to mindfully eat a complete meal from start to finish once a day for most days of the research period; most often this meal was breakfast. In addition I would estimate that I mindfully ate at least one bite of approximately ninety percent of my food encounters during the research timeframe. This most often occurred at the beginning of the eating experience; the first bite or two. However, at times I would start out eating mindlessly only to remember part of the way through to become still within and mindfully engage the food. During the research period there were also several experiences of mindless overeating. Although these were neither desired nor planned they did serve to provide interesting comparative data.

***Sitting meditation.*** Many proponents of mindfulness also encourage a daily structured meditation practice (Bays (2009), Kabat-Zinn (2005), Smalley and Winston

(2010), Loring (2010), Gunaratana (2001), Hahn (1991), Brahm (2006)). Geneen Roth (2010) also compels women to develop a daily meditation practice to accompany the work of healing food and body issues. During the two month immersion I took up sitting meditation, a new practice for me. This differs from mindfulness in that it is a focused period of time of non-doing and non-thinking, whereas mindfulness can occur while you are going about normal activity. For my sitting practice, I chose a dedicated space in my home and sat either in silence or accompanied by a particular piece of meditation music for between five to ten minutes. On several occasions, I was able to take time immediately following the meditation to write my reflections in my research journal.

***Book Club/Discussion Group.*** I formed a discussion group/book club for women interested in sharing about this topic that ran for eight weeks during this two month period. Geneen Roth's (2010) *Women, Food and God* was the basis for the group, however the discussion covered a myriad of related topics.

The month prior I used the website [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com), an online network for local interest groups, to post the start of the group. Through this website I invited interested women to come to an informational meeting where I described the intentions of the group and assessed interest. The posted criteria for joining the group was that the women had read the book already and had an interest in forsaking conventional dieting for the practices Roth outlines in the book. Eight women attended the initial meeting. Of those eight, six decided to become part of the ongoing group and an additional two women joined the ongoing group who were not able to attend the informational meeting.

The group of eight women met for eight consecutive Thursdays starting on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Our discussion was loosely guided by the *Women, Food and God* weekly

discussion guide provided by Geneen Roth on Oprah.com. Although I started the group, I was there as a participant not a facilitator. The group had a shared facilitation model. Group members were made aware ahead of time, both verbally and in writing, that the group experience would help inform my heuristic research and each member signed a consent form (See Appendix). The discussion at these meetings furthered my exploration of my own experience with presence and the healing of food and body issues. I did not have the intention of involving the members as co-researchers or including their stories in the research. Following each meeting, I documented my personal reflections in the dedicated journal. This journal and signed consent forms were kept in a locked file folder within my home accessible only to me.

*Dedicated reading.* During the two month immersion phase I continued to grow in my understanding of mindful eating through engaging in new learning on the subject matter. I daily read literature dedicated to the subject matters of mindfulness and mindful eating written by authors other than Geneen Roth, many of whom are cited within this thesis.

*Personal communications.* I engaged my personal relationship circle in focused conversations about this subject matter. In particular, I discussed my observations and experiences during this time with my spouse, two close friends and one family member. This family member has also been greatly intrigued by Geneen Roth's (2010) work. We were involved in regular discussions about these issues prior to the decision to begin the research. Reflections about these discussions were recorded in the research journal.

*Art making.* During the immersion phase I took a one week intensive studio course in Art therapy related to embodied imagery. I chose this course for its direct

relevance to my thesis research. This course offered experiential creative exercises including dance, movement, creative writing, as well as a myriad of visual art projects and activities. Nachmanovich (1990) describes the recent popularity of the concept of 'being in the moment' as pointing to something of 'vital importance' in our society. He says that this state of mind is cultivated and enacted during artful practice (p. 22). As such, I utilized every artful exercise as an opportunity to go deeper into my relationship with my body through an experience of practicing presence and allowed a truth from within to be revealed in my work. Journal entries and examples of the creative pieces are included as data.

In addition to the art pieces I created during the course, I created four art pieces integrating the themes I experienced in the four identified processes of my journey; illumination, embodiment, connection and emergence that were identified in the explication phase of my research. The process for creating these pieces will be explained in the creative synthesis section below and the pieces themselves can be found as Figures 2, 4, 5 and 6 in the results chapter.

**Explication.** During and following this two month research period I was involved in what Moustakas (1990) describes as a "timeless immersion inside the data, with intervals of rest and return to the data until intimate knowledge is obtained."(p.49). I utilized the dedicated research journal as the main source of data along with the art that was created. In the explication phase I was primarily focused on identifying themes. Moustakas (1990) asserts that the organizing and analyzing of heuristic data can take many forms. He does not give a prescriptive method for how the data should be organized rather he encourages, through his own examples from his research, that the

form arise organically in a way that fits the topic and the individual researcher. As such, I created a method for analyzing my data that fit with my experience and made sense to me as a way of distilling all I had experienced over my two months.

I began by engaging my intuitive sense in an exercise of presence. As I was going through the research process I had an inner knowing of what some of the themes would be just by virtue of having lived the experience. Prior to going into cognitive analysis I wanted to allow that intuition to articulate the experience so I first entered into a brief meditation and then went to my research journal and made an entry that I titled *possible themes* listing the key themes I felt arose through the experience. That initial brainstorm resulted in twenty two themes.

I then went to the data. In the two month period I recorded eighty eight full size pages of journal reflection. I did one initial review of my research data in the chronological order it was written in. Following that initial read, I returned to review my list of intuitively felt themes to see if there was a fit. Most of what I had written resonated with what I read but some key themes were missed. I then read each page and wrote a short summary list of any themes that seemed to arise on each page. Following this step I made a meta list of themes that I identified through this process noting which themes repeated from page to page by placing check marks beside the theme for each repetition. That list contained forty seven themes.

I then mapped these themes on a large chart and drew connections, grouping them into seven key areas; insight, clarity, embodiment, body-embrace, connectedness, empowerment, change. I reread the complete data again and following that read through recognized that I could further group those seven themes into four major processes that I

underwent during the immersion. Insight and clarity were grouped under illumination. Body-embrace was grouped into embodiment. Connection stood as its own process and empowerment and change were grouped together under the process of emergence. Next I assigned each sentence or group of sentences a number 1-4 to represent one of the four processes that the data pertained to and cut the pages into meaning units and organized them into four piles. Following this, I read through each pile one by one and identified a total of fifteen separate themes divided within each process. Half of which appeared in my initial intuitive brainstorm. This explication process resulted in a story of my journey through four key processes encountering fifteen themes in all.

**Creative Synthesis.** The creative synthesis took the form of two major activities, creating art to symbolize my journey and writing the story through the results chapter of this thesis. As part of my art therapy course we were asked to create an arts based project of several linked pieces. I took the opportunity to further my healing work by creating a symbolic depiction of my journey with my body. I created one piece for each of the four key processes; illumination, embodiment, connection and emergence to help me to synthesize my understanding of what I lived. For these pieces I used a collaging technique inspired by a woman in the *Women Food and God* book club/discussion group. She had shared with the group some soul collage cards she had made at a workshop related to her struggle with food and body issues. Soul collage is the process of selecting images, words, patterns etc. from magazines based on an intuitive sense, an experience of letting the image call out to you and draw you in. Then once the images are selected the art maker uses them to “speak your own intuitive wisdom back to you” (Soulcollage, 2011) to create a collage of images that tell a story of a deeper theme in your life.

As I was choosing my images, at times the selections came as a surprise to my rational mind but I tried not to judge them and carried on letting myself be moved by imagery on the magazine pages as I turned them. I then sorted the images and words I had chosen into each of the four core processes. When it came time to enter into the art making stage for each piece I first paused in meditation to return to a state of awakened presence, to clear any judgment or planning and to create the piece from what I refer to as my authentic Self rather than my analytical mind. Immediately following the meditation I began letting the various images and words speak to me in terms of my journey with that distinct phase of my healing process. I played with the images and words arranging them in various forms until I felt a certainty that I arrived at a layout that gave voice to my experience. This resulted in a profoundly spiritual and powerful art making process. It felt as though I was a co-creator in these pieces with my deeper Self and the divinity within me.

Once the images were created I used them as inspiration and hung them in my home in the space that I was using to write this thesis. I approached writing the sections of the results chapter by first rereading all the journal excerpts that were clipped into the particular pile that I was writing about and selecting the quotes that I wanted to embed in the writing. This completes the steps I carried out for this study: however, my journey has not stopped here. I continue on a daily basis to learn and grow in the practice of presence and the relationship with food and my body. By embarking on this search I know I have begun a life long journey with presence. This process has given birth to a universe of questions and answers, that I am sure will continue to engage me throughout my life, related to waking up and becoming present to the now.

## **Ethical Considerations**

In completing this study, several ethical issues were considered in my planning. This research plan was submitted to and approved by an external ethics review board. One issue I considered was whether or not I would really allow myself to go deeply enough into the process to do the topic justice. I believe honesty is paramount in the validity of a heuristic piece and I wondered if I would create any internal resistance to being fully open and honest in my experience knowing that the thesis will become a public document. I wanted to ensure I was not censoring my experience. In wrestling with these thoughts I realized that complete honesty is not the same as complete disclosure. I permitted myself to write my experience in my own private research journal as fully as possible. Then, through review, I was selective about what parts I felt were necessary for inclusion to highlight the essence of the experience and yet protect my integrity in terms of what is comfortable to share in a public document. It was through this diligent scrutiny and self-awareness that I was able to stay true to the process while, at the same time, staying true to my sense of comfort and privacy.

Although the story of my struggle with my body is largely a personal one, in writing it I was aware of the potential to implicate people from my personal life through descriptions of my past or reflections on how my personal relationships may have impacted my historical views on food and my body or trigger my current emotions. As such, I considered carefully how to be sensitive and respectful in my handling of the information that fell into this category. I evaluated these pieces diligently, assessing if any harm that could come to a reader who was implicated. I discerned that while I could go into more description of my past or of family patterns and a discussion of my

relationships that it was not really necessary in terms of this topic. My topic is about experiencing and accepting the unfolding of the present moment and as such, in some ways, it would have been contradictory to go into a lengthy discussion of my past, particularly if that discussion implied blame on others. Where I did mention personal relationships I limited the information to minimize harm, leaving out personal identifiers.

As mentioned earlier, another issue I encountered was ensuring full disclosure to discussion group/book club participants so that they realized the group process would be used for a research project. At the outset of the group I obtained consent from each member and throughout the meetings I naturally mentioned aspects of the work I was doing in my research as part of what I shared in discussion. While this was not intentional, it did serve the purpose of ensuring the members knew my purposes and were continually reminded as the group went on.

In addition to the book club participants I was clear with others in my personal circle when something from our conversations sparked thinking and reflection that I may write about it for the thesis. When writing the results chapter, anything that pertained to a book club or personal discussion was written in a way that it maintained the confidentiality of the other person or people and focused rather on my own experience and learning from that discussion.

Being that this study is focused on such a personal and painful part of my life, my struggle with eating and my body, ensuring self-care was another important ethical consideration in my planning. I was very cognizant of the potential need for external support and was ready with the resource of a psychotherapist from my past, who was familiar with my historical food and body issues and who was willing to provide

telephone counseling should it be needed. However, I think due to the therapeutic activities inherent in the study, I did not need to access this support. First of all, my research journal served as an aspect of self-care, allowing me to therapeutically process the emotional aspects of my experience without filtering. The discussion group/book club was also an avenue where I was able to process my experience with listeners outside of my partial relationship circle. Finally, the practice of mindfulness itself has been recommended within the literature to promote self-care (Christopher & Maris, 2010) for those engaged in deep emotional work and I feel that my daily practice of mindfulness was a protective factor for processing the emotions that surfaced through this work.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Moustakas has been criticized for his inclusion of timelines and structured methodological steps in his description of the heuristic research method (Sela-Smith, 2002). It is thought that this is a contradiction to the nature and spirit of heuristic inquiry. However, Djuraskovic and Arthur (2010) assert that this disciplined pursuit within Moustakas' approach "is necessary to ensure trustworthiness" (p. 1572). The rigor and discipline I held myself to in terms of timelines and concrete steps for my method assisted me in keeping the focus and thus helped to ensure the validity of the study.

Djuraskovic and Arthur (2010) argue that in heuristic research the researcher is "the primary judge of validity". (p. 1584). Initially I had planned to, throughout my process; reread the reflections I had written on a regular basis to ensure that my depictions were an accurate telling of my lived experience. Although I did often read my own journal prior to the explication phase, I found that this was not a necessary step for ensuring validity. It was unnecessary because I could tell from how I felt while writing in

my journal that I was being authentic. The process of journaling became an exercise in presence itself. I found it to be very cathartic and could pour my whole self, all my emotion and truth onto the page. I have been keeping a personal journal for over twenty years and so am very accustomed to writing with abandon and expressing myself completely openly in this forum.

However as self-aware and honest as I feel I strived to be, I am aware that there is no such thing as perfect self-awareness. We are always limited in our ability to know an experience and on any given day a different truth could be revealed depending on what I am ready to see and open to experiencing and that depends on a host of contextual factors. The practice of presence itself provided an opportunity to accept whatever awareness comes without holding on to an expectation of perfection. In this way a self-study heuristic piece is no less reliable and valid than one involving co-researchers in that what a person reports or what one observes about another's experience is also a reflection of a particular context and a limited and changing ability to grasp full truth.

In addition to my own assessment I engaged the help of two key people who are intimately familiar with my history around food and body issues. Two of my closest friends acted as reviewers of my work. While I appreciated their editorial comments, their main objective was to challenge me on the validity of my writing. I asked them to review the material with the questions in mind of whether the work reflected what they knew of my experience. I wanted them to assess if they felt something important seemed to be missing and to question me on whether I had explored all possible avenues related to an aspect of the topic. I found their feedback and support to be extremely helpful and encouraging during this process.

I believe that a study such as this, gaining a more complete understanding of the experience of practicing presence, was best achieved through first-hand lived experience. As such, the heuristic method was a well-suited vehicle for me. I used a modified blend of both Moustakas and Sela-Smith's interpretation of the method. Hiles (2008) proposes that a process of heuristic inquiry is thought to be good preparation for developing clinical skills. The process of engaging myself fully through this study will assist me immeasurably, in my future professional work with others, to know and fully understand both the richness and the challenge of going so deeply into the self for answers.

### Chapter 3: Results

I have been on a personal journey of transformation over the past many months since I first read Geneen Roth's *Women, Food and God* in May of 2010. This journey has involved a process of actively exploring the practice of presence as a vehicle for healing my relationship with my body and with food utilizing the practices of mindfulness, meditation, art making, reading, community, reconciliation and reunion. My thesis research was a self-exploration to answer the question "What is the experience of healing food and body issues through the practice of presence?" I have come to learn that presence is a journey that returns us to our whole self, the body, mind and spirit. Presence rouses what I refer to as the deeper Self within and reveals messages of truth that have not yet come in to awareness. I am certain that learning to become more fully present in a compassionate, non-judgmental way has been the absolute key to shifting a lifelong alienation from my own body and unhealthy patterns of overeating. It has also been a homecoming of sorts: a reunion of aspects of me that have been cut off from one another. This led to an experience of coming to know and embrace my whole self; body, mind and spirit and coming to honor and appreciate the wounds of my past as necessary teachers. It is these teachers that have guided me to where I need to be today in order to propel me forward in my life's journey.

During this heuristic research endeavor I have recorded eighty eight pages of personal reflection in my research journal and developed several art pieces, included in this chapter, which helped me to process my experience. The journal and art comprise the data that I have analyzed to determine the results of my research. After reviewing this data to distill the major themes in the experience, I have selected fifteen different, yet

often overlapping, themes evident in my writing and artwork to discuss. I have further grouped these themes into four core processes that I underwent during my journey. I have named them: *illumination*, *embodiment*, *connection* and *emergence*.

These four processes are presented in a linear fashion as I did experience these in such a way that would indicate that one built on the other. However, it was also a very iterative experience in that there were aspects of each process present within the other. I have since determined that each individual experience of presence contains all four processes: illumination, embodiment, connection and emergence but depending on where I was in my journey one process seemed to be predominant over the other. Each one of these processes will be discussed in detail in the following sections. I have located the various themes within each process. These themes did not arise as stages or phases but rather as part of the overall iterative process. There was, however, a sort of collective growth that ensued with them. It seemed that the deeper experience I had in one of the themes, it opened myself up to deeper experience in another.

## **Illumination**

*Where awareness is present, the old is seen in a brand new way.*

(Levine, 1991, 106)

In reviewing my research journal it was evident to me that four outcomes of practicing presence are heightened awareness, compassionate curiosity, increased clarity and new realizations. I am referring to these experiences collectively as *Illumination*. During my immersion with the subject I noticed incredible insight and clarity, both into my past and my present experience with food and my body. I developed a compassionate

curiosity about my patterns of negativity towards my body and misuse of food. I was able to have great awareness into what was triggering my unhealthy behaviors. In addition to this awareness, there was keen understanding into my historical patterns with eating and with my relationship with my body, only now, as a result of my new insights, I was able to reflect on these issues in a non-judgmental and compassionate way. Clarity in the present moment was also a central feature of my experience. Not only did I have enhanced clarity about what my physical needs were in terms of types and amounts of nutrition, but I also had remarkable clarity about my emotional states and the drivers related to compulsions. During this period of increased presence I also had many new realizations related to these issues. These new ideas have been instrumental in my healing process, and I do not believe they could have come to me if I had not been present.

In the following sections, I will discuss each of the following four themes that presented themselves during this process: understanding patterns and triggers, compassionate curiosity, increased emotional and physical clarity and new realizations. In addition to these four themes, I will also present my creative expression in the form of an art collage that symbolizes the four themes and the meta-process that I am calling *Illumination*.

### **Understanding patterns and triggers.**

Practicing presence allowed me to reflect deeper on my history with food and my body. It allowed me to challenge long held assumptions about myself. During my immersion in presence I was better able to see what was triggering the unwanted behaviors, both in the moment, and later, as I reflected on an eating experience. This

heightened awareness did not completely prevent me from misusing food during the research project. It did, however, change my interpretation of those experiences.

Unlike past attempts to understand my patterns, I found that through presence I was able to clearly see the behavior patterns as they unfolded and gain some insight into them. For example I was much better attuned to the emotional states leading up to and during an experience of overeating, “I was disconnected, distracted, dull and a bit on autopilot”. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 14, 2011). I could then recognize the difference in my state of being during times of healthy eating versus times of overeating.

I was also able to begin to decipher the commonalities in the experiences. I recognized that certain emotional states were more commonly tied to overeating than others. The overeating behavior seemed to come repeatedly at times when I felt stressed and wanted to procrastinate from doing something else.

Eating was meeting needs for me unrelated to physical hunger. Following one overeating experience I reflect in my journal about knowing that I was feeding a different need, but I did not want to look too deeply as I did not want to stop. At that point I did not know exactly what that need was but I did know that it was not bodily hunger. I resisted looking too deeply for that answer at the time because I didn’t want it to result in stopping the eating behavior in the moment. I wrote:

I felt sick, embarrassed, confused and curious throughout the binge. I realized it was not what I wanted and there were deeper reasons and yet the compulsion to

continue was strong and somehow soothing and I didn't want to explore why I was doing it. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 25, 2011).

I go on to wonder if the binge was more about a defeated part of me proving that I would not change through this process versus actually about wanting the food. This experience opened up a window into past incidents. I explored the concepts of self-sabotage and defeat and this allowed me to recognize how my behaviors have served the faulty subconscious beliefs regarding my lack of worth and capability.

One pattern surprised me; I noticed that pleasurable experiences also seemed to bring about overeating at times. There is a particular favorite television show that was regularly paired with overeating. I noticed how even thinking about watching that show made me automatically think about eating. This led me to conclude that the food was tied to the experience of indulging myself and giving myself the hour to "sink into something outside of me" (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 8, 2011). I also noticed a particular group of people who I tended to overeat around. This is a group with whom, I feel completely accepted, and most like my authentic self. It then seemed extremely contradictory that they would trigger unhealthy patterns around food. It became evident that the very feeling of complete acceptance opened up permissiveness for me about eating. I then reflected on the dieting in my past and wondered if regularly being on diets in my childhood and adolescence amounted to me equating non-acceptance with food restriction.

A key benefit I saw in having this heightened awareness about the patterns was that it enabled me to critically review my thoughts and behaviors. Following a discussion

in my journal about feeling judged by others about my body and making body comparisons with others I write, “Those thought/feeling patterns harken way back to childhood and they actually feel very old, very childish” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 22, 2011). I recognized that those old thoughts no longer served me. I was able to see that this way of being no longer fit how I wanted to be which allowed me to recognize the incongruence and consider different choices.

Following my second meeting with our book club/discussion group, I reflected on a discussion we had in the group about pressure to overcompensate for our bodies. There seemed to be a shared experience amongst many of the members of feeling like we needed to overachieve in other areas of our lives in order to make up for the deficiency we believed we had in our physical bodies. I wrote:

The myth I have told myself is that the thin version of me will be afforded automatic acceptance. I always felt like I couldn't get it by virtue of my being but rather through proving, through intellect, humor, achievement etc. When I think of it now I feel exhausted. How different it could have been to know, really know, worth and not have it tied to the body. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 15, 2011).

Through the experience of being present in my body I was able to hold those old beliefs up under the microscope and easily challenge them. There is such a sense of clarity about what is true. I found that when I was present I could access what felt like the authentic part of me that knows my worth beyond doubt, that understands that it is not tied to my form, that I am worthy simply through the essence of my being.

### **Compassionate curiosity.**

In and of itself, having an understanding of patterns and triggers related to eating is not new to me. I have been struggling with these issues for more than twenty five years and have spent countless hours trying to understand and change my behaviors. What stands out in this experience was the quality of how I now more accurately understand those behaviors and my unusual emotional reaction to the self-analysis.

The shift that was taking place for me involved moving from a shame based questioning to a very clear feeling of non-judgment as I reflected on my behavioral patterns and triggers. There was now, instead, what I am calling a *compassionate curiosity* that seemed to arise out of a deeper, wiser part of myself. I compared it to a loving mother beholding a child who didn't know any better. I was seeing this part of myself with compassion, love and curiosity.

Observing this shift to a more curious stance I wrote, "When I feel myself with an urge to binge or overeat or sneak eat, I actually now want to ask the question: 'what is this about? Where is this coming from?'" (M. M. Farah, personal communications, June 3, 2011). In the past overeating always led to feelings of failure, guilt and shame, but my new curiosity allowed me to approach myself in a new way.

This compassionate curiosity also translated to my reflections about my history with food and my body. I observed that I could reflect on my early childhood experiences related to food and my body with complete acceptance rather than holding any anger or looking to lay blame. In the past I would have been more inclined to look outside of myself for fault. I would have been searching for answers as to why I had to go through

this suffering with my body image and would have been inclined to blame, particularly in evaluating familial patterns related to food and dieting. In the clarity of presence, I could fully accept my history for what it was and in fact took the perspective that these wounds are a necessary part of my story and development, that this struggle is an important teacher in my life. I am now able to let go of wishing the past were different and plant myself firmly in the now.

### **Increased emotional and physical clarity.**

Throughout my journal reflections, I repeatedly describe feeling clear. It was as though presence allowed me to really see myself. When I was most present I was easily able to discern my physical needs and make choices to appropriately serve those needs. I was also highly attuned to my emotional states and could notice even the subtlest shift in emotion. In one entry I liken presence to windshield wipers: “Presence allows a clearing – like windshield wipers, clearing a view. Breath, freshness and a chance to know. It is beautiful” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

Being present to my body allowed me to quiet the mind so I could actually hear what my body wanted. I wrote in that same journal entry about how the heightened clarity allowed me to really zero in on a food choice. I write, “I feel my mouth dry and sticky. I want fruit, an apple, or carrot maybe. Sweet, crunchy, juice – and water...so clearly can I access that information now.” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011). When I was present I could accurately assess whether or not I was hungry and once I understood that I was hungry I could then discern what my body wanted in specific detail.

In contrast, I was also very cognizant of how being locked in my ruminating thoughts disallowed me that clarity. “I tried to discern my levels of fullness but found it was really hard to gauge. I couldn’t really connect to my body because my mind was so frantic.” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011). Within my journal there were many times when I report being stressed, distracted or consumed in thoughts that I couldn’t tune in to hunger levels or what my body needed. The comparison was astonishing in terms of how presence seemed to help me to make better eating choices. When I could stay present during the entire process, I noticed how I naturally chose smaller portions, felt a greater degree of certainty about what to eat and knew the precise moment of when my body had had enough.

On those occasions when I was having a difficult time hearing my body I would often try to take time out to meditate, even as short as five minutes, and this seemed to really help me access information both about my physical needs and my emotional states. On April 27<sup>th</sup> I write, “I do notice how after meditating I can so clearly feel what it is my body wants to eat. The choice becomes easy because I am connected to my body, as if I’ve cleared a pathway for my mind to receive my body’s messages” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 27, 2011).

I also noticed how meditation heightened my ability to read my emotional state. Within that same entry, describing my feelings following a time in meditation I write:

I was able to really see the feelings bubbling within – sadness mixed with love and feeling blessed. I could really feel the sensation, like a steel bar running along my core squeezing in. The time [in meditation] just opened space for me: space to

feel, enjoy, live. I realized just how frantic the mind can be and what false messages it sends”. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 27, 2011).

Having a clear view of the present moment and deciphering my emotions better allowed me to experience the truth of the present moment. This created a gap between my experience and myself so that I wasn't merged with it but rather could assess and shift my emotion or circumstance.

I reflected on how when I was present these emotional shifts did not cause me to want to eat and how that felt different from my usual experience:

I am dancing in presence this morning...Incredible how sharp everything is – not only can I really feel my body and hear its cues but also my emotions. They feel very erratic. I can glimpse something and feel calm, happy, appreciative, and a second later, see an undone task and feel an instant wave of stress and inadequacy. What I think is so amazing is how clear the shift is to me. [Presence] allows me to see it and diffuse or explore it but not to bury or smother it as I think would be the norm. No part of me would want to eat in this state but in a normal state it wouldn't be clear, wouldn't be understood rather [the emotions] would just create a general sense of dis-ease and I think my reaction would be to feel better, to distract...and my approach is often food.” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 14, 2011).

What I was most struck by was the precision with which I was able to notice emotional shifts when I was very awake through the practice of mindfulness. It had me wondering

about what the possibilities could be if I could spend more of my time in this wonderful awake state.

### **New realizations.**

Part of what I am terming illumination was the array of new realizations that were occurring for me throughout the research process regarding my relationship with food and my body. This was a process of inquiring deeply within myself to understand why I overeat and trying to understand why presence seemed to be changing that for me. This deep searching resulted in the creation of many new ideas and profound insights.

One such thought was that eating for me at times serves as an escape from the thoughts and the discomforts of my life. It can be a chance to break from my circumstance and dive into a distraction, if even temporarily, to change my state. When contemplating this I made a further link that meditation could, in fact, offer the same reward:

Food, in the moment, is an attempt at a break from the painful, the mundane, the incessant stream of thinking and ‘to do’ lists, leading to fullness, shame, pain, discomfort and fog. Meditation is also a break, a release from the ‘to do’, from the thinking...but an entirely different result. It results in vitality, awakening, peacefulness, gratitude, energy, clarity, lightness of being, everything opposite (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 25, 2011).

Another realization related to why I overeat at times came following a dinner with my husband. We had been apart during the day and I had been looking forward to our dinner together, the time with him, the relaxation and the connection. However, by the

time the meal was almost over, it dawned on me that I had not truly been present in the experience and it was almost over. Although I was no longer physically hungry I kept eating. In this case, it occurred to me that eating was about drawing out the experience. “I realized that I didn’t really want the second helping, but what I wanted and needed was to show up and be where I had been...the deeper want is to just wake up and be present” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 25, 2011). Had I been present from the beginning I feel that the experience itself would have been gratifying enough, that I likely would not have chosen to consume the extra food.

Additional key realizations arose regarding the nature of the relationship between presence and food and body issues. I drew the link that there is an inherent cyclical process at work when it comes to presence and eating. Stating, “I feel dull again, full, tired and realize how hard it is to be present when I am in this state. That eating lighter allows me to more easily be clear and awake. It’s a cyclical relationship. I can be present if my body is light and I am more likely to eat light if I am present” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 7, 2011). Presence serves the eating behavior and healthier eating behavior serves the effort to be present.

Another important realization was related to the sequencing of the healing process. Through the process, I noticed dramatic changes in terms of my attitudes about my body. I was experiencing dramatic shifts in how I was relating to my body and yet my eating behaviors seemed to be inconsistent, with many experiences of overeating through the research. The eating behavior was changing but at such a slower rate. I have come to believe that repairing my relationship with my body and truly loving the body, in its present form, is a precursor to changing my relationship with food and ultimately arriving

at a healthier physical form. I came to see that this was the logical order of how the transformation would occur for me: “I realize though, that for me, [healing] is sequential, first the body, then food. Cannot be any other way.” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 12, 2011). I needed to first repair my relationship with my body, and build trust and experience in listening and responding to its needs before I could expect wholeness in my relationship with food. I saw that as a new relationship with my body developed it would organically result in more and more congruent eating behaviors over time. I felt calmed and assured by this and steadied myself to engage in a slow, but utterly beautiful, process.

### **Symbolic depiction of the process of *illumination*.**

The piece I created to depict this core process is titled “illumination” and is shown in figure 2 below. The central images in the work are of a woman holding water in her cupped hands and an elephant that has been positioned to seem as though it is drinking of that water. The elephant symbolizes wisdom to me. Presence offered me the gifts of clarity and insight in my journey. It called forth the deeper wisdom of my authentic Self. In the image this is represented by the water cupped in the hands of the woman/goddess and the elephant, my deeper wisdom, is able to drink of that gift. What results is a new truth, represented by the flower below, which is washed in the water of insight and clarity.



*FIGURE 2. Symbolic depiction of the process of illumination.*

The other images present within the piece are of flame and light on the right hand side and the word 'space' positioned within these. In my journal reflections I often referred to meditation allowing me separation and space from my emotions and thought processes. Here is one excerpt related to this perception:

So hard to get away from the thoughts. They are so constant, but I noticed that what [meditation] does is create the tiniest of space around the thoughts and slows it down. This allowed me to see the sun shining in the crease of our leather couch and notice the pattern of the windows framing the green outside. I still feel busy and stressed and like I need to procrastinate- all the ways I felt before, but the intensity is lessened" (M. M. Farah, personal communication, June 9, 2011).

I observed that while mindfulness could not eradicate a negative emotion or mind state it did seem to offer space around it and somehow decrease the negative impact. This space

gave rise to an opportunity to clearly reflect on how to respond to the negative experiences.

The flames in figure 2 represent the ‘burning up’ of the false beliefs and exaggerated experiences and the open space that ensues. Finally, there is also an image of a woman looking at her reflection in a pond with the phrase ‘I can see clearly’ beneath it. This spoke to me of the experience of being able to see myself fully and clearly in the compassionate, non-judgmental way that the practice of mindfulness allows. The piece is bordered by images of water symbolizing both cleansing of old ideas and feeling and clarity for the new to be born.

### **Embodiment**

*There is no way back to the body; the body is the way. You leave and then you return. Leave and return. You forget and then you remember. Forget. Remember. One breath and then another. One step and then another. It's that simple. And it doesn't matter how long you've been gone; what matters is that you've returned...and you realize that torture isn't having these arms or these legs; it's being so convinced that God is out there, in another place, another realm that you miss the lavender slip of moon, your own awakened presence.*

(Roth, 2010, p. 125)

A second central process that I underwent during my immersion with presence was one that I am terming *embodiment*. This process involved coming into my physical body and beginning to know the physical expression of my being. Presence allowed me to be aware of the phenomenon described by Eckhart Tolle (2005) of the experience of

the life force and animated vitality that exists within our limbs. This knowing resulted in a true desire to nurture it, listen to its needs and give it voice through physical expression. A process of reconciliation occurred during this time as well. I was able to view my body in a different light and rectify the damaged relationship that has existed for most of my life. This new knowledge of my body and the body/mind/spirit integration that took place allowed me to sincerely appreciate and fully embrace my body. In the sections that follow I will present my experience with the themes of inhabiting the body, responding to the body, body reconciliation and embracing the body. This section will conclude with the presentation of the artwork that I created to express my experience in the process of embodiment.

### **Inhabiting the body.**

During this research process it became unmistakably clear to me that for most of my life I had little connection to my own body. My body represented pain, failure and embarrassment therefore I lived primarily within the boundary of my mind, often lost in remembrances of the past or wonderings of the future. Being fully present to the moment requires arriving within the body. There is no other way to access the present moment but through the body.

This journey in presence returned me to my body. I found that once I was there it was not only comfortable, but it was the only place I wanted to be. This was a tremendously exciting shift for me. My body was the same body that had always been with me but everything about the experience of being in my body through presence was different. I wrote:

I feel free today, excited and free. Like although I have the same legs, bum, hips; that everything about my body has actually changed. It is an alive, awake, embodied vessel today – containing life, my spirit, pure light and love. Embodied. Yes, that is the difference. I can actually be in my body, live from my body. Whereas without presence, I am constantly separate – disenfranchised, apart from. It feels amazing to occupy my own body. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 28, 2011).

Being in my body, willingly and purposefully, allowed me to integrate the experience of my body with the experience of my mind and soul.

I once heard, and now often quote, the expression ‘if you don’t love something it is because you don’t know it well enough’. In my research journal, I called to mind this phrase in relation to my experience with my body. I asked myself, ‘how could I develop love for my body if I had no knowledge of it?’ Meditation required me to inhabit my body, really feeling my limbs, my breath, my belly. I was then able to carry that experience of being in my body through to living in present moment awareness. By living within my body, I came to know it deeper and this not only allowed me to hear it but also to begin to embrace all that it offered.

### **Responding to the body.**

In the discussion group/book club that I created I was very interested to notice that most of us had a shared experience of feeling like we are not able to respond to our body’s needs. We surmised together that we are so focused on pleasing, and not disappointing, others that we often forsake our own needs. At this meeting we discussed,

with a healthy dose of absurdist humor, how it was even difficult to get up from our desks at work to use the restroom when we needed to because it meant giving ourselves the time to do it.

This discussion caused me to reflect on how often my thirst cues go unacknowledged. Hours can go by when I have had a subtle awareness of being thirsty and yet I do not honor that thirst by getting myself a drink. I regarded this lack of responsiveness to be stemming from the same place that causes me to often ignore my hunger and satiety cues. I surmised it related to an underlying lack of connection to my body resulting in an inadvertent disregarding of its needs. I believe it was my experience of increased presence that shifted these patterns for me. In my research journal I wrote, “I now have a sense of...learning to really listen to and believe my body, honor its needs, quench its thirst, relieve its bladder, feed its cells” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, June 3, 2011). Through the process of becoming present, I became much more aware of my body and it then felt natural to want to nurture it by responding to its needs.

Being present in my body allows me to hear what my body wants, whether it is water, food, movement, stretching, or deeper breathing. During the art therapy course I attended during my immersion phase we did several movement-based exercises. I was surprised how fully I was able to give myself over to these exercises and allow my body to really move. This, in and of itself, was a sign to me of the healing that was occurring within me. In the past I would have been too body conscious to allow myself to really engage in activities like this in front of others. In one specific exercise we were asked to move to the music leading with whatever body part was calling to us to lead. I had a very

clear urge to lead with my belly. It felt great to move in such a pronounced, exaggerated way. Later, when I was reflecting in my journal, I realized how my belly, in particular, has been extremely stifled in my history due to being self-conscious about its size, trying to make it appear smaller. I write: "I have realized how suppressed my body has been, sucking in, holding, not releasing, not letting it lead." (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 10, 2011). Once we can really connect to the body's needs, only then can we lovingly respond.

### **Body Reconciliation.**

In describing the journey of this research process to others, I have often referred to it as an experience of reconciliation. I have both felt the need to absolve my body for all the pain I have attributed to it and also ask for forgiveness for all the pain I have caused it. For so many years I have abused my body with hateful messages of rejection, utter neglect and unhealthy eating patterns. Presence has allowed an opening, a chance to relate to my body in a completely different way. Through presence I have cultivated deep appreciation for my body and a clear perspective on what it has endured for me over all these years.

This body has been blamed for so much perceived loss in my life. I have positioned it in my mind as a formidable yet inseparable opponent. The process of reconciliation through meditation and learning to live within the body opened up a new way for me to see the role my body has played in my life. I no longer see it as the villain in my story; rather I see it now as an undeserving recipient of the negative effects of my separation from authentic Self.

In one of our book club/discussion group meetings we had a discussion about how there is great freedom in knowing that it is not the body itself, but our relationship with our body that is the problem we need to overcome. I shared with the other members my realization that the body is actually passively involved in its size. It is simply mechanically responding to my behaviors. It is simple science that I knew on an intellectual level but somehow emotionally I viewed the body as an active agent in my victim story about my weight. I had attributed powers to the body that it has never have. My hips and thighs were not out to ‘get me’; they weren’t taunting me with their size. Rather, I realized, my body was doing the best it could to maintain its vitality in spite of living in conditions not conducive to health. My body was not causing my pain, rather it was the story I had been telling myself, all these years, about my body that was causing the suffering.

Through presence I was able to release the pain of the past related to my weight but it also felt important to acknowledge the loss. In my journal I reflected, “So many years in exile from my body, so much beauty robbed, so much focus stolen” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 10, 2011). Through an art making process in the art therapy course I took in May, I was given a powerful and unforgettable opportunity to both honor the losses I have experienced and also ritualize the experience of the reconciliation.

One day we were encouraged to use the whole day to explore artistically any themes that were prevalent for us. This opened a perfect chance for me to more deeply engage in the body reconciliation process. I began first in meditation and then by journaling. As I was journaling I recalled an experience I had the night prior of watching

my two year old son run across a large grassy field. I chased him and we fell to the ground laughing. I was struck by the freedom he was exhibiting, the complete joy he was taking in the movement of his body.

In reflection, I realized that I had so few personal memories of ever truly enjoying my body in childhood. I remembered enjoying the use of my imagination in play vividly but when it came to my body, instead, my memories are of feeling encumbered, ashamed and disappointed by it. I became filled with sadness as I wrote:

I feel so sad, so desperately sad for that little girl. I want to heal her. I want to hold her. I want to scream as loud as I can ‘you are beautiful, just because, now run...breathe’, I so wish that for her. I so wish that freedom, that abandon. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 10, 2011).

My writing evolved into a kind of poetic letter to my body. It was structured body part by body part and expressed statements of remorse, gratitude and hope for each part of the body. For example, one verse was:

Belly, how you’ve been stuffed, stuffed up, chewing all my pain. How you’ve been sucked in and closed up, harnessed out of shame. Thank you for being my center, for persisting, for creating and housing the life that goes on after me. Breathe now. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 11, 2011).

I continued with similar verses related to my legs, arms, hips, mind, etc.

Following this time in creative writing, I began the art making. There were other students in the studio but there was a respectful silence amongst us with only the sound of

some instrumental music playing in the background. I decided to try a doll making project that had been presented to us earlier in the week to create a representation of the body. The project involves ripping fabric strips and wrapping them around a pipe cleaner outline. The fabric is woven around and around in overlapping colors until you have enough wound fabric amassed to form a body, then a clay mask is applied for a face.

I was in a state of heightened presence and was experiencing a beautiful combination of grief and profound love. I began by making the pipe cleaner outline and spent several moments first looking at the form of my doll's body. I then got an inspiration to trace the verses of my letter on to small strips of tissue paper wrapping them around the pipe cleaner over the part of the doll's body that the verse pertained to. I finished by the repetitive ripping and winding of the fabric over each of my letters to the various parts of the body. The physical act of the ripping and winding, in itself, was very cathartic. The completed doll (pictured in Figure 3) serves as a powerful reminder of the relationship that my deeper Self intends for my body. Ritualizing the body reconciliation process through embedding my messages of gratitude and hope in the doll has felt like an important step in this healing journey.

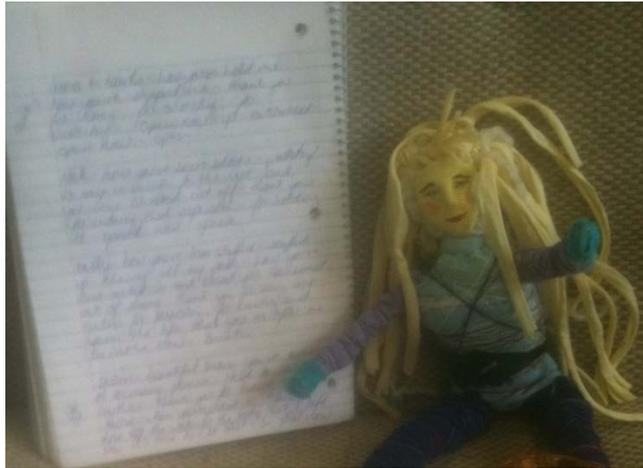


FIGURE 3. *Body reconciliation doll and letter.*

### **Embracing the body.**

Through presence I began experiencing my body in a whole new way. I felt alive and vibrant and truly comfortable within it for the first time in my life. I longed to have the experience of my body that had been out of my reach for so long until then. I wrote: “I need to... begin using the body, really exploring and using it. Perhaps dance...walking, running, birthing, just really allowing myself to live in the body” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 3, 2011). Within a renewed relationship I was not only able to accept my body at its current size and shape but truly love and appreciate it.

For years I have known that learning to accept my body would be an important step in letting go of the obsession with weight and the unhappiness that ensues but I always imagined acceptance could only come through an arduous and largely forced process. I never imagined I could not only accept, but, embrace my current body simply

by learning to experience it. In my journal I wrote about the shift that happened through becoming present to the body; “I don’t feel apologetic for the body I possess anymore. I feel like there is endless beauty here” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 26, 2011). In moments of presence I am able to easily access true appreciation for my body.

The old habitual thought patterns still come from time to time; only now I recognize them for what they are. During the immersion phase of my research I could detect faulty programmed beliefs when they appeared and access a deeper wisdom through entering a state of presence in order to diffuse them.

One such experience came while I was participating in a Pilates class that I was using as an opportunity to practice mindfulness. During the class various thoughts would enter and break my meditative concentration. However, as I was now accustomed to doing, I would notice the thought, acknowledge the break in mindfulness then return my attention to the present moment. One of the thoughts that entered my attention was noting the thin legs of the instructor and I felt a flash of that familiar disappointment in myself as I drew the comparison between her legs and mine. I instantly brought myself back to the moment and back to my own body. I wrote about the feelings that followed:

I was overcome with kindness, gratitude and appreciation for my thighs. It was a new feeling for me. It felt similar to the experience of embracing and kissing [my son], it was that kind of nurturing and love. I felt protective over my thighs, like I needed to guard them from my own negative thoughts and comparisons but mostly I just felt love, a lot of love. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 12, 2011).

In that moment I realized that I had clearly transitioned the largely adversarial relationship I had always had with my body to one of caring and stewardship.

Through embracing the body I began to also understand the concept of truly possessing my body. It is mine; a gift entrusted to me, and it is only I who can take care of it. In the past, the concept of taking care of the body would have only been understood through the lens of obligation to eat right and exercise and would have been accompanied by feelings of guilt and failure for not doing so adequately. I now understand that the most important way that I can take care of my body is to authentically appreciate it. In reflecting on this concept I wrote:

That really must be the key, loving, loving, loving my body. Not wanting to punish it or numb it with sugar and [be in] a haze but wanting to feed it, caress it, love it, really embrace what is here, really love it (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 10, 2011).

Through being present in my body, coming to know it, letting go of the past story related to it and experiencing the ‘now’ I have awakened to the beauty that was within this body all along.

### **Symbolic depiction of the process of *embodiment***

The piece I created to represent the process of embodiment was inspired primarily by the experience I had during the art therapy course, described above, of grieving the losses of being disconnected to my body since childhood. The young girl in Figure 4 represents me as a child accessing her deeper wisdom, her Divine Self. She is offering up a gentle bouquet of words for her broken self. These words are related to living a right



heightened sense of connection with the external world. It felt as though my life was intricately interwoven with all other living things. I felt deeper compassion and alignment with other people and noticed I was more deeply affected by social concerns. The experience of mindful eating directly connected me to the world beyond me. My relationship with food shifted substantially. Instead of having an adversarial relationship with food, something I needed to control or could be controlled by, I felt gratitude and wonder about food. Through being present in the eating experience, I was able to understand the essence of life; being fully present within myself allowed me to develop a deeper connection to the world outside of me. In this section I will present three themes that were evident in my experience: connection with others, increased social concern and food as a doorway to spirit. In addition to presenting these three themes, I again will be sharing the art piece that I created to show the integrated experience of connection.

### **Connection with others.**

During the research period, in states of heightened presence I noticed that I felt more loving towards, and had deeper appreciation for others. I felt a pervasive sense of unity with all women in our culture who have ever worried about their bodies, regardless of their size. I developed a much more compassionate and connected view of others. This general shift in how I was relating to other people is perhaps best articulated through contrasting my experience during this research to typical past thoughts and behaviors.

A cornerstone in my broken relationship with my body was to obsessively compare my body to the bodies of others and extrapolate all kinds of false stories on whatever observation I held. For example, if I compared myself to someone who I

perceived to have a “better” body, I would determine that they must be happier, more together, more in control etc. The reverse scenario also existed of feeling a false sense of advantage over someone I judged as having a more disordered relationship with food than I did.

In one experience during my research endeavor I was alone in a café and wrote about comparisons I was feeling between myself and some of the other women - all strangers - who were there that day. I noticed a great deal of negativity in my thoughts and a lack of being grounded in my body. I wrote:

I feel such separation at the moment. Looking for where I fit – better than, less than, better than, less than – useless garbage. This is a clear pointer that I am not present, not connected because when I am [present] I feel the deep connection, the ‘same-asness’ (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 15, 2011).

In a state of presence I noticed that I did not habitually compare my body to others. I had no desire or compulsion to judge, only to notice. I felt incredible unity with others.

In the past there were times when loved ones had dramatic weight loss or began intense health regimes that I would become emotionally triggered by their positive changes. A broken part of me would subconsciously wind up feeling left behind or that the other’s physical success somehow punctuated what I perceived to be my failure in the same area.

During my research endeavor my husband was training for a marathon and his body was changing, becoming much healthier and leaner. I noticed how I felt fully and authentically happy for him. Living in a more present way allowed me to clearly separate

his experience and his body from my own. There was no part of me that felt threatened by, or jealous of his physical changes. Being connected to my Divine essence through presence allowed me to see only good in another's changes and celebrate that. I feel this is a much more authentic and loving way of being in the world.

When thinking about eating and body issues, I experienced a real sense of sisterhood with all other women struggling with loving their body, not only overweight women. In the past, I had drawn dividing lines between fat women's body issues and thin women's body issues. Hearing thin women speak about dieting or complain about their body usually evoked a feeling of internal annoyance and skepticism from me. I had a hard time believing they really had any issue at all because to me, they already had what I wanted. They had thinness. This journey in presence has really opened me up in this area. I now have a real feeling of solidarity with any woman who struggles with arriving in her own body. I believe that the same problem is at the core of these issues: disconnection. Regardless of the shape of the body or the behaviors that a woman exhibits, when I am practicing presence I feel a unity and great compassion for any person who has lost connection with his or her body.

In presence I view bodies, in general, to be beautiful: different forms, different sizes but the same beautiful pulsing life energy in all. I wrote: "At this moment there is an opening in me and I equate all life, all bodies, all shapes, all forms as beautiful. All are living, breathing and carrying God's essence – wonderful" (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 27, 2011). I was able to dissolve the long held false sense of separation that existed for me, dividing my experience from the experience of others.

**Increased social concern.**

This deeper sense of connection also extended to society at large. In times of presence I noticed that societal issues had a greater than usual impact on me. During the research process I found myself considering the issues of the environment, obesity and world hunger and how aspects of our culture that I had previously just accepted as normal seemed completely arcane now in light of my emerging new relationship with food and my body.

When present, I found I was much more conscious of consumption, not only of food but also of resources. I was more careful to not use materials unnecessarily, hoping to minimize the environmental impact. So often my environmental efforts have been motivated by guilt. When I was in a mindful state I noticed that I had a sense of feeling oneness with all things. Acting in the best interest of the world around me came effortlessly and was born of a true desire to protect and embrace rather than obligation.

During the immersion phase in my research an issue that particularly challenged me was the prevalence and normalizing of weight loss surgery in our culture. I wrote: “I continue to feel sickened and saddened by the epidemic in our society – by hotdog eating contests and crazy portion sizes, by the surgeries that cut up our bodies to atone for our sickness. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, June 9, 2011). Being engaged in such an intense body reconciliation process, it was especially sad for me to think of the thousands of people who live in such pain over their bodies that they take the drastic measure of surgery to get the health they crave. I did not feel judgment towards the

individuals; rather I felt protectiveness over them and sadness about a situation that leads them to determine surgery is the best solution.

Beginning to apply mindfulness to eating has also had me reflecting on issues of poverty and hunger. I felt my past eating behavior showed a complete disconnection to the reality of those issues. When engaging in mindless eating I could have a plate half-finished without realizing it due to being so preoccupied with mental distraction and usually resulting in overeating. I wrote: “Mindful eating cultivates gratitude – I can begin by experiencing and appreciating each bite. Mindless eating misses so much. There is an assumption in [mindless eating] of abundance and access that is unhealthy and allows for a lack of appreciation.” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, June 13, 2011). I realized that when I am mindlessly overeating I am completely disassociated with the reality of the crisis of hunger both in my own community and around the world. Through presence, I became very aware of the ethical implications of my over-consumption and the over-consumption in our culture that is evidenced by the prevalence of obesity.

### **Food as a doorway to Spirit.**

Engaging in mindful eating has allowed me to fully ‘be with’ the food on my plate and experience the bite in my mouth. I realized that for so much of my life my relationship with food had been contentious. I loved it, and therefore overate and yet I hated the guilt I experienced in doing so and the power I felt food had over me. In becoming present, I could clearly see that food itself is not, and never was the biggest problem. It was how I was relating to food that contributed to the problem. Becoming present to food allowed me to connect with it in a new way: “I now know to not be afraid

of food. I see that it holds no power, no ill will, only love, life giving, pure energy... I feel like I can really truly enjoy and love food again. Taste and appreciate the flavors”.

(M. M. Farah, personal communication, June 13, 2011).

I realized that allowing myself to truly enjoy and appreciate the eating experience instantly connected me to the earth that provided nutrients and the skilled hands of the workers and merchants who made it possible for me to have it. This way of eating has been a delightful new experience for me. I wrote: “I feel healthy, able to see the sunlight in the food. Eating a mango slice this morning I could feel the growers, the sunshine and the long haul to get here. I could feel the spirit of the food.” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, June 9<sup>th</sup>). Eating mindfully links me to the larger process that is behind the life of the food; this realization or, heightened awareness, allowed eating to transform into a very beautiful, and at times sacred, experience for me. I wrote “Mindful eating opens an immediate doorway to spirit – connects me with every holy energy in the world.” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, June 13, 2011).

### **Symbolic depiction of the process of *connection*.**

The art piece, shown in Figure 5, titled *Connection*, shows a sun in the center with rays extending outward. This image represents the common life force in all. I chose four smaller images placed at each corner of the piece. The one on the lower left is meant to represent the bounty of life through rich, colorful and nutritious foods. Above is an image of a woman beholding the sight of a mountain. This spoke to me of her connection and reverence for nature. The third, in the upper right corner is an image of hands holding a bowl of clay, which symbolized for me our protective duty to care for the earth. The

fourth image is that of a spider web which represents the interconnectedness of all life. On this image I placed a person who looks to be in a prayerful or meditative state. I saw in her an honoring of the mystery of Source and the connectedness that each of us can have with Source within when we become still. I have then joined the images with four words that speak to me of this sense of connection that I have experienced in my journey. The words are: taste, connect, appreciate and love. The piece is bordered by images of green plant life, symbolizing, growth and aliveness.



*FIGURE 5. Symbolic depiction of the process of Connection.*

The process of creating this image was a very meditative experience. I felt this heightened sense of connection and wakefulness even as I was working with the materials. When this image was done and I stood back from it I noticed something in it that was not intended but very appropriate to the image. I noticed that the square shape of the four corner images placed at the edges of the piece around the sun ray image made for the shape of an equidistant cross in the center of the picture made up of the of the sun's

rays. Although I did not intend this initially in a conscious way, it spoke to me on a symbolic level representing the Divinity within. Seeing the cross in this image was reassuring. Although my cerebral mind did not plan to place a cross in the center of my image, I believe it was planned by a deeper Creator.

### **Emergence**

*When Michelangelo was asked how he created a piece of sculpture, he answered that the statue already existed within the marble. God himself had created the Pieta, David, Moses. Michelangelo's job, as he saw it, was to get rid of the excess marble that surrounded God's creation. So it is with you.*

(Williamson, 1992, p. 27-28)

The final core process that I identified in my healing journey is one that I am calling *emergence*. This process is comprised of four distinct but related themes: transformed eating experiences, transformed experiences of my body, empowerment and deep insight. Each of these themes is about coming more fully into my authentic Self and letting go of what no longer serves me in living my life's purpose. This phase has to do with the transformations I have noticed in my behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs as a result of living in a more mindful way. I have seen substantial behavioral shifts and important changes in the way I think about, relate to and use food. There has been a shedding of the shame that I have for so long held on to about my weight issue. I now have a freedom in my relationship with food and my body that I have never had, resulting in a tremendous feeling of empowerment. I have seen old beliefs die away and new beliefs, which I will refer to as *deep insight*, arise in their place. These deep insights feel like divine truth

revealed. Following a presentation of each of these themes I will be presenting the soul collage that I created to represent emergence.

### **Transformed eating experiences.**

Throughout the research process I observed marked shifts in the experience of eating and in my eating behaviors. I found that presence allowed me to be more attuned to the needs of my body both in the types of food I ate and the portions. Eating mindfully opened up a new process of dialogue between my body and me. I became accustomed to asking my body what it needed and found that it was only when I was fully present that I could clearly hear what it was communicating. I wrote:

My body is more awake than ever before. Somewhere now within me there is a meta-awareness that is noticing my body, sensing what it needs and trying to obey that. That is new... This morning at breakfast, for example, I asked myself several times if I was full and so I was checking in, which is new. (M. M Farah, personal communication, May 22, 2011).

Typically I am in the habit of cleaning my plate, thus using the empty plate as the cue to stop eating. This process of exchange with my body allowed me to have more controlled eating, easily leaving food on my plate when noticing that my body had enough.

Early in my research experience I was interested to notice that when I would eat mindfully there was a feeling of great abundance on my plate even with a very moderate portion size. One day I poured a small bowl of cereal and took the first bite very mindfully noticing all the tastes and textures: the crunchiness of the grains, the coolness of the milk etc. I was fully present with the food. Each bite was such a full experience

that then looking down at the bowl and all the remaining bites, it seemed like there was so much in it. I not only felt certain that there would be enough food; I also wondered whether I could finish the bowl.

Thinking about this experience later I wrote: “Interesting to notice how little I put in my bowl, a third the portion I probably would have in my fog last week. I’m not intentionally trying to eat less, just responding to what my body wants” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 7, 2011). I noticed the difference, not only in perception of the portion, but in the actual amount I poured when I brought mindfulness to the experience of initially selecting an amount. When I mindfully poured the cereal from the box and looked at the bowl it seemed ample to meet the needs of my hunger, however, it was obvious to me that it was a much smaller amount than I would usually take at breakfast.

I also noticed some subtle emotional changes related to the eating experience. During the research immersion I felt a shift from being in a more anxious state related to eating to a more calm way of being with food. I discovered that my usual way of being with food is to carry a low-grade anxiety related to a feeling of lack; that somehow there will not be enough for me. I have wondered if this in part, a result of experiencing so many years of self-imposed deprivation through dieting. This shift came into my awareness by observing the stark contrast in how I felt in the past, to how I felt when I was present in the eating experience.

For example, I noticed when ordering at restaurants that there was no subconscious fretting about whether or not the portion size would satisfy. This indicated

to me that this subtle unease must have been a common feature of my restaurant experience in the past. I also noticed once during the research, while sharing something with a friend at a restaurant, that there was a complete absence of any attention on how equally we were dividing the dish. I wasn't giving any notice to what or how much she was eating of the food we shared. This noticeable absence of this anxiety revealed to me that it usually must be present beneath the surface.

When eating mindfully there was, instead, a calm trusting that my needs would be met. I felt completely assured that I would have the 'right' amount. It was surprising and encouraging to notice how just becoming mindful with the food, without altering portions, seemed to multiply the feeling of abundance that was there in the dish. It became evident that if I truly did bring my full attention to every bite that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to feel the need to overeat.

There were many eating experiences during the research process where I found it very difficult to maintain a state of presence and mindless eating still occurred frequently. What I observed, however, was that when I would engage in overeating there was an obvious difference. Every time it happened there was a new awakened part of me that would notice the behavior at some point. Non-judgmentally alerting myself to what was happening resulted in me stopping myself sooner. The degree of each overeating experience seemed to be much less during the research phase than previous times. After one experience of overeating by taking an unnecessary second helping at a meal I wrote:

What was interesting about dinner was how quickly I recognized being stuffed and how uncomfortable it felt. I wanted the sensation over with. I think in the past

it would have been too familiar to me to take notice, but this time my body was really awake to it and didn't like it at all, didn't want to repeat it. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 25, 2011).

Having a regular practice of mindfulness allowed me to be more aware of when I was acting in a way that was disconnected from my body. Rather than judge the experience, I could simply take notice of it, freeing me to change direction.

During my research process, I was reading Chozen Bays' (2009) *Mindful Eating, A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food*. Her work had a very profound impact on how I experienced joy in eating. In her book, she discusses how we can have many types of hunger and how it was important to honor every type of hunger. This opened up the possibility for me to recognize that at times I may want to eat something simply because it looks or smells good and that it is okay to honor this, as she calls it, 'eye or nose hunger'.

By choosing to eat something knowingly to feed another type of hunger, I was giving myself permission to experience food for pure enjoyment. What I found to be the important distinction in this experience from a mindless eating experience was the conscious awareness of why I was eating. Permission coupled with awareness took the chaos and guilt out of eating. It opened up the possibility of food being joyful and having multiple purposes. What I found was that when I was fully present to my senses and willing to honor my other type of hunger, a very small amount could satisfy. It did not lead to overeating. It was encouraging for me to see that I could have experiences of

eating simply for taste that did not have to be about overeating, guilt, restriction or deprivation; that it was possible to mindfully experience eating for pleasure.

### **Transformed experiences of my body.**

One of the most powerful changes I experienced in the research phase was how I began to view my body differently. Presence and the new relationship I was developing with my body brought some exciting and noticeable changes. I could see my naked body in a mirror and, for the most part, feel good about myself, whereas in the past the reflection would have been met primarily with disdain. I wrote:

I am enjoying the look and feel of my belly, my curves, my breasts, my hips. I still will pass a quick judgment now and then but so much less often and much less harsh. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 22, 2011).

It was so amazing to me that at several months pregnant and continually expanding I could feel more vibrant and beautiful in my physical body than I did at some of my thinnest body weights.

In one conversation with a family member, I mentioned that I was feeling the best I had ever felt about my body. I contrasted the experience to how I felt after losing weight prior to my wedding. At that time, even though I was so much thinner and receiving the acknowledgment and compliments from others about my body, I could still not accept my body. I wrote: “[I] was clouded with obsessive thoughts and comparisons about size and wondering how fat I looked at certain angles. Now I feel alive. I feel so much gratitude for my body and love towards it” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, June 13, 2011). This change in my relationship with my body was also observed by others. Towards the

end of the research process my husband shared with me that he noticed I was walking differently. He felt I was exuding a body confidence and feeling of attractiveness that he had previously not seen in me.

### **Empowerment.**

One of the characteristics of my experience with presence has been a pervasive feeling of empowerment. In several places in my journal I wrote the words “I feel hopeful”. This feeling of hope is so different than anything I had ever experienced related to changing my body in the past. It is grounded in the knowledge that I have stumbled upon something very real and very life changing. When I was dieting I always felt defeated. Often times, even at the start of a diet there was an internal sense of not actually believing that a lasting change was possible. I was always disempowered about my body and although I wanted to believe that I had found the magic diet that would make the difference I didn’t have an authentic sense of hope.

A possible reason for this is that for so much of my life, I have felt like I could not be trusted when it came to food temptations. All the years of dieting had amounted to hundreds of repeated experiences of failed will power. Bringing my thoughts and feelings into conscious awareness has given me freedom around my food choices. I wrote:

Meditation is showing me that when I feel calm and awake I don’t need food... those blissful, beautiful, times when I am fully present, I don’t need the food, I don’t need to be calmed, connected, dulled. I am already calm, connected, at peace, awake. Food holds no power in that space (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 15, 2011).

Weeks later, still reflecting on how empowering this new way of eating is I wrote: “So much power in being able to choose if I use [food] right or use it destructively. Awake conscious choice. It is beautiful and powerful.” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, June 11, 2011). My walk in presence has awakened in me my own sense of strength.

On one occasion, I was on an outing buying groceries by myself and was waiting in line to pay. I had a momentary compulsion to buy chocolate as a ‘treat’ like I had so often automatically done in the past, however bringing my attention to my body I realized I didn’t actually want it and so therefore did not buy it. Reflecting on the experience I wrote:

I didn’t feel deprived or restricted. I simply asked myself if I was hungry and if my body wanted the sugar and the chocolate. The answer was clearly ‘no’, it didn’t. It is just not about deprivation and allowance anymore – it’s not the same old tapes. It is simply about connecting to my body in the moment and responding to it. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, May 26, 2011).

It was a very empowering experience to realize that I could choose to not indulge and feel no lingering wanting. I could walk away from that small temptation and be completely free of it. Being fully with my body, there was no grasping, I realized I needed nothing.

This calm, trusting way of relating to my body is so new for me. My past relationship with my body was characterized by feelings of guilt and shame. In my childhood and adolescence I always wondered if I was an embarrassment to my family and I felt as though I let them down when I would fail to lose the extra weight on a diet. Dieting and dreaming about losing weight was constantly on my mind as a teenager but I

discussed it with very few people. I experienced shame when eating, for being overweight and about dieting. As I grew older my struggle with my weight became a very personal and deeply guarded matter. I began to talk less and less to family about my weight. Only my closest friends and those I felt could commiserate with were let in on my world of weight obsession. For everyone else I tried to portray an air of confidence in any way I could so that I could overcompensate for and mask what I perceived to be my big failure.

In light of this, what has been surprising for me during this process is how totally comfortable and at ease I feel discussing my history with my body. There have been a few occasions where people have asked about my thesis work and I have surprised myself by how forthcoming I have been about the fact that it is a self-study and that I am exploring my food and body issues. I feel like becoming present to my body and seeing my experience so clearly has torn down the walls of shame that the years have built up. In presence, I feel there is a peace about, and an acceptance with, what 'is' versus wishing my experience away like I so often have done in the past. The quality of non-judgment that is the cornerstone of mindfulness has freed me to accept the history that I have with my body. I now see that things could never have been any different. I regard these wounds of the past as necessary teachers that have brought me on this journey to wholeness.

For most of my adult life I was internally conflicted by what felt like the opposing duality of my body and my spirit. I deemed myself to be a spiritually evolving person and yet I was so internally caught up in what felt like the merely superficial concern of my body. There were times in my past that I felt cheated in life by having to live with this

burden of weight and then I would feel guilty for the lack of gratitude for all the blessings that had been bestowed upon me. It was so difficult for me to reconcile how someone who understood what truly mattered in life could waste any amount of time begrudging the past and wondering how things would have been different if I had the body that I always wanted. I wrote:

It always felt so superficial to care so much about my body and experience the pain of this obsession, like I was beyond that and should be pursuing higher ideals. Now I see the glorious union. Right relationship with food, my body, consideration for the world through ethical consumption; these are spiritual, deeply spiritual matters. (M. M. Farah, personal communication, June 13, 2011).

This research process has been a powerful experience of uniting the physical and the spiritual aspects of my life, body and soul. Standing firmly in the present moment has empowered me to return to myself, integrate all aspects of my being and unapologetically reclaim the home that was created for me: my body.

### **Deep Insight.**

There are those times when we arrive upon something that is so clear, so vivid, that it stirs us in the deepest corners of our being. We then know, beyond any doubt, that it is true. I believe that I have arrived upon such a thing through my learning in this process. Within Buddhism there is a distinction made between insight and deep insight. The Buddha taught that the path to ultimate freedom on this earth, enlightenment, is arrived at only through deep insight, which he referred to as *right* wisdom (Brahm, 2006). This is seeing things as they actually are. I believe that my experience of deep insight

during this process has resulted in an incredible shift in priorities for me related to my long held battle with my body.

Probably the most surprising and liberating aspect of my entire research experience has been that I now truly believe that attaining more presence in my life is a far more important goal than changing my physical body. This has been a profound *deep insight*. I have had a taste of what living in a truly present and mindful way is and so now sustaining this experience of presence is more desired and more of a focus for me than attaining a different physical shape through weight loss.

I have lost the obsession with changing my physical body. In its place is a hunger to achieve a more mindful and present life. Early in the experience I began wondering about the relative value of being thinner versus the value of living in a more present way.

I wrote:

I know that if I could live in a state of presence always then I wouldn't even mind having a large body, because everything associated with it: the pain, the isolation, the separateness, the shame, the suffering would/could not exist, not in the present – so what would it matter, the size of my body?" (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 29, 11).

The benefits of becoming more present were so evident to me and seemed to far outweigh the benefits I perceive are associated with being thinner.

Although I have not yet had any health complications related to body weight, I know that it is a reality that many face. Therefore, I still see value in losing weight for the purpose of becoming healthier; however, the importance of weight loss is now in

perspective. For so long the prospect of losing weight was the illusive solution to every problem, the Holy Grail of my life. Becoming present has truly changed that for me. In one entry I wrote:

A life of presence at this size would be far more valuable to me than a life of fog at the perfect size – but here’s what I know, if I truly had a life of presence I couldn’t/wouldn’t maintain this size – they could not co-exist because presence would not allow for it (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 27, 2011).

I no longer see losing weight as carrying nearly the power that it used to. I do however believe that if I am able to become more fully present in my life in a sustained and committed way, then the healthiest physical form for me will be a natural outcome.

However, I do not presume this to be an easy road. I found maintaining presence and practicing mindfulness to be extremely hard work. It requires intense focus and dedication but what I recognized is that although presence does not come easy it is entirely worth it. I believe it comes down to a choice of living the fullest expression of my authentic self through presence or remaining in a fog, missing out on the essential beauty in every moment that is my birthright.

Another *deep insight* is that I now believe mindfulness to be the only healthy way for me to relate to food and the only way I will ever achieve a healthy body weight. In one journal entry I wrote: “I feel like I am breaking through, breaking free, growing...I feel very clear that this is the only way, that I’d rather lose the obsession with weight than the weight itself.” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 29, 2011). There is a certainty now that this approach of living with more presence and mindful eating is the

only way for me to proceed in trying to achieve a healthier relationship with food and my body.

### **Artistic depiction of the process of emergence.**

Many times throughout this process I have thought of the imagery of a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. The metaphor, while a bit cliché, seems to fit my experience so perfectly. To me the cocoon represents the unhealthy body that was saturated with negative beliefs and harmful behaviors. Within, is the beauty of the life force and potential for a body that is aligned with Spirit. Describing my experience at one of my book club/discussion group meetings, I wrote: “by the end [of the meeting] I had a nervous energy, an opening, like I could feel the skin stretching as I was internally growing – a butterfly emerging from chrysalis. Like this [overweight] body has been the cocoon protecting the spirit but like I am beginning to no longer need it and can begin to shed what doesn’t serve” (M. M. Farah, personal communication, April 21, 2011). This image formed the basis of the piece I created, depicted in Figure 6, titled “Emergence”.



*FIGURE 6. Symbolic depiction of the process of Emergence.*

The butterflies and dragonflies represent freedom, beauty, flight and change. The background of this piece is a silver shimmering cardstock that also spoke to me of newness and hopefulness. The image of the woman in white at the bottom was very striking to me. At the time I selected it from the magazine it jumped out at me and I didn't know why on a conscious level immediately. It was only after gluing down my image and placing the butterflies as if to be emerging from her belly did I remember a very poignant movement exercise from the art therapy class I attended during the immersion phase of my research.

We were instructed to listen to a piece of instrumental music and move our bodies to the piece with eyes closed. The intent was to let our bodies lead and try to follow the rhythm of our natural movement inclinations. During the movement exercise, I was very intrigued by a posture that I assumed and repeated in a form of dance to the music. I was mostly surprised at how compelled I felt to move into and remain in this posture despite it being quite uncomfortable physically. It was a pose where I was extremely arched back, arms swinging freely, swaying from side to side, almost like being cradled by something. In the discussion following the exercise we talked of it being a posture of surrender but also one of being held. The image I chose of the woman is interesting in that it is almost the exact same posture. It was as if to say, out of her complete surrender, out of her trust that she would be held, emerges her divine Self and the beauty within.

I placed the swan directly above her belly also representing transformation and beauty. The belly was important for me for three reasons: one is that I had known that in many Eastern Traditions it is believed that the belly is the power center of the soul

(Selby, 1992), secondly a key awareness of mine through this process has been my history of suppression of my body over the years and the belly, in particular, with trying to hold it in and manipulate the look of its size. I have since had a particular sense of wanting to honor and free it and have been conscious of breathing expansively into the belly and physically freeing it. Lastly, the belly is the literal center of creation in terms of the womb and I have been very aware of that aspect of the belly being pregnant through this body reconciliation process. The themes of pregnancy and birth were symbolic of the rebirth that I am experiencing in terms of a new relationship with my body. The image was finished with some descriptive words placed at the top including: transform, evolution, empowered, new life, change etc. I used a collage border of images of the sky to represent possibility, newness, vastness and hope.

Presence and the practice of mindfulness took me on a magnificent journey to and within my body. Presence shone light on my past patterns and the emotional triggers for my behavior. It helped me to develop compassionate curiosity towards myself and others as I approached these issues. I noticed an increased ability to clearly see my emotional and physical needs. Many new realizations emerged related to my relationship with my body and my eating patterns that I feel could not have come forward if I hadn't been fully awake in the present moment. Presence has been an experience of embodiment. I found that when present I could fully inhabit my own body and from within it I could hear what it needed and appropriately respond to those needs. This process allowed me to make peace with a body I had previously been at war with and to embrace it fully. When awake to the present moment I noticed a heightened sense of connection to the world around me: to individuals, to society, and to the earth. Eating became a vehicle for encountering

the Holy. Presence took me onto a path of transformation with significant changes in both my eating behaviors and how I related to my body. It has been a journey of empowerment with deep insights emerging that will forever change how I think about my lifelong struggle with my weight and how I approach my body moving forward.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

*At our very core lies an essential purity. There is a fathomless potential within us for wisdom and compassion, and our very wish for well-being, for happiness, our wish to be free of suffering, may be regarded as an expression of that True Nature (Levey & Levey, 2006, p.198).*

There is a concept within Tibetan Buddhism that every person has three levels of being: the inner, outer and the secret being (Surya Das, 2007). The outer being refers to the physical self, the body. The inner being is the thinking mind which includes the ego, self-identify, feelings, and memories etc. The secret being is considered the essential core of who we are, what I refer to as my Divine essence within. One of the goals of Buddhist practice is to integrate these three beings, allowing them to operate cooperatively so that one can live more fully and harmoniously. I have discovered that when I practice presence my inner, outer and secret beings have an opportunity to operate in alignment, there is a quality to the experience that is distinctly different from my usual way of being. There is an extraordinary sense of aliveness within me and an experience of sharpness of color and vibrancy to my outer world. It is in this state that my most authentic Self can emerge.

For so much of my life my three beings have been fragmented. I have always had a strong sense of my secret being but felt I had to work hard to access it through deep spiritual searching or rigorous spiritual practices. My inner being was both a source of pride and of pain. I relied heavily on my personality, intellect, wit and creativity to offer me a measure of worth that I did not inherently know that I had or deserved. It also was what perpetuated all my false stories and obsessive thoughts about how much better life

could be if I looked differently. My outer being, my body, was something that I viewed as only serving the practical purpose of moving me through my life. It was primarily viewed as an impediment; I was convinced on some level that how it looked was keeping me from living my potential; from deserving love, from gaining full acceptance from others, from being carefree. Therefore I only related to my body on either a practical or a manipulative level; working to coerce it through diet and exercise into something more acceptable to me.

Practicing presence has significantly shifted that dynamic for me. Being present to and living within my body allows me to really know and honor each of my three “beings” at once. I have come to see that the *secret being* is not so far out of reach. Rather, I see it as my most constant Self. It is the pure essence at the core of me that is readily accessible when I still myself enough to connect with it. When present I can clearly recognize and compassionately interpret the obsessive and harmful activity of the inner being, the mind. This awakened state of being present also allows me to hear, respond to and embrace the outer being, the body and recognize that my body is the only vehicle to experiencing everything wonderful in this life.

The experience of presence allows me to enter into a beautiful state of connection and integration. I truly feel at home in my body. Although I had been living in a compartmentalized way for most of my life this feeling of being in connection with my body does not feel foreign to me, like I am forging new territory, as one might expect it would. Rather there is something immediately familiar and *right* about the experience. It is as though I recognize this connected way of living with my body as an experience of

*home*. I have therefore come to view this entire process as a reclaiming; reestablishing a connection that had been severed.

The experience of connecting with our most fundamental self in meditative practice has been likened to ‘removing dust off the mirror’ (Bai & Scutt 2009). Rather than meditative practices instilling practices and qualities in the meditator, such as interdependence and compassion, as though they are new to us, instead this practice undoes “certain habits of mind and heart that have denied, concealed and marginalized these original insights and practices” (Bai & Scutt, 2009, p. 93). I have come to know that living in a way that is awake and connected is my natural home, my birthright and something that I lost touch with over time and was called to reclaim.

Practicing presence helps me to understand that I have choice around whether or not I incorporate the thoughts I experience into my being and sense of reality or merely notice them. Just yesterday I found myself making assumptions that I was being judged by a fellow patron in a café for what I had ordered for myself and my children; a very old pattern of thinking that harkens back to my struggle with accepting my own relationship with food. It was empowering to decide what kind of meaning I wanted to ascribe to the passing thoughts. Becoming present to my thoughts allows me to take a fresh look at them and decide anew if those thoughts and beliefs are true. Mindfulness challenges an individual to regard a thought as just that, a thought or an occurrence and not necessarily a truth. Tolle (2005) writes: “If there is awareness in you, you no longer need to believe in every thought you think. It is an old thought, no more.” (p. 100). Presence allows me to carve out a new understanding of my thoughts, and in turn, a new reality, one that feels more in line with my authentic Self.

I do not presume to say that living in presence is an easy road to walk. I have found that maintaining presence and practicing mindfulness is extremely challenging. Even after months and months of practice accompanied by firm resolve to live in a more present way, I still find myself spending large parts of each day distanced from the moment. On a day-to-day-basis this can involve noticing my busy mind fixated on the past or spinning about the future and I will consciously then need to decide to bring myself back to the present moment. For example, while doing ordinary tasks like unloading the dishwasher, I will observe myself lost in my thoughts and then mindfully choose to either bring my attention to the dish in my hand and the quality of my surroundings or become consciously aware of my mental activity and choose to maintain it in that moment because it served some purpose for me. This process is repeated several times each day.

Zinn (1994) believes that the reason maintaining a practice of mindfulness is so difficult is because our unawareness is such a tenacious habit. My own habit of operating in auto-pilot is often justified under the rubric of multi-tasking and efficiency. Qualities that are often rewarded in the society I live in. Practicing presence is a discipline. It requires consciousness, moment-to-moment examination of one's state of being otherwise it is incredibly elusive in what is viewed as the mundane in daily life or in the frantic pace of everyday stressors.

In addition, practicing presence means being willing to participate in experiences that are sometimes painful. Being present to the difficult emotion: the anger, the grief, the sadness does not make the emotion dissipate or reduce the amount of pain but what it does is connects us in the experience. I was recently in a very upsetting argument with a

friend. Although I was listening to the rage and anger in them I was simultaneously able to carve out tiny windows of being present to what was going on in me. I felt my bodily sensations and was able to notice that behind my own reactionary anger was a feeling of being frightened. A wiser part of me was then able to take a higher view of the situation, reassure myself that I was not in danger and that I could withstand receiving the expression of anger. This not only allowed me to be present to myself but also to be present to and honor my friend's emotion versus layering it with my projections.

Diving into the suffering, no matter what it is, and truly living it offers an opportunity to see clearly and respond to what is actually happening. However, there may be times when, for our own protection, we do not become present to the pain; times when we need to pull back from an experience for our own survival. We can, however, still remain conscious about what we are doing; be present to the fact that we are choosing to not engage the difficult emotion or experience. I still eat for emotional coping at times but through practicing presence I am conscious that I am choosing to do it, I am aware that the food in that moment is offering me comfort. There is an entirely different feeling in doing so with awareness. It restores some control to me for my behavior and is empowering. Despite the challenges of practicing presence, I know it is the most important and worthy goal that I could ever pursue. I realize that it is not realistic, nor desirable, to be present for every waking moment but experiencing my life as fully as I possibly can is my birthright to claim.

I am hopeful that in time and with continued practice achieving a state of presence will come more naturally. Toni Packer (2002), renowned meditation teacher speaks of how students describe the difficulties they face in remaining mindful and then out of the

blue they find that spontaneous undivided presence comes to them on its own without being forced. I believe this is indicative of our natural inclination for being. I believe I have learned over time how to distance myself from the moment but at my core is an inherent knowledge of how to be connected.

I watch how my baby girl looks at each new object I show to her, no matter how basic or commonplace it is to me. Her eyes widen with appreciation and amazement as she takes in her surroundings. She is completely awake, connected with the present moment. Over time I have lost that as my primary state of being. My fears, disappointments, judgments and interpretations have taken over and often prevail over what my senses are encountering. Gunilla Norris (2004) refers to becoming present as a “basic and profound courtesy” (p.53). The word courtesy is interesting in this context. It speaks of really understanding the gift of life and showing true gratitude by participating in it.

I have lost far too many hours worrying about and being self-conscious of my body. I was on a vacation recently and was enjoying the heat of the sun poolside and was then struck by a surprising awareness. I was enjoying myself! I was completely relaxed and present, dipping in and out of the pool, enjoying the company I was with, appreciating the sun and the breeze and the relaxed atmosphere. I was not giving myself over to worrying about how the cellulite on my thighs was appearing in the bathing suit, what others were thinking or desperately coveting the bodies of the other women walking around me as I had done nearly every other time I was in a bathing suit publically for the thirty previous years. In *Women, Food and God* Roth (2010) asks her readers to contemplate if the thousands of people who have died this day would care about the size

of our thighs if given the chance to trade places with us. It is amazingly freeing to realize that we can enjoy our life by simply showing up in the moment before us.

What I have discovered, along with Geneen Roth and many others in the mindful and intuitive eating movements, is that there is truly no value in looking to external experts or investing energy and money in complicated diet programs. I have come to see that I am the only expert on my own body. When I really tune in to the needs of my own bodies and act in accordance with that wisdom I feel amazing.

For example when I listen to my body I realize that, despite what hundreds of diet experts say, I am not actually hungry for food first thing in the morning. I don't usually get hungry until about three or four hours after I awaken. How many times have I forced myself to cram in a bagel on the go because I believed I could only lose weight if I kick started my metabolism by eating breakfast. Eating breakfast simply because I 'should' is acting out of alignment with my own particular body wisdom. When we are disconnected from our body we cannot hear what it is telling us: we get in our own way and divert our body's natural tendency towards health. I have come to see that truly loving my body and making choices with food that serve it come naturally if I am practicing presence.

In the following sections I will discuss the four core processes of *illumination*, *embodiment*, *connection* and *emergence* that resulted in my research. I will also discuss aspects of the fifteen themes that are contained within the four processes. While it is true that the four processes did occur in such a way that would indicate a sequence, I want to convey that they are not distinct and separate phases. In reflection, it appears that each

individual experience of presence contains all four processes: illumination, embodiment, connection and emergence but depending on where I was in my journey one process seemed to be predominant over the others.

### **Illumination: Clarity and Insight**

Very early in this research journey an increased quality of clarity was noted when I was practicing presence. It stood out because it provided such a stark difference to the usual quality of my experience that can often feel like being in a distracted, hazy fog. The Sanskrit word for mindfulness meditation in the Buddhist tradition is *Vipassana* which translates to seeing things as they really are (Levey & Levey, 2006). That is a predominate feature of my experience of practicing presence. So often my view of life is laden with my interpretations and judgments. For example I can have a conversation with someone who seems distant and distracted. Rather than simply observe their state; I interpret it and distort it to match my own internal story of what is happening. When I am connected through mindfulness I am able to achieve incredible clarity and see things as they actually are. Hanh and Cheung (2010) write that “[Mindfulness] is a source of light in the darkness, allowing us to see clearly our life experience in relation to everything else.”(p. 68). Presence illuminates the moment, without it we risk missing what it is we are actually experiencing.

Practicing presence allowed me to clearly see that at the base of my unhealthy relationship with my body existed faulty beliefs. Somewhere within me I believed that my value as a person was tied to my physical size and that I could not be fully loveable unless I arrived at a shape closer to the physical ideal dictated by my society. However, despite my displays of hope through constant dieting, deep down I believed that a lasting

change was not possible for my body; that I couldn't be trusted to have a healthy relationship with food long term. Insight into these beliefs allowed me to step back and become conscious of the choices I had been making pertaining to my relationship with food and my body. From this distanced standpoint it was easy to see how the behaviors did not stem from a part of me that was whole nor aligned with my inner wisdom.

### **Understanding patterns and triggers.**

There is an adage that says 'to know where you are going you must know where you have been'. This came to mind when contemplating the gift of being able to gain a deeper understanding of my history with food and my body. Practicing presence offered me the opportunity to calmly observe patterns and triggers, often at the time they were occurring. Hahn (2011) describes the mindfulness meditator to still water; able to reflect things clearly. In the past I had tried to understand my struggle with my body and weight obsession through psychotherapy and while I believe that kind of analysis offered me increased awareness, the practice of presence expedites the learning and opens the door for an extremely clear view of these behaviors as they are being lived rather than through the retelling of a memory.

When I practice presence I inquire about the behavior as it is happening. I recently attended an emotional family gathering, not only was I confronted with difficult emotions but I was reentering a group dynamic that was very triggering for me in terms of my history with food. I found I was able to practice mindful eating for the first couple of days but by the third day my old patterns of eating when I was not hungry and turning to food for comfort and belonging began to emerge. What was different about the experience was that with my new found awareness I regularly surveyed myself, noticing

the behaviors and the accompanying emotions. While the awareness did not result in a behavior change in the moment, it did result in additional learning about myself and my process of change. This awareness served the function of loosening the grip that the behavior had on me. I was able to engage with the experience in a more distanced way; as an observer of an experience rather than being completely enmeshed with the unwanted behavior.

This aspect of the practice of presence, what I am terming 'illumination', has been observed by other writers and researchers. In Hayes and Feldman's (2004) study of mindfulness ( $n = 111$ ) they found that mindfulness is associated with insight seeking behaviors such as trying to understand the antecedents of problems. In another small sample study of a ten week mindfulness intervention for women with binge eating disorder, the researchers found that participants had an increased awareness of emotional triggers for eating (Baer, Fischer, & Huss, 2005).

Another example of an important pattern that I had become aware of was my desire to wait until I was alone before overeating or eating something I regarded as forbidden. This eating behavior illustrates the thinking behind one of Geneen Roth's (2010) key principles, 'eat with the intention of being in full view of others' (p. 211). With this instruction Roth is trying to address the sneaking behavior she sees in many compulsive eaters that is born of the shame they feel about eating. She asserts that shame comes from the negative messages we send ourselves that most likely originated in childhood with the disapproving voice of a parent, sibling, or teacher (etc.).

The awareness of sneak eating behavior allowed me to observe and become curious about it. This calm curiosity was able to shift the long held feelings of shame

associated with my eating. Instead I was able to see it for what it was; a way of eating in that moment, nothing more. Oprah Winfrey often quotes the poet Maya Angelou who says ‘When you know better, you do better’ (Oprah.com, 2011). The new awareness gained through this journey in presence cleared a path for new and more health affirming choices.

Awareness of the eating patterns was a necessary component in beginning to shift them. Weiss (2004) explains the phenomenon in this way:

If you have been practicing mindfulness, you are a lot more likely to have developed some awareness of yourself, your world, and the way your mind works. You are more likely to be aware of the preconceptions and old reactive patterns you bring to the situation. You can welcome them, embrace them, and not act (or react) out of them. (pp. 179-180).

Becoming conscious of the triggers for overeating drove a wedge between me and the behavior. I was no longer one with the behavior but rather a conscious observer of it. It was this process of separating me from my behavior that I believe is a key factor in empowering change.

### **Compassionate curiosity.**

Students of meditation are instructed to greet thoughts that enter their minds during a meditation session with neutral awareness. They are often taught to regard the passing thoughts like clouds floating by, told to notice them and let them pass. This same quality of simply noticing seems to pervade my experience of food and my body when I practice presence. I find that I can more easily hold myself with loving compassion, noticing what is there with open curiosity rather than the self-critical lens that pervaded

so much of my past experience. In the past when I would think about my unwanted eating behaviors, punishing thoughts would predominate followed by feverish planning of how I could get back on a diet and change my ways. When I practice presence I am truly free to just observe myself without judgment or the need to change. It is this quality of acceptance and curiosity in mindfulness that is responsible for encouraging the process of change (Hayes & Feldman, 2004).

Learning to approach myself with compassion is a necessary precursor to being able to come to a place of forgiveness and reconcile my past relationship with my body. Self-compassion is a vital part of coming to peace with the body (Fain, 2011). When you take a compassionate view, you can befriend aspects of yourself that you were previously uncomfortable with. Fain (2011) writes:

As soon as clients tap into the power of self-compassion, out goes the “battle” from the battle of the bulge. When they take a kinder, gentler view of their bodies, their whole selves, as well as a softer stance toward their imperfect food choices and daily weight fluctuations, they struggle less and eat more healthfully almost immediately (p.11).

Rather than carrying shame over my choices, through compassionate curiosity, I am able to learn from them and see them as information to gain a deeper understanding of who I am in this moment.

Without compassion, we are trying to insist on change under conditions of hostility and resentment. Just this evening I observed myself cleaning my kitchen following dinner and although I was completely physically satisfied I stood at the sink and ate the corn off my children’s unfinished cobs rather than throwing them away. As I

was doing it I brought awareness to my behavior and held myself with almost a gentle amusement rather than the admonishment that would have existed in the past. With this stance of curiosity and compassion I am able to wonder about the behavior with openness. This open stance allows me to go in to exploring the behavior unafraid. Gentle awareness opens the door to change.

The compassion I gain through my experience of practicing presence has not only allowed me to embrace my body and behaviors but it also encourages me to take a new view of my history of struggling with these issues. Rather than seeing my story of my body negatively, as one of only pain and brokenness I now understand that my past experience has led to a culmination of learning and events that has brought me to this very moment; a moment I treasure. This has allowed me to release the blame I once attributed to others and has transformed anger into interest.

### **Increased emotional and physical clarity.**

Mindfulness has been likened to a lamp shedding light on the emotions, allowing us to affectionately see what is there without judgment (Hanh & Cheung, 2010). The lamp is a fitting analogy and connects to why I chose the word 'illumination' to describe this part of the process. Practicing presence allows me to clearly see what was happening in any given moment within me, whether it is at the physical level in terms of hunger or thirst or at the emotional level. I am often able to clearly discern the interplay between the two. For example, I now can recognize when I am mistaking a physical sensation (hunger) for the emotional experience of stress. When I am overwhelmed, usually with tasks, I can develop sensations in my body that at first feel like hunger. When I become aware however, I see that it is the anxiety that I am feeling.

I have since discovered that these experiences of clarity are consistent with what the literature says regarding mindfulness practice. Brown and Ryan (2003) write: “Mindfulness captures a quality of consciousness that is characterized by clarity and vividness of current experience and functioning and thus stands in contrast to the mindless, less ‘awake’ states ...” (p. 823). Hayes and Feldman (2004) also found that mindfulness is associated with increased clarity of feelings and a perceived ability to improve one’s emotional state.

One of the central experiences that occurs for me through meditation and mindfulness is a sense of space that opens up between my immediate experience and my Self. As previously mentioned, it is the gap that is created that allows me to observe my current circumstance with distance, rather than be meshed with it. Weiss (2004) describes this phenomenon of clarity that comes from this separation of Self and experience, explaining it in the following way:

Your practices of mindfulness help you create some space around your thoughts, feelings, and perceptions...the result is that you have some breathing room. Once you have breathing room, you can see the situation in front of you more clearly, and you can act in helpful, constructive ways (pp. 179-180).

Likewise, Brown & Ryan (2003) say that “mindfulness may facilitate the creation of an interval of time or a gap wherein one is able to view one’s mental landscape, including one’s behavioral options, rather than simply react to interpersonal events” (p.844). This space that is created through accessing the present moment allows me to notice the emotional backdrop. This assists me in making better choices rather than defaulting to habitual patterns of emotionally driven eating.

When I eat mindfully it is like various parts of my body are engaged in an active negotiation. I am experiencing the bites and the flavors and enjoying that part of the experience and wanting to continue on but am simultaneously aware of my shifting stomach sensations that are lobbying for cessation. This similar experience was observed in the McIver, McGartland, & O'Halloran (2009) study of a mindfulness and yoga intervention for 25 obese women. The participants reported having a sharper sense of taste and having more awareness of how foods felt in their body following mindful eating.

Tolle (1999, 2005) writes extensively about this benefit of being present. He discusses how when you enter a state of presence you can then be in a position to closely observe yourself. He says that this ability to be fully present and clearly see the current internal experience is how you disassociate from your ego driven habits of the mind and enter a state of higher consciousness. It is this state of heightened clarity that indicates to me that I have connected to Spirit. It is such a difficult shift to describe but it is like in an instant I am transported. There is stillness, lightness and vividness in my experience. When I have entered in to this space I am then able to operate from the wisdom that exists there and only there and act in alignment with my whole being.

### **New realizations.**

In this process important new discoveries emerged that gave rise to the changes that occurred in terms of how I viewed my relationship with food and my body. Levey and Levey (2006) write that in mindfulness “profound insights arise that alter our deeply held, but unexamined beliefs” (p. 77). One important realization is that overeating is often my strategy to fight time. I discovered that I use eating to prolong an experience:

such as an enjoyable dinner with my husband, or to procrastinate another less enjoyable kind of experience: such as housework. Roth (2010) writes about how, in her experience, people with eating issues say that their primary motivation for turning to food is “[They] want peace. Quiet. To forget about [themselves] for a while.” (p.72). I certainly connect with this statement. There have been times where it has felt as though eating is the only way I can permit myself to honor my own needs.

This had me wonder if the current rise in obesity in our culture could be related to the ramped up pace of our day to day lives? As I look around it seems that we are plagued by chaos and busy-ness. We are in an age of instant-everything, immediate gratification and constant attachment to our technological convenience. We have lives that are over-programmed, minds that are over-tasked, and bodies and spirits that are exhausted and in need of a break. Eating forces stillness, if even for a minute. Perhaps for me eating is a subconscious strategy to slow everything down. When I eat I am offered a momentary chance to stop. In those moments I am not craving food what I actually just crave is peace.

Roth writes “Compulsive eating is a way we distance ourselves from the way things are when they are not how we want them to be” (p.37). In my view, the practice of presence has the potential to address this part of the problem of overeating in that it offers an alternative and more effective avenue for achieving peace and stillness. However it is important to distinguish that the kind of peace that is offered is not to be thought of as synonymous with happiness. Presence alone cannot eradicate every painful situation but what it can do is shift how we experience the situation. Rather than struggling against our

reality, presence offers peace through surrendering to the moment. Presence awakens us to our reality and invites us to walk in acceptance.

### **Embodiment: Reclaiming Home**

When I first began this journey I imagined that it would mainly be about the experience of eating. One surprise for me has been that although there have been pivotal shifts in my experience of food and eating, this has primarily been a journey about my relationship with my body. Having gone into the pain of being largely separated from the experience of my body I now have a true desire to delight in the experience of being in my body. It is like I am viewing my body as a long lost friend that I am having a reunion with and it is this strong connection that is beginning to shift the eating patterns. Hanh and Cheung (2010) propose that in the realm of eating, the oneness of mind and body that is gained through mindfulness practice allows us to “really listen to our body and know what it needs.” (p.72). I now have a deep desire to treat my body with kindness; I want to experience the vibrancy and vitality that results when I listen to it.

I have realized that if I am disconnected from my body then I am out of touch with the only thing that separates life and death. Roth (2010) writes, “Your body is the piece of the universe you’ve been given; as long as you have a pulse, it presents you with an ongoing shower of immediate sensate experiences.” (p.122). Practicing presence has helped me to truly understand and honor the fact that the body is the only vehicle I have for accessing the life that I love; my only way to kiss my babies, feel the sunshine, experience the magnificence of a sunset etc.

Overeating and obsessing are just two examples of ways I leave my body but there are other ways that people escape the present moment and discount the body:

alcohol, drugs, overwork, sexual addiction etc. Consider how attunement with the body and responsiveness to its needs could impact not only our body weight but also other aspects of our physical and mental health. For example, gaining experience in living within my body and the heightened awareness of the body has resulted in alertness to subtle shifts in the body that may point to symptoms of illness or injury. I am now more aware and alert to a pain or an unusual sensation and I am taking action sooner to support my body. In the past I would have to have been really quite sick or very uncomfortable before I paid attention. The practice of presence offers the experience of being more sensitive and attuned to the needs of the body.

This experience has me wondering about the potential for far reaching impacts on our collective health (and healthcare costs) if we were more highly attuned to, and willing to respond to our bodies with the compassion and care that they are asking for. I also wonder if cultivating this connection with our physical bodies in a more widespread way in our society could result in less of a willingness to harm the body through other behavior such as drug and alcohol misuse, smoking, high risk sexual activity or dangerous driving, to name a few.

In addition to physical health the practice of presence offers incredible benefits to our mental health as well. I have learned that having a greater connection with my body has resulted in a sharper sense of emotional awareness and a better ability to regulate my emotions. Hanh (2009) says, when writing on the benefits of mindfulness meditation, “When there is a hurricane of emotions in us, if we know how to withdraw from the storm ... we shall not be swept away.” (p. 36). Being more in tune with my emotional landscape has helped me to better navigate the sometimes rough waters of the heart.

Recently our family came through the major transition of a cross-country move, one that resulted in varying degrees of emotional upheaval for all of us. In that there were times when I lost my patience with my kids too soon and was not proud of how I was parenting and coping in general. In those moments I felt swept up in a sea of emotions; frustration, defeat, regret, guilt, longing for the order we had in our old environment etc. I found that if I could still the tides long enough to become truly mindful and present to the emotion then I could locate myself within it and begin to see what was at work in me. This may point to part of the explanation for why mindfulness interventions are showing some promise in treating mental health conditions (Linehan, Schmidt, Dimeff, Craft, Kanter & Comtois, 1999, Teasdale, Segal, Williams, Ridgeway, Soulsby, & Lau, 2000, Wilkinson-Tough, M. Bocci, L., Thorne, K & Herlihy, J, 2010, Douglass, 2011). Without awareness we can often be lost at sea without oars. The turmoil of our emotions can be overwhelming and perhaps this is part of what leads chronic mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.

The process of embodiment that resulted from my journey in presence has had a profound effect on my own quality of life. The implications could be far reaching if the thousands upon thousands of others in our society who are not at home in their bodies could find their way back to their body. Being at home in the body is basic to our existence and is a birthright. If those of us who are disconnected are to ever truly be at peace we need to be returned to our bodies. The practice of presence awakens us to our body; it is a way back.

**Inhabiting the body.**

Roth (2010) writes: “Change happens when you understand what you want to change so deeply that there is no reason to do anything but act in your own best interest...when you begin to inhabit your body from the inside” (p.121). Once I stepped into my body, decided I wanted to be there and felt the magnificence of life from within its walls, transformation followed. Now I experience my body on a moment to moment basis. I can be engrossed in an engaging conversation but there is part of my awareness that is connected to the experience of my body. I notice subtle reactions in the body and contained within those reactions is a wealth of information. In the therapeutic field of Focusing, it is said that the body actually knows more about a situation than is known in our cognitive awareness. (The Focusing Institute, 2012). It now is clear to me that I can only access that information of my body if I am awake to my body.

The diet mentality had me believe that my body was only worth possessing when it attained a specific goal weight. Anything short of that was believed to be a body in waiting, not quite achieved. Many days my mood would be significantly altered through stepping on the scale. In this process I have realized that my body is perfect and whole as it is, at any size. From this stance of acceptance, I am then able to truly connect with my body and walk in it. Once this happens I am better positioned to act in my own best interest.

There is much discussion today of body/mind integration. However, the paradox of inhabiting the body is that it has not resulted in integration like I thought it might but rather a distinct realization that my body is a part of me but is not me. I have a very clear sense that my body is merely the physical manifestation of me. As Tolle (2005) explains

presence results in the lifting out of identifying with form. When we are fully present we realize that we are not the body that we occupy, nor are we defined by the labels that others use to identify us, such as mother, teacher, student, wife. We are not even the mind that thinks the thoughts we think. Rather we are the essence or consciousness that is behind the thoughts, various identities and physical form that we inhabit.

This may sound reminiscent of Cartesian dualism but I experience this differently than the dualistic segregation that often existed for me in the past, pitting the self and body against one another or giving preference to one over the other. I do not see the body and the self as separate entities controlling or being controlled by the other. Rather I have come to view the body, mind and spirit like three strands in the braid of my being. Deeply interconnected and constantly impacting one another. However, I have a strong sense that my essence is the Spirit within, that deeper, wiser Self at my core. At the same time, my mind and body remain integral to my being; three separate parts, but inextricably interwoven. This new way of experiencing my body honors its deeply spiritual nature and its vital importance in the full expression of my being. When I fully inhabit my body through the practice of presence I sense the sacredness of my body. I am aware of its own divinely created energy and am compelled with a true desire to honor and nurture it to the best of my ability.

### **Responding to the body.**

Practicing presence opens up a channel of communication between my body and I that has not previously existed. When I tune in and connect with my body I can simultaneously hear countless tiny messages. For example, at this moment my feet are cold, my fingers feel cramped, my eyes are tired, I am vaguely thirsty, my breathing is

relaxed, my neck is strained and the ridge on the table on which I am typing is creating soreness under my forearms. What I also know is that, at this moment, I am not hungry. A couple of minutes ago I was lost in the words I was typing and was completely unconnected with an awareness of my body and what it needed. This brief experience of practicing presence allowed me to check in and then make the adjustments to support the wellbeing of my body. I have since straightened my back, sipped some water and moved the laptop closer so that my arms are not pressed on the table ridge. Responding to the body is an act of gratitude. It acknowledges that we have a responsibility to our body and that we are willing to accept that responsibility graciously.

Albers (2003) writes that the dissatisfaction with the body that is intrinsic in dieting inhibits one's ability to decipher the body's needs and messages to us. She writes: "The dieting mindset is akin to taking a knife and cutting the connection that is your body's only line of communication with your head." (p.2). The practice of presence restored that long severed line of communication between my body and I. Now there is possibility for true conversation. Research has found that mindfulness results in a deepening of the awareness of the messages that the body continually sends (Christopher & Maris, 2010).

Since developing my practice I now am in a habit of responding when my body asks. I used to go for hours with a vague awareness of thirst and not acknowledge it. Now I thank my body for the signal and respond by hydrating it. I have recognized that I cannot expect health, vitality and performance from my body if I do not acknowledge and meet its needs. With practice I know I will be better able to eat, drink, stretch, and move

as the body requires, however, it will only be through continuous communication born of the connection that is offered through the practice of presence.

### **Body Reconciliation.**

Roth (2010) states that “there are frozen places in ourselves-undigested pockets of pain- that need to be recognized and welcomed, so that we can contact that which has never been hurt or wounded or hungry” (pp. 7-8). Engaging in a process of reconciliation was a critical step in moving forward in creating a new healthy relationship with my body. With such an entrenched experience of alienation over so many years, the hurt that had accumulated needed to be acknowledged and as painful as it is it needed to be explored.

The process of body reconciliation that opened up as a result of practicing presence allowed me to access those ‘pockets of pain’ and unearth the healing that was contained within them. I needed to grieve the years when I did not know, at the core, that I was loveable as I was. I needed to revisit my ‘little girl self’ desperate for validation and hold her and tell her of her inherent beauty. I found that many painful memories returned to me and I could explore them and in doing so let them go.

I recalled one conversation from nearly twenty years ago that deeply hurt me at the time. It was when I was getting ready to go to off to university for the first time full of excitement and hope about the new possibilities. I was driving in a car with a member of my family enjoying a sunny day and a beautiful view a couple months before school started. My family member began, trying to be sensitive and definitely realizing the delicate nature of the subject, to tell me that on behalf of a few members of my family they were concerned about me. They wanted to encourage me to really focus on losing

weight so that I would not miss out on the college experience. I remember sitting there looking out the window, feeling completely caught off guard, with tears streaming down my face. It was as though my entire lifelong suspicion that I was not okay as I was had just been confirmed. Being able to revisit that memory in the light of presence I am able to understand that it shook me so deeply not because it came out of the blue as I had thought at the time but because it affirmed a belief that I clearly held deeply at my core. Deep down I believed that I was not okay, not enough, because of my size. In my process of body reconciliation I was able to reflect on this and many other memories of dishonoring my body and see them through the lens of clarity and compassion.

Acknowledging the losses and the pain inherent in my life long struggle with my body paved the way for a process of letting go and cleared room for a new beginning. McIver, McGartland, & O'Halloran (2009) found that the women in their study similarly reported grief experiences in their process:

There were references to the dismay at how out of touch the women felt in relation to their bodies, and sadness about the lost connection...Some described this as a period of grieving, including concern about the damage done to the body, perceived physical limitations and wasted possibilities ( p.1239).

The healing of deep-rooted food and body issues must necessarily involve a grieving process. When one finally feels what it is like to live in and love the body one cannot help but mourn the lost time. The beautiful ritualizing of grief that occurred for me though the creation of the doll (pictured in figure 3) was a powerful catalyst for the reunion with my body.

### **Embracing the body.**

Through practicing presence, I have begun to experience beauty in the totality of my body. Rather than all my focus being directed to my self-defined problem areas I regard all the parts of my body with equanimity. Practicing presence offers me an opening to truly appreciate and give due attention to my whole body: the eyes, the ears, the hands, the feet. I have built understanding and appreciation for the amazing functions they perform day in and day out. Harnessing deep gratitude for how my body serves me daily changes my relationship with my body to one of gratitude.

The process of embracing my body did not come from a conscious decision to change my thoughts about my body nor through a planned approach to view it differently. Rather, through practicing presence, I unlocked a love that I believe was there all along held by my authentic Self, waiting to be renewed. Bai & Scutt (2009) write: “When we look at the world in a state of mindfulness, it glows with a degree of radiance and vividness that is usually missing or diminished ... Awe, wonder, and gratitude fill our hearts naturally and easily when we see the world through mindfulness.” (p. 101). When I am awake in my body I regard it with this same awe and appreciation.

Chozen Bays (2009) discusses the impact of operating in a space of hostility towards our body. She writes:

We may not even be aware of our irritation or anger at our body, but the body is aware of it...we can be bathing our body continually in the negative energy of our distress. An atmosphere of love and kindness is essential if living beings, including children, pets, plants and our own bodies, are to thrive and reach their highest potential. (p. 133).

Thinking of this in relation to the constant messages of disapproval given to the body when engaged in a diet mentality, it is no wonder that sustained weight loss is so elusive. Dieting pits one against their body; enemies in a battle, whereby one is trying to conquer the body. It is only through love and fully embracing the body that one can move towards creating health within it.

A few months ago I had an experience waiting in line in a public restroom where a beautiful young woman stood at the bank of mirrors in front of the rest of the women who were waiting. She stood for a very long time staring, pulling at her outfit, turning different directions testing out different postures. There was an uncomfortable silence amongst the other women who were waiting in line. After many minutes she finally finished her dance with the mirror and left. One woman waiting expressed out loud, with a tone of clear annoyance; "Could she have looked any longer! Oh my God!". Other women joined in with low toned snickers. I wondered if their assumption was that she was looking out of vanity since she was so beautiful. I had a very different reaction. I felt my heart sink watching this young woman. The fact is that the objective reality of size or beauty is not often relevant to the inner reality of how one relates to one's body.

Her dance with the mirror reminded me of my own history with mirrors. Certainly my time at the mirror was not born of vanity but rather it came from a different place, a place of disapproval and insecurity. For as long as I can remember, if alone at a full-length mirror I would push against my hips and stomach as if to get a glimpse of how I might appear if I was smaller. This became so habitual that I was often not even consciously aware I was doing it. When I think now of the implicit messages in this behavior it is very sad, such a dishonoring of what is there, wishing my image away. It is

only through my walk in presence that I can now see my reflection in a mirror and not press myself in wishing for that smaller frame. I don't always greet the mirror positively, some old habits creep in, but I then tend to remind myself to practice presence and notice what is actually there, the image and also the judgment.

Before practicing presence my body endured a nearly constant environment of hostility. Although poor food choices and lack of exercise were the key behaviors for which I often reprimanded myself when I was ensnared in a diet mentality, these are not the most significant forms of mistreatment that my body withstood over the years. It was the emotional mistreatment: the criticism, the shame, and the hateful thoughts that my body endured that I now believe have caused the most harm. My body had been soaking in negativity for years. Early in this journey, when I first began to shift to embracing my body, even though my body was largely the same in form and stature as it has been for years, I had an intuitive sense that my body was entirely different. It has felt as though the shift to love and positivity has actually impacted my body at a cellular level.

In his work on achieving optimal health, Chopra (2000) discusses how the body is an impermanent mass, ever changing, with 98% of the atoms in the body replaced every year. He points out that fat cells fill and empty with full replacement every three weeks, the stomach lining is replaced every five days and we have completely new skin every three weeks. As such, I know that the current mass of my body has materialized under much different circumstances than the body of my past. Regardless of the number on the scale or the size selected off a retailers rack, I now know that a body that is embraced creates more vitality, power and health than one that is rejected and alienated from the Spirit residing within it.

**Connection: Strands of the Web**

Through this research process I have discovered that when I am practicing presence, I am connected. I am connected to my body, connected to my past, connected to my thoughts, emotions, the world around me, the food on my plate and most importantly what I experience as the divine Source of all. When I experience this Divine connection I can live in a way that is awake and beautiful. When I am practicing presence I experience a sense of connection to the whole universe; it is as if I have an ability to tap into the peace, joy, and wisdom of the perfect whole. I liken it to having an electrical cord for my being; when I am present I am plugged in. My body feels the vibrational energy coursing through it. My senses sharpen; sounds are clearer, colors are brighter and tastes are sweeter.

The state of presence is an unmistakable experience, and represents a distinct contrast with my usual disconnected state. Chopra (1994) has a beautiful way of describing this phenomenon of connection through presence. He writes:

If you embrace the present, and become one with it, and merge with it, you will experience a fire, a glow, a sparkle of ecstasy throbbing in every living sentient being. As you begin to experience the exultation of spirit in everything that is alive, as you become intimate with it, joy will be born within you (p.61).

The deep connection I feel with others, my surroundings and even with food when present can create an instant joy within me. I have come to believe that there is an inherent need within me for this state of connection. This state can be thought of as living out of our true divine nature.

I have learned that when I am out of alignment with my true nature; my divine essence, there is a hidden longing within me. I have tried to gratify this yearning for many years with food. I can remember many instances of being by myself, feeling very alone and eating. The paradox is that more I stuffed myself with food, the emptier I truly felt. I could not have articulated it then, but in those moments I was craving connection. To know that I was not alone, that I was worthy; the kind of knowledge that is fully experienced when I am in connection with my Spirit; my divine essence. Once we have entered into that state of connection we are united with the current of Divine energy that is in all. I propose that this explains the feeling of complete connectedness that is experienced in the present moment.

This experience of pervasive connection is described in the literature on mindfulness. It is often referred to as interdependent co-arising or *interbeing*. Weiss (2004) describes how a core feature of interbeing is the disintegration of a person's sense of isolation. He writes: "Mindfulness practice incorporates the understanding that we are not separate from each other. This awareness of oneness, of nonduality, is fundamental to true mindfulness practice (p. 190)." He uses the example of looking or talking to someone and feeling a synergy with them like you know what it is to be them. This concept of interbeing pertains to the connection that develops with other people but also to a sense of connection that arises with other living creatures, nature, inanimate objects etc. When mindfully connected to the present moment a ubiquitous sense of connection naturally emerges.

### **Connection to Others**

Due to my history with my own body I had become quite accustomed to viewing the bodies of others comparatively. Much time has been spent enviously admiring the bodies of other women. It was a much different experience than appreciation; there was a sort of darkness to those thoughts in that they always reflected back as self-criticism. Now I find myself largely in appreciation of the human body and appreciating the variety of forms in the human body. Bhante Henepola Gunaratana (2001), a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and renowned lecturer in the area of mindfulness discusses this benefit of mindfulness. He teaches that mindfulness can change not only our relationship to our body but our relationship to the bodies of others, helping us to see that fundamentally all bodies are the same. Bodies have the same functions and failings: they all grow older and eventually die, regardless if they are fat or thin. This knowledge leads to a feeling of unity with others.

Regardless of a women's size I find I am extremely appreciative when I sense that another is celebrating their own body. For example, I was recently at a wading pool with my children and noticed a large bodied woman who seemed to be very proudly wearing her bikini. She was moving very freely around the pool, splashing with her children. It seemed to me that she was completely free of self-consciousness and having a wonderful time. I felt instant joy in seeing her. I viewed her as powerful and free and it made me happy. In the past I likely would have reacted to that with harsh judgment about the social taboo I would have thought she was breaking. I likely would have stared, not out of admiration for her power but rather out disgust at her shape; a projection of my own feelings towards myself.

Fain (2011) explores the notion that the pain of our own perceived physical flaws make us seek comfort in the flaws of others. Rather than finding kinship with fellow overeaters, she says, we take refuge in unwholesome comparisons; pleased if you feel you are comparatively thinner than another and sometimes even taking satisfaction when a loved one gains weight. What I have discovered is that when I am fully awake in the present moment these types of insidious comparisons vanish. The sense of interconnectedness that is experienced creates an understanding that what is good for another is good for me and the whole. It is more than just being happy for another from a distant stance, rather it is like sharing in another's joy because their being is directly connected to our own.

The body-acceptance I gain through practicing presence results in a wider reaching embrace of acceptance for other women's bodies and a feeling of unity with other women struggling with loving their bodies. Schmidt (2004) refers to this aspect of mindfulness as the *Mirror Principle*. It is thought that through a transformed view of the self, one then begins to view the outer world differently and encounter it in a whole new way. Rather than feeling isolated in my unique experience of food and body issues I have begun to realize that I am joined by countless women of varying sizes and shapes.

The external realities of the morbidly obese woman and the anorexic woman are superficially different but I have begun to question if in fact the internal landscapes are very similar. Perhaps situations that have always appeared to be irreconcilable opposites are actually only separated by a thin wedge of distinction: a matter of measurement. The deeper hunger driving either the behavior of eating or the behavior of starving could be

the same at the core; a hunger to feel connected, to feel whole within themselves and return to their true Divine nature.

In my own story I believe my relationship with food and my body shifted primarily because of a deep love that was accessed through the practice of presence; through connection with my true essence. It is this incredible love that is what I believe to be one of the most magnificent gifts of the practice of presence. In *The Wonder of Presence*, Packer (2002) writes: “Awareness does not judge, condemn, or accept, because it has no me-ness to be defended or nurtured. In the wonder of clear seeing, me-ness is in abeyance, leaving infinite room for love.” (p. 102). Simultaneous to this experience of self-love, I experience a sense that strands of love are radiating from me out to the world when I am practicing presence. The experience calls to mind an image of an endless web of light and love encompassing everyone and everything and it is truly beautiful.

### **Increased Social Concern**

An unexpected outcome of my walk with presence was noticing how much the practice of presence has shifted the way I consider my environmental and social actions. Although it may seem that a discourse on the environmental crisis is a departure from the topic of food and body issues, the subjects are intimately interwoven. Lelwica (2010) writes: “caring for the earth and transforming our relationship to food and our bodies are intertwining, not opposing, tracks...what we eat connects us to the rest of the world” (p. 199). The powerful sense of connection that occurs when practicing presence is not only with ourselves but it also allows us to dissolve the illusory boundary around ourselves.

What results is a feeling of deep unity with all and thus stirs within us a love that compels us to protect our body, one another and the ground we stand on.

When I overeat now, I am aware of what I am doing to myself but I also have another layer of awareness and that is recognizing the overconsumption and acknowledging within me that the food I just ate was wasted energy. In his book *The Presence Process*, Brown (2005) says that the more we become present, the more we resonate with all life. He argues that harm to nature can only come from a person who is not present. This is in keeping with my own experience. When I am deeply rooted in my practice of presence I am much more conscious of the environment and how my actions are impacting the world around me. Bai and Scutt (2009) point to the concept of inter-being and how this state brought about by mindfulness can lead to regarding “the earth as continuous with one’s body” (p.102). Perhaps then, it follows that connection to the body that results from practicing presence extends to a desire to protect and defend not only our own bodies but the environment they occupy.

Think of how this desire to protect and defend extends to the issue of bariatric and plastic surgery. In both weight loss surgery and liposuction we are cutting away or removing parts of the body as a reaction to our disconnection with the body. The prevalence and growing widespread acceptance of surgery as a solution to the obesity crisis is very disheartening to me. What is required is a change in paradigm, a new way to view our bodies and our responsibility to protect them versus surgically removing parts of them. A woman who had recently undergone a procedure described the removal of part of her stomach to me as “no different than removing an ulcer”. This was a troubling comparison in that the part of the stomach that was removed was not diseased. It was a

body part simply doing its job; functioning in spite of difficult circumstances and responding to behaviors to which it is subjected (Williamson, 2010).

Lelwica (2010) writes that weight loss surgery has become common due to what she calls “the religion of thinness”. She explains that this cultural paradigm in our society is making large bodied people out to be infidels. She asks her readers to consider what other alternatives are forsaken by the wide acceptance of surgery as the solution? I wonder about what impact could it have if someone considering weight loss surgery engaged in a similar process of practicing presence and truly experienced love of body, including the love of the part of stomach they were considering cutting away?

In the same vein as the ecological crisis, the current obesity crisis and the growing business of bariatric surgery in our society can, I believe, be largely attributed to disconnection. There is a broken relationship between us and our bodies and the world we live in. We don’t see our bodies as ours to be protected; rather they are often treated as encumbrances to be manipulated and problems to be dealt with in the most expeditious way. We are largely cut off, disconnected from ourselves, each other and the world we inhabit. If we are to regain health within our own bodies and for the planet we need to connect. The practice of presence opens the door.

### **Food as a doorway to Spirit.**

When full attention is brought to eating and one enters into a state of complete presence the food itself creates an experience of Spirit. Bays (2009) describes this experience when she writes:

When something opens the channel between our heart and the holy mystery that is present in every moment of our life, then we are fed from the source of deepest truth. If this happens when we are eating, then physical food becomes spiritual food. (p. 154).

She discusses how cultivating a practice of remembering and honoring all the labors that go into bringing our food to us through mindful eating can instill a gratitude in us that allows us not to take the food for granted. She calls this “looking deeply” into the food and seeing it with the “inner eye” (p.154).

Being truly present with food can awaken a feeling of reverence about the food that had never existed prior. For example, I can have several bites of a regular sandwich, just vaguely aware of the tastes and textures, and then, as if by some magical transformative process, take one powerful mindful bite where the spirit of the food is unbridled. Then it is possible to truly taste the aliveness and connect with the different flavors and the various sensual experiences on the tongue, teeth and throat. It is not just about an enhanced sensory experience: Those mindful bites offer an enhanced spiritual experience. Mindful eating has me instantly arrive at a place of gratitude, encouraging eating only what is needed and respecting the process that it took for the food to get on the plate. This positions me as an appreciative recipient of the gift.

Just as spiritual rituals such as Catholic Eucharist and Zen Oryoki can bring us into the present moment and transform an experience of eating to an experience of connecting to Spirit (Bays, 2009) so can everyday mindful eating. What a gift it seems to be that rather than waiting for a formal ritual we can choose to have access to the Holy

several times a day through each and every bite. I am struck by the generosity within this opportunity. Mindful eating provides so much, not only each bite but each morsel within the bite: if only one crumb is experienced mindfully it opens the door for Spirit.

In my history of dieting it felt like every time I would go off plan it was an excuse to count my whole day, sometimes my whole week, as a write off. I would tell myself that I could start again 'tomorrow'. I would then engage in an overeating ritual that was spurred on by a strange combination of punishment and welcome indulgence. Dieting was always about absolutes, 'good food/bad food', or 'on diet/ off diet'. With a mindful eating approach to food there is no right or wrong, there is only noticing 'what is'. Within this there is an opportunity to mindfully notice all eating experiences. Even if a food choice was made out of unawareness and one is in the middle of eating the third cookie in a row, by just experiencing a bit of that cookie mindfully one can instantly be connected to Spirit and in that there is healing.

### **Emergence: Becoming Who We Are.**

I do not feel I have arrived at a 'healed' place in terms of my food and body issues. I also do not feel it is possible to ever be completely arrived in terms of healing. What I have learned instead is that it is a kind of unfolding, an emerging that will continue, likely for the rest of my life. This journey is a process and although I continue to practice presence on a daily basis, I still overeat, and cast occasional negative messages to my body. What is different though is, as my awareness of these behaviors grow, the incidences become less and less frequent. Learning the practice of presence is a process, a lifetime of glimpses of our true Selves and the beauty possible to us.

I now see that the struggle with food and my body has been trying to communicate something very powerful about my deeper hunger: my hunger to be whole. Presence delivers us tiny moments of wholeness. When we experience this connection to our divine essence we get a lived experience of God; a moment of heaven. The deeper craving within me is not one for food; it is a craving for peace. In misguided attempts to find peace in the past I have reached for food. I hoped that food could ease the uncomfortable emotion I was feeling, distract me from whatever situation I wanted to avoid or delay something from happening in the future. Food has never, and could never truly meet that need. Arriving in the present moment and stepping in to the body connects me to the core of my being; my Divine essence, and this brings about the peace that is craved.

Within Buddhism it is thought that it is our fundamental work as human beings to recognize and uncover our Buddha-nature, our true nature that is our essence (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997). I believe it is the pain of being separated from our true nature, even if we do not know what it is we are separated from, that drives many of us toward overeating. Weiss (2004) says that by becoming present we can uncover the spirit that has always been there and become more and more ourselves. I have realized that practicing presence aligns me, for even just a second, with that Divine essence within. Sometimes I catch myself being petty or judgmental towards another and I will call myself back to the present moment and connect. When I do the false stories fall away, the ego dissolves and what is felt is truth. In these beautiful moments, I feel peace.

Presence instantly returns one to who one actually is. As babies we are completely present and awake but our essence, our truth becomes obscured over time by layers of

life experience that have told us we are something other than what we are. In my own struggle with my body I have piled up layers upon layers of disappointments, shame, comparisons, wishing, searching, grasping; each one further concealing the impeccable truth from myself; that I am already completely whole, at any size. Almaas (2008) writes “In the practice of being where we are, it becomes clear that to be ourselves, to be real, we need to be in the present moment (p. 161). Experiencing our wholeness is a matter of connecting with the wisdom that exists at our core, only accessible in the present moment.

For so long I thought the struggle with food and my body were barriers to my spiritual development, annoying nuances of the mind that kept me from higher pursuits. Turns out they have been pivotal catalysts in my own process of awakening. *In Return to Love*, Marianne Williamson (1992) writes:

When Michelangelo was asked how he created a piece of sculpture, he answered that the statue already existed within the marble. God himself had created the Pieta, David, Moses. Michelangelo’s job, as he saw it, was to get rid of the excess marble that surrounded God’s creation. So it is with you. The perfect you isn’t something you need to create, because God already created it. The perfect you is the love within you. (p. 27-28).

The image of the statue in the rock has called to me ever since I first read about it when I was a youth. For years I have believed that the ‘perfect you’ or our Divine Self was there waiting to emerge but I also believed that the chiseling of the rock was a lifelong process and reaching the ‘perfect you’ was a far off goal to aspire to. It is only through this journey of reclaiming my relationship with my body and with food through the practice

of presence that I realize that the Divine Self is not a distant future hope rather it is constantly accessible when we fully enter the present moment.

Rather than hardened stone that we need to work at chipping away I now see it more like a marble blanket I wear. When I practice presence the blanket slips off, if even ever so briefly. What is revealed to me is my Divine essence; my true Self. In these moments I more naturally act in alignment with my whole self: body, mind, spirit. I am not burdened with preoccupation about my body or constant judgments about myself and others. I am able to experience life joyfully and peacefully.

Experiencing the freedom that God intends for me is much less complicated than I once thought. It is a matter of simply awakening to it, and this freedom is attainable each and every moment when I choose it. Chopra (1994) calls us all “divinity in disguise”. He says that “we will remain unfulfilled unless we nurture the seeds of divinity inside us.” (p.3). Presence offers an opportunity for us to be who we most authentically are (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997) and then the divinity within emerges.

### **Transformed experience of eating**

Practicing presence has profound effects on my eating behavior. When I am awake to my body I naturally choose foods that are better for it, eat smaller portions, overeat less often and enjoy food much more than at any time in the past. The experience of being overly full is a lot less frequent in my life now and when it does occur it feels extremely *loud* within my body. I take notice and gently remind myself that this way of eating is not in alignment with my body’s wisdom. Mindful eating research participants report similar noticeable changes in terms of reduced quantity of food consumed, slowed

speed of eating, healthier food choices and new experiences such as leaving food on the plate. Participants reported feeling a new sense of calm where food was concerned (McIver, McGartland, & O'Halloran, 2009). It is interesting to consider how it is that mindfulness can have this type of impact on these kinds of ingrained eating habits.

When we practice presence our bodies are more awake than in our usual state. We develop a meta-awareness that notices everything and is highly in tune with our body's needs. This creates a new capacity in us to check in with our bodies through the eating process and continually assess whether or not we have satisfied our hunger. For me this was a very new way of determining when to stop eating. Typically, I had been in the habit of cleaning my plate, the empty plate was my cue to stop eating rather than the actual requirements of my body. By paying attention to how the body feels one can begin to adjust to more appropriate portions (Kessler, 2009).

I realize now that my history with food was dominated by a sense of lack. I often felt concern that I would not get my needs met; a low grade anxiety that there would not be enough. This led to never allowing myself to feel the sensation of hunger, eating to stave off a future possibility of hunger versus an actual occurring hunger. It also led to consistently choosing larger portions than my body required. Mindfulness eases the feelings of anxiety about scarcity. I realized that I could be present to the experience of hunger and notice the sensation without being afraid of it. Hunger is now seen as one piece of information about my body. I also more readily see abundance on my plate; noticing what is there in front of me rather than being concerned about how I will feel after the last bite.

I firmly believe that one could sustain a healthy weight through maintaining the eating behaviors that the practice of presence offers. However the difficulty with practicing presence, similarly to dieting, is maintaining the resolve and the moment by moment commitment to engage in the present moment. While the challenge is perhaps as difficult as a diet, the stark difference is the kindness and empowerment it offers. A further difference is the incredible instantaneous pay off. With presence the rewards are in the experience itself; not through waiting for particular numbers to appear on a scale. Transformation is not just about a before and after photo as it is in a diet; transformation is available moment to moment.

I have begun to crave that instant gratification that meditation and mindfulness bring. However, I am aware that it is important to monitor for signs of turning mindfulness into another obsession. I have recently caught myself in the act of obsessing about practicing presence in relation to food and the body. I found myself judging myself for not maintaining mindful eating practices as I would like to and getting caught up in a comparison with other people who seemed to be more adept at integrating meditation into their daily life. I had slipped into the familiar frameworks of shame, non-acceptance and self-criticism.

Another example can be food charting (recording everything consumed in a day). Although I personally do not do this, it can be used in mindfulness practice to build awareness but it has also been used as diet practice. In my experience this often resulted in self-punitive thoughts about how I had failed in my eating. I can see how if I were to adopt this practice as an awareness exercise that it could easily slip into an exercise in judgment. It seems what distinguishes a healthy practice from something more

destructive is the degree of true presence that is maintained. One needs to practice assessing if the quality of their experience is illuminated, embodied, connected and if their divine Self is emerging or if one begins to feel a familiar shame and sense of failure, like what accompanies dieting.

One of Roth's (2009) eating principles is to "eat what your body wants" (p.211). This is interpreted by fellow readers as eating what food is being craved when there is a feeling of physical hunger. However, the interpretation can be extended to encompass the wants of other parts of the body. The eyes, mouth, and mind is part of the body, so eating 'what your body wants' can mean honoring those other types of hunger when fully present to it. This notion may be frightening to a chronic dieter who may view this as permission to let the flood gates open and overeating pandemonium to ensue. However, perhaps the disallowance of those desires puts us more at risk for overeating. The consciousness that is delivered through the practice of presence allows one to be aware of why they want to eat and acknowledge and respond to that part of the body. If mindfulness is maintained they will continue to listen to the body and balance the needs of the whole body so that they do not overindulge.

Living with this eating philosophy, for example, allows for finishing a meal, having a satisfied stomach and still deciding to have some bites of dessert based on one of Bay's (2009) other types of hunger and be totally at peace with that decision and in full integrity with the body. In this case, one is conscious that one is doing so not for the anatomic needs for those nutrients but rather simply because they want to experience the beauty of the flavors (mouth hunger), appreciate the artistry of the baker (eye hunger) or participate in the social tradition of dessert with loved ones (heart hunger) etc. This sort

of conscious allowance is empowering because the decision to eat is not about a breach of willpower; it is about mindfully, in full awareness honoring a different part of the body.

Roth (2010) asks women to give themselves permission to enjoy the experience of eating. “Eat with gusto!” she decrees. Eating mindfully and becoming aware of when shame is building empowers one to reclaim the eating experience and transform it into the pleasurable, joyful experience it is for people with healthy relationships with food.

I have found great joy now in eating simply for pleasure. In the past I would have regarded it as “being bad” or “cheating on my diet” there would have been a superficial pleasure in the permission but it would have been underscored by guilt and disgust in my behavior. Through this new approach to food and eating I experience the sensual pleasure of eating and for example, savor the delicious sight, smell and taste of an almond croissant. Someone recently asked me “how do you deal with temptations, don’t you want to have a second or third?” I realized that by not seeing food as ‘allowable’ or not, the concept of temptation falls away. When I am practicing presence I do not sense an inner conflict between the polarities of ‘good girl/bad girl’.

It has been interesting to observe my children’s eating patterns in light of my interest in mindful eating. When left to their own devices they naturally eat when they are hungry, have no interest in food when they are not and seem to be listening to their body in terms of balancing their nutrients based on their daily needs. One day my son will ask for protein rich foods, another day it is calcium rich food etc. I will put a variety of foods on my daughters high chair tray and every day she selects differently based on what her body needs in that moment. It seems we are born with the skills to eat mindfully.

Hirschman and Zaphiropoulos (1993) encourage parents to prevent eating problems by learning to trust in their children's innate wisdom regarding regulating their diet. They teach parents how not to dictate the menu or time of the day the child eats. They tell parents to follow the lead of their children by asking and responding to, 'are you hungry?', 'what do you want to eat?' and 'have you had enough?' This approach supports children in maintaining their connection to their bodies. Therefore the changed eating behaviors that result from practicing presence are not a matter of learning completely new ways of being with food rather they are a return to a more natural way of eating that may feel foreign due to years of alienation from them.

### **Transformed experiences of my body.**

The body is the only way I experience everything that makes me feel alive and whole, it is the only way I can access my very spirituality. We cannot practice presence without being in the body. Therefore what at one time seemed to be at opposite ends of the spectrum now seem to be married: what is physical is spiritual and what is spiritual is experienced through the physical. Hanh and Cheung (2010) write: "We must treasure everything that belongs to the body and not despise it. It is our very vehicle for awakening. We can find all aspects of the path to enlightenment in our own body."(p. 76). For so long I could not reconcile the relationship between my body image issues and my quest for spiritual growth. I felt that my grievances about my body were like superficial pests that prevented me from utilizing that energy for spiritual development. Contrary to this old belief, my journey with my body has provided an incredible spiritual opening. It is only when the body is viewed as the most important aspect of one's being

or a defining aspect of ones being that it takes them further from discovering who they really are.

I now take great joy in the experience of my body. Now when I am consciously moving through exercise, I see it as an opportunity to let my body have full expression and exaggerated movement that is not often available through the course of a normal day's activities. I have recently discovered that yoga can be a very powerful mechanism for experiencing my body. In my youth yoga, like many activities I blocked myself from for fear that I was too heavy and uncoordinated, seemed impossible for me. Then about twelve years ago in a phase of desperation I tried 'hot yoga' for weight loss. During every class my mind oscillated between criticizing my lack of technique, fantasizing about getting a body like the flexible women in front of me, calculating the calories I was burning or planning for something going on in my life that had nothing to do with yoga. I was there, but I was not at all present. My commitment to practicing presence has me now see that when we choose to be in our body, willingly and purposefully it can truly become a beautiful moving meditation. By bringing all of my attention to the sensations in my body during yoga I release my mental notions of what my body 'should' be able to do and instead am able to celebrate my body.

By becoming connected to and present within my body I have enjoyed it far more than times in my life when I had attained my coveted 'thinner' version of my body. Being smaller did not result in experiencing more joy in my body. This demonstrates how there is not an externally measurable truth in what is an acceptable size for the body. The standard measure in our medical model is the Body Mass Index (BMI) but that measure is under criticism in terms of its relevance to actual health outcomes (Lelwica, 2010).

Linda Bacon the author and founder of the Health at Every Size movement (2010), is very critical of the focus on obesity as a health crisis. She says that the focus on weight undermines the very nature of the challenge and encourages readers to take a critical view of how body weight has been positioned as synonymous with health. She rightly points out how size does not paint a picture of what is internally going on in organs and inner structures of the body.

The issue I see with the BMI is that it is an externally imposed goal for our bodies. Health can only be known within the body itself. Attaining that externally set height/ weight ratio says nothing about the actual physical or mental health of the individual. I am the only expert there will ever be on the subject of my own body. Factual information about nutrition has had its place in helping guide my eating decisions but my struggle against my body is not from a lack of knowledge. It is through listening to industry experts in the past that I had been afraid to eat something as natural and full of goodness as bananas and avocados due to glycemic index and fatty oils. My history of being ensnared with externally imposed diet and fitness regimes reinforced separation from my body. When we diet we ignore or override our body's cues for the sake of following a plan or a piece of expert advice. How many mornings did I force myself to eat breakfast when not hungry because I feared gaining weight if I did not activate my metabolism? It is only through practicing presence that I now realize that I do not get hungry until a few hours after I awaken. Eating breakfast simply because I 'should' is acting out of alignment with my own particular body wisdom. When we are disconnected from our body we cannot serve it. When we practice presence we can honor its wisdom. We hear its continuous whispers to us; we are listening.

I firmly believe that taking true joy in my body and becoming alive within it has more of a chance at improving my health outcomes than simply attaining a goal weight set by an external measure. I have learned that the amount I weigh has nothing to do with the amount of acceptance I should be willing to afford my body. Through this process, my body is changing and I believe it is emerging into its own natural size, what Bacon (2010) would call its 'set point', the place it naturally functions optimally. I am not willing to predetermine what that size should be based on a BMI chart or a long held fantasy about what number would bring me joy. Through the peaceful relationship I am forging with my body and with food, I know intuitively that I am heading in that direction. I believe that my intuition and how I feel in my body will guide me to know when I am there.

### **Empowerment**

There is power in realizing that once you deeply know something that knowledge cannot be undone. Once someone is practiced in mindful eating they are then equipped with the power of that knowledge and even when they unconsciously or consciously decide to act in contrary ways they can always choose to return. Dr. Albers (2003) encourages people to embrace the mindless eating episodes as they happen. She challenges her readers to see them as reminders to reconnect. Albers quotes Buddha who says "If we are facing in the right direction, all we have to do is keep on walking" (p.151). Through the practice of presence I have been empowered to realize that I can trust myself, that when I am connected I will always tap into a deeper wisdom that will steer me towards 'the right direction'.

Practicing presence dissolved the shame that existed for so many years about the size of the body but also about having a history of struggle with weight. For so much of my life I felt deeply flawed that I could not ‘get a handle’ on this issue. Now through this journey, I see the experience for what it is; an important teacher, not only for myself but also for others. In addition to this research, I have also begun speaking and blogging about my experience in the hope that the story of my journey could guide others back to their own body. When I am speaking about this journey to a group I feel the normal nervousness of a public speaker but I do not feel anxious about whether or not I will be judged about my history. The power of presence is that in the stripping away of judgments we are able to welcome all truth.

The participants in the McIver, McGartland, and O’Halloran (2009) yoga and mindfulness study also described a lessening of shame associated with their body. The authors characterized one of the major shifts that the participants noticed in their relationship with their bodies as the ‘empowered body’. That certainly aptly describes how I experience my body now. It feels empowered and free.

I learned to abdicate food choices, first to my parents as a young child and then, not too long following, to the rules of diet experts. It is empowering to know that I have the answer; my own body knows how to act in its own best interest if I let it lead me there. Practicing presence has taught me that my body can be trusted. When I am present, I am conscious and therefore not acting out of my conditioned patterns of the past (Tolle, 1999) but rather out of the truth of my being.

When one becomes mindful in relation to one’s body they can look at the body and see what was actually there. They see arms, legs, back, torso, feet. They can describe

shape, dimension, curve, ridges and dimples. It is freeing to realize that one could look at the body and see what is actually there versus usual patterns of seeing ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘fat’, ‘ugly’, ‘undesirable’, ‘pretty’, ‘disgusting’, ‘old’. These judgments only exist in the realm of thoughts; they do not actually exist in the present moment. It is the thinker of the thought, who brings these judgments to life. They depend on them for their survival. The power to make all these painful judgments about the body vanish rests in the present moment. Packer (2002) writes:

In simple presence with what is here right now, be it joyful or painful, an amazing freedom reveals itself...the freedom to be totally, effortlessly the way things are at this moment. (p.96)

Perhaps this is what empowerment is: aligning with the moment; being at peace with *what is*.

### **Deep Insight**

I now know that my weight did not rob me of peace. It was my thoughts about my weight, my obsessions about being somewhere other than where I was that keep me from experiencing peace. Brahm (2006) writes: “Insight is common, deep insight is rare, insight is comforting; deep insight is challenging, sometimes terrifying. Insight makes little impression on one’s character; deep insight changes one’s life.” (p.173). It is through deep insight, that I have the recognition that the weight itself has caused me little problems in life; it is the meaning I have given to it, the story I have told myself about being overweight that has been at the root of all the needless suffering.

In discussing these insights with a dear friend she reminded me of a motto within Narrative Therapy that states “the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem”.

What this process revealed is that usually the problem is not even the problem. It is the thoughts we choose to think or the beliefs we choose to believe about the ‘problem’ that are the problem.

Eckhart Tolle (1999) invites his students whom may be troubled about something to just simply ask themselves ‘What problem do I have now, in this moment?’ For example, I recently had a dilemma and spent the better part of a day ruminating about what to do and played all kinds of scenarios out in my mind. I spent that day completely out of connection with my experience. I had been with my children at the park and missed all kinds of beautiful opportunities to enjoy them and my surroundings. My stomach was in knots but if I had asked myself to truly describe my problem with that moment I would have realized that I was outside at a park with my children with no immediate problem. My problem was only alive in the realm of my thoughts. Had I been mindfully present I would have quickly seen there was no problem at all in that moment.

The practice of presence offers the peace that I was chasing in the comfort of emotional eating or in the hopefulness of the new diet plan. Levey and Levey (2006) write: “The more profound the insight, the more transformative its power” (p. 120). My deep insight helped me to realize, early in this process, before the eventual weight loss that ensued, that if I never changed size or shape it would not matter as long as I could free myself of the obsession and live in a way that was more awake and alive in the present moment. Presence has been the vehicle for healing the relationship with the body but presence is achieved through connection with the body so accessing the experience of presence itself is reason enough to work towards healing that relationship.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

*Women turn to food when they are not hungry because they are hungry for something they can't name: a connection to what is beyond the concerns of daily life... We have become obsessed with getting rid of our obsession... But fixing ourselves is not the same as being ourselves... The relentless attempts to be thin takes you further and further away from what could actually end your suffering: getting back in touch with who you really are. Your true nature. Your essence. (Geneen Roth, 2010, pp. 32-33).*

Through this research endeavor I have come to have visceral knowledge of what it means 'to be hungry for something we cannot name'. I now understand the difference between merely living and living awake through the practice of presence. I have discovered that practicing presence has a miraculous quality. It instantly transforms an ordinary experience into one that is Divine. When I practice presence I can feel the pulsing of my blood and the tingling of my hands; to see vibrant colors and feel a range of emotion fluttering through my being. Presence reveals the life force that I believe is very much in, around and behind all of us and it connects me to all that exists. Learning to come into and fully participate in the present moment is a process of calling my whole being forward to emerge as who I most authentically am.

I believe that the deepest craving in all of us is for Peace. This is the kind of peace that comes from being *home*, living as our true Selves, acting in alignment with our Divine essence. When we are out of alignment with ourselves, even in the slightest way, we suffer. This suffering can take the form of even a subtle feeling of discontentment. I believe that we are not truly, fully at peace unless we are connected to Source. We long

for this reunion but often do not know what it is that we are longing for. To alleviate the craving we sometimes take misguided turns into the arms of drugs, alcohol, material belongings, beauty, overwork and for some of us, into the arms of food.

In exploring the question, ‘What is the experience of healing food and body issues through presence?’ I have learned that presence offers me what I truly need. If even for a split second, I am fully awake and connected to the Divine power within me and within all. There is an incredible stillness and calm in being able to simply *be* without judgment, without interpretation. One can then meet one’s body and one’s emotions where they are at. This clear seeing paves the way for important insights to guide us on our paths. One can feel the full experience of the body, sensing its vibrancy and power and embracing the life force it offers. When present we are in full connection with all. We see ourselves as seamless threads in the continuity of life. An enormous love is revealed within, for self, for other and for the world we inhabit. Practicing presence gives a glimpse of our True Nature, and it is intoxicating. The harmony in this experience of total connection instantly quiets the dis-ease within and lures us forward to act in ways that are in alignment with our beings, to emerge as the most whole version of ourselves.

So much pain has been caused by all the years of not being home in my body. Every moment I have spent obsessing over losing weight and feeling like I was not enough because of the size of my being are precious moments where the joy and peace available to me escaped my grasp.

One of the greatest gifts of this experience is the knowledge that it is far more important to lose the story I have told myself about my weight than the weight itself. That

when I wake up and truly embrace the present moment from within the body, whatever size it may be at the time, I have an instant opportunity for grace.

### **Applications for Clinical Practice**

Increasingly food and body issues are at the forefront of what brings clients to therapy. With obesity ever on the rise there is much attention given to behavior change strategies. However, perhaps it is helpful to conceptualize overeating in a new way. Here it is presented as a symptom to a problem of a spiritual nature. The symptom is overeating but at the heart of the matter is disconnection. What I have discovered was that my overeating was a result of being out of alignment with what I refer to as my authentic Self; when I am removed from my sense of wholeness.

Rather than just an approach to a single problem this way of conceptualizing the practice of presence can be regarded as a philosophical approach guiding how one works in therapy. A therapeutic framework could be built around recognizing that many psychosocial problems result from disconnection to one's True Nature; Divine Self. A therapeutic intervention could be to help one to cultivate a practice of presence as a means of connecting to their authentic Self. The practice of presence is truly universal in that it simply has to do with our capacity to wake up and, from within the present moment, understand what we need to do to be aligned within our being. In this research I have looked at the impact on food and body issues but these concepts could apply to many other problems.

On a broader scale, I feel there is a synergy between what I have discovered in this research and the issues of overeating and body acceptance to what is happening with the current environmental as well as economic crisis. Hahn and Cheung (2010) propose

that the principles of mindfulness can be taught broadly as a sort of ‘peace education’ and that there would then be potential for global healing. I believe we are being called to look at what is causing us to destroy our bodies, our planet and to endlessly seek happiness through materialism.

If the therapist holds the belief that the power to heal lies in the present moment, they can use the therapeutic encounter to assist and challenge clients to enter the moment. There are opportunities to cultivate experiences of presence in the counseling room both through our enduring commitment to being present with the client and through guided exercises. Gestalt, Existential and body oriented therapies such as Focusing, as examples, have a myriad of techniques designed to draw clients into the now.

However as mentioned earlier in this thesis, I do not feel the practice of presence is something that can be understood second hand. The true power of presence is not something we will ever be able to teach our clients. It is something they must uncover for themselves. We can however offer the therapeutic encounter as an opportunity to invite the client to notice the moment. The safety of the therapeutic container may provide an ideal opportunity for someone who is ready to risk really feeling some of the more difficult emotions through presence.

I believe we are all challenged in unique ways from living in the fullest expression of ourselves. For me, it has been primarily through my food and body weight struggles, for another it might be through battles with chronic anxiety, addiction, bullying or perfectionism. No one can be told what it is for them. They must discover, for themselves, their own powerful teacher. However, once they have uncovered what it is that is holding them back, and then perhaps the therapeutic encounter can be one

potential space to practice the process of returning and experiencing alignment with their authentic Self.

I believe one of the most significant ways a therapist can support someone on a journey to practice presence is through committing to become more present within one's own life, including one's clinical practice. I believe we are all inextricably connected, as such, each of us can assist in calling another's Divine wisdom forward but only when we ourselves are present.

### **Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The nature of heuristic research is not to establish a cause and effect relationship but rather to illuminate the nature and meaning of an experience from the direct perspective of one who has encountered the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). To the extent that the aim of my study was to understand my own individual experience with the practice of presence, it was effective at providing an in depth analysis. However, I am but one person. In future research it would be interesting to understand if the journey that I outline, in terms of the four processes of illumination, embodiment, connection and emergence would unfold for another walking a similar path with presence and their food and body issues.

I have experienced presence to be an incredibly powerful positive experience and I wonder if others would concur that it is such a transformative experience? Personal characteristics and life experiences undoubtedly impact one's perceptions of their encounters with the practice of presence. It could be that I am a person who has a natural tendency to live in a more distracted way than others. Perhaps I lean more towards daydreaming, ruminating, analyzing etc. and for someone who more naturally exists

firmly in the present moment they would not experience the kinds of dramatic results that I did. It would be interesting to see how personality and demographic characteristics impact the experience, looking at how culture impacts the experience. I approached this research as one from an individualistic culture which has shaped both my understanding and my experience of the practice of presence. Perhaps the next step in furthering this research would be a study involving co-researchers, to assess if other people have similar outcomes and comparing the various experiences.

Another study limitation was that the designated research period was limited to an eight week timeframe under observation. By no means was my walk in presence confined to that period. I am, in fact, still making daily observations about how the practice of presence impacts not only my relationship with food and my body but actually every aspect of my existence. I wonder if the processes and themes that I articulated would have changed if had I analyzed a longer timeframe. Future research on this topic could involve a mixed quantitative and qualitative study assessing the impact of the practice of presence on food and body issues over a longer term and measuring changes in behavior, looking at variables such as changes in caloric intake, or in body dimensions over time etc.

A further study limitation has to do with the difficulty of attributing what part of my process achieved the results noticed. In my research there were many different practices employed to assist me in becoming more present: mindfulness, sitting meditation, mindful eating, journaling, art making etc. Collectively these practices brought about a period of enhanced presence in regard to my food and body issues. There is no way to separate the various practices when considering the results, therefore it is not

possible within this study to know if one of those practices specifically contributed to the observed results more than another. For the sake of developing interventions and programming on this topic it would be interesting to have research that assesses the relative impact of the various practices.

In this thesis I have put forth a hypothesis that overeating is often a search for wholeness. I have also suggested that other problem behaviors may be of a similar nature. I propose in this research that presence has a positive effect on overeating because it offers the peace that is erroneously craved elsewhere. Future research could seek to explore how generalizable these findings are to others dealing with this issue or with other behaviors that are problematic to an individual. For example it may be interesting to conduct a study to explore the relationship between the practice of presence and problem gambling, compulsive shopping, pornography addiction etc.

Another area of interest for future study would be to see how these practices impact the child and youth population. There is current widespread concern about the rise of obesity amongst this group. I speculate that children would be a more receptive population to exploring how the practice of presence could impact overeating behaviors. Children have had less experience ignoring their innate skills and knowledge of how to eat according to their body's needs.

Lastly I would like to suggest an interesting research application in looking at how the practices employed in this study could help other populations reestablish a connection with their body. Populations who have perhaps dissociated from their bodies due to painful experiences from the past such as sexual abuse, critical illness or other forms of body related trauma. This process for me was one of reconnecting to my body. I

believe that it was through this reconnection and reconciliation that peace with my body was returned to me. It would be interesting to explore how a similar process of reclaiming relationship with the body could help others who have distanced themselves from their own bodies as a result of issues other than body weight.

### **Concluding Comments**

This has been a journey of returning. Practicing presence has not taken me into new territory, it has returned me home. I have come to see that my lifelong alienation from my own body, tendency towards overeating and obsessive relationship with dieting have been pivotal teachers in my own personal course in awakening. They have taught me how to come home to my own Divine nature; my true Self. Perhaps this is what Geneen Roth meant when she chose the subtitle for her book (2010) *Women, Food and God, an unexpected path to almost everything*. This has certainly been an unexpected path for me. I could never have imagined that my food and body issues were going to lead me right into the arms of the Divine but they have.

Each time we reach for food when we are not hungry it is a reminder that we are lost and need to return home. We need to arrive in the body, become present, see clearly what is going on within. We can then connect with Spirit within and in all and breathe. When we do, we no longer crave food, nor do we feel distant from the body. In those moments we are whole. When we truly arrive in the present moment we realize that we actually already have the very thing we are craving.

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