

INTRODUCTION



Like most small children, I must have begun life's journey with an amazing self-image. As a toddler I would climb out of the bathtub, gleefully pat my chubby little thighs, and delightedly chant, "I fatty! I fatty!" My sunny, two-year-old perspective was joyfully untainted and completely self-accepting.

But time marches on, and even in the best of circumstances clouds inevitably cross our paths, weaving shadows into the glorious rays of innocent sunshine. Those shadows can increasingly obscure our vision until we eventually lose sight of who we are. I'm not sure exactly when I first became vulnerable to the influence of those shadows, but at a young age I began chasing the enticing promises of perfectionism, and my life soon became entangled in guilt, fear, anxiety, and shame.

By the time I reached my eighteenth birthday, my self-image had suffered a devastating transformation. On that landmark day I again stood in the bathroom, but this time I was retching over the toilet, secretly trying to throw up every morsel of birthday cake I had just eaten. Though driven by the obsession to acquire a perfectly "skinny" body, I didn't know exactly how skinny I needed to be. All I knew was that I wasn't skinny *enough*. My life

was consumed by the urge to hasten toward that nebulous goal because I was convinced that when I reached it, my problems would disappear and I would have everything I wanted.

For seven agonizing years, I lived with my head literally in the toilet. Since eating disorders hadn't yet become a topic of public discussion, I knew of no label for the compulsive behavior that had taken over my life. What I did know was the despair of constant failure as I desperately struggled to escape the grasp of this seemingly invincible monster.

By the time words like anorexia, bulimia, bingeing, and purging had become common in the media, I had been free of my eating disorder for over a decade. My body had stabilized at a comfortable weight and I was the mother of six young children. Unfortunately, the happy life I was seeking still eluded me. Oblivious of the real pathway to happiness, the shadowy illusions of perfectionism continued to rule my world, stealing much of the joy from my parenting and my marriage.

Through the years our children enriched my life beyond measure and we shared many happy times together, but my hunger for an enduring sense of peace and happiness remained unsatisfied. My conflict mostly stemmed from the fear that I wasn't good enough, that my family wasn't good enough, and that we would never be able to measure up to what I felt were God's demands for perfection.

I held the belief—although I would never have admitted it—that if I could somehow make myself good enough, I would be able to control myself, my family, and even the circumstances of our lives so that everything would “turn out right.” Only then would I be able to experience the happiness I craved.

Eventually, a huge, menacing cloud covered my path, hovering ominously above me until every tiny ray of sunshine disappeared. Overwhelmed by its shadow, I gave up all hope of ever being happy. During that bleak period, I wished God would let me die and end my miserable journey. Instead, He taught me how to see His divine light shining through the threatening clouds and manage the perfectionism which had dominated my life for far too long. He helped me receive the simple yet powerful gifts that would heal my heart and lead me to a joyful life—the kind of life He desires for all His children.

When I look back on my journey, I sincerely rejoice even though my wanderings took me through dark and difficult terrain. Unexpected twists and turns challenged the very core of my being, but they ultimately led me to a beautiful new understanding of God. He truly does want His children to have joy in this life. Indeed, He wants us to have joy in this very moment! This knowledge has repeatedly lifted me above the clouds of fear and perfectionism, and has granted me many magnificent vistas of understanding and self-acceptance. It's opened my eyes to God's amazing love, and it has allowed me to experience and share that love over and over again.

While the specific details of my journey are uniquely mine, I find many common threads winding throughout my story and the stories of others. Feelings of guilt, shame, insecurity, inferiority, and inadequacy plague men and women alike as we struggle to measure up to artificial, unattainable standards of perfection. We often seek to soothe our pain in destructive or ineffective ways before we discover how to embrace life and receive the joy God intends for us. My journey is a reminder that God's love remains constant throughout the ups and downs of our lives, and that each of our experiences can be turned to our good as we learn to open our hearts to Him.