



SOULFUL LIVING

by Louisa Latela, MSW, LCSW

finding her voice

I am excited to share with you the story of yet another amazing woman. Sophia, who through her recovery from obesity and compulsive eating has learned to honor and speak her truth. She graciously offers the story of what she describes as her journey to finding the voice she lost in childhood and being visible to the world in a way that feels safe.

“I remember myself as a skinny girl with long brown hair, big blue eyes, and a passion for language and words. I loved school. I loved doing my homework. I wrote stories that got attention and praise from the teachers. At the same time I felt highly responsible and concerned that I ‘take care of things.’ I worried about being able to understand and complete everything that was assigned to me. I worried that if my parents fought or my siblings were in trouble, it was my job to find a way for all of us to be okay. Those who have helped me along my journey to adulthood have taught me that a lot of my over-responsibility is probably a result of the incest I experienced at the hands of my paternal grandfather when a young child.”

Sophia was molested by her grandfather during her early childhood. When she finally summoned the courage to tell her parents about the incest she remembers feeling frightened by the huge drama it created in her family. Her parents were outraged at what happened to her, and made it clear that it wouldn't happen again. But, Sophia felt responsible for having been the source of chaos and turmoil for those she loved, and didn't like knowing that speaking her truth made people unhappy. She also felt guilt about revealing this awful secret. Being the bright intuitive girl that she was, Sophia came to the conclusion that it was not safe to allow her voice, the voice of her soul that is, to be heard. If she kept silent, handled things on her own, found ways to be perfect, or worried enough, she could keep bad things from happening to her again, or to the people she loved. And that worked for a while.

However, one cannot keep the voice of one's soul silent for an extended period of time without experiencing significant emotional discomfort. In order to soothe that discomfort, one must either decide to speak her truth, or find a way to distract herself from the continued discomfort. Sophia chose the latter and found that food served the purpose well.

“In junior high I became aware that I didn't want to stop eating. One night while babysitting for a family friend, I discovered a package of Oreos. I had been told I could help myself to food. For the first time I sensed an intense feeling of pleasure eating the cookies, and a simultaneous intellectual realization that I could not stop eating. I made enough of a dent in the package that the couple for whom I was babysitting mentioned it to my parents—to my intense shame. I made a vow that night never to let that happen again. As it turned out, it was the first of many thousands of promises I would make to myself over the years to reduce my anxiety over my eating behavior.”

Sophia started dieting in high school. Over the years, she tried most all the popular diet plans and programs including Overeaters Anonymous (OA). While she did not keep off the weight she lost during her OA years, she learned the value of sharing and receiving support. It was in the OA rooms that she started to risk talking and being heard. She found comfort in knowing that she was not alone.

Sophia was in her mid twenties when she realized that neither losing weight nor eating sweets would resolve the issues related to her high levels of anxiety, feelings of depression,

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and childhood incest. It was then that she started therapy and stopped yo-yo dieting. Her weight leveled out in the 240 pound range.

“I was grateful to work with therapists who encouraged me to speak my piece rather than try to tell me what I should know or do. I did not allow my therapists to focus on my eating or weight. I wasn't prepared to let the light of love or acceptance into that area of my heart. I was too afraid that somehow my crutch would be taken away if I talked about it. I needed to know that they cared for my well-being even when I was fat and sweaty from climbing the stairs, and just unwilling to take any steps to be different. I slowly resolved or reduced major issues that had plagued me for years. I noticed that I was happier. I was talking! My voice was being heard and more importantly, I was believing what I said to myself! I was investing in myself in ways I never had before.”

One of the greatest gifts of her therapy is that Sophia could no longer silence her truth without suffering. So, at the age of 45 and weighing 285 pounds, she followed the promptings of her intuition to explore the possibility of weight loss surgery, an option she had previously forbidden herself to consider. This time her motivation to lose weight came from a desire to self-nurture versus her need to please others. She felt confident in her commitment to make the lifestyle changes that long-term weight loss would require, understanding that surgery was only a tool and not a cure for obesity. Equipped with the coping skills and support system she had developed over the years while learning to love herself, in October of 2007 Sophia had gastric bypass surgery. Since then, she has lost 100 pounds.

“The feeling of beauty and energy that filled me as I lost the pounds allowed me to come out into the sunlight. I am singing again, writing, riding my bike, even allowing men to notice me. There is much more laughter in my life now, and peace. Even as I confront the fact that in order to keep the weight off I have to stay in tune with myself, my torment is less. I still constantly plan to begin a new diet every Monday, but I can laugh at myself now, and say, gently, yeah, right, that'll happen.

“I have learned as much as possible that my life will be better if I can say how I feel, as soon as I'm aware of it, to the appropriate person. It doesn't have to be lengthy or detailed. Just, 'I'm really uncomfortable right now. Wow, I just got incredibly

anxious. I am not at all sure what to say right now to that. Wait, I don't understand.' When I'm able to stay in the moment and talk, I don't have to stand alone at the buffet all night because I'm uncomfortable meeting new people. I don't have to hold in my temper and fear to such an extent that all I can think about is going through the drive-thru. And the sooner I speak, the less damage I'll end up inflicting on myself later.

“These days, I have a few basic things I do to continue to allow my authentic self to blossom:

“I seek help for my eating and weight issues primarily through positive support groups that focus on recovering from weight issues and reclaiming power over food. If I find that this new source of *help* feels punitive or overly focused on dieting, or even boring, I stop. I read spiritual books, and poetry that engages my brain and my emotions.

“I say *yes* to relationships. I know when I am depressed or not seeking my highest good. I close myself off from people because they are *too much work*. Now, whenever possible, I say yes to invitations to get to know new people in new settings. I know this goal will challenge me in uncomfortable ways, because it means I have to focus on such things as what I will wear; how I will handle the food involved; and how I will cope with my social anxiety. It also has a huge potential to fill me with joy. So I say yes.

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The fact that Sophia freely shares her story today is more powerful proof than her story itself. It is possible to relinquish your attachment to food in favor of stepping into your Truth, allowing your light to shine, and confidently relaxing into the magnificent being that you truly are! ●



about louisa...

Louisa Latela is a psychotherapist in Haddonfield, NJ She is a My Self Design Program Provider, offers individual and group counseling, and facilitates Telephone-Support groups. Her new e-workbook “Live your Highest Good: Make Peace with your Body and Weight” is due to be released this spring. If you have any questions or comments, or would like to share your experience of living soulfully as it relates to your relationship with food Louisa would love to hear from you: call 856.429.9799, or email: louisa@louisalatela.com. www.louisalatela.com