

# What We're

## *An Interview With* Geneen Roth *On* Mindful Eating

RENEE LERTZMAN



GENEEN ROTH

*T*here is perhaps no more recognizable trademark of compulsive eating than “grazing” at the refrigerator. Most of us do it only when we’re by ourselves. In her latest book, *When You Eat at the Refrigerator, Pull Up a Chair* (Hyperion), Geneen Roth describes eating straight from the refrigerator with humor and candor, and even suggests sharing the experience with someone:

*Imagine you invite a friend over for dinner. Tell her that the two of you are going to eat the way you eat when you are alone. . . . Lead her to the refrigerator. Open the door. Stare. Begin picking from Tupperware containers. Use your fingers. Graze through yesterday’s Chinese food. Last week’s tapioca pudding. Make loud grunting noises of pleasure. Open the freezer. Try to chunk off a piece of frozen cake with your fingers. When that doesn’t work, hack it off with a carving knife. Notice the fine spray of sugar settling on your floor.*

*I can appreciate her message, because I’ve been there, standing before the freezer in the home of my childhood, eating my mother’s frozen Hanukkah cookies or leftover sweets from a Shabbat reception, hoping not to get caught. Like many women in our culture, I have experienced this painful struggle over food: the desire to conform to cultural standards of thinness, coupled with the unwavering conviction that once I’ve*

Photo (right): Jason Langer/The Image Bank



*Really*

*Hungry  
For*

attained my ideal weight, I will be happy. It was Roth's book *Feeding the Hungry Heart* (Dutton) that led me to connect my desire for love and emotional nourishment with my endless quest to have enough to eat.

One of Roth's perhaps most well-known and controversial exercises helps people to experience what they have as "enough": in conjunction with her advice to "carry a chunk of chocolate everywhere," Roth teaches how to eat that chocolate slowly and with complete awareness. The exercise, she writes, "reminds us to wake up, pay attention, stop reaching for what we don't have, and focus on what we do have. It teaches us that we don't need a truck full of love to satisfy our hungry hearts. When we pay attention, enough is possible."

Roth knows what it's like to struggle with food, having gone on her first diet at the age of eleven, when she began skipping dinners to lose five pounds. "My mother always felt fat," she says, "and didn't want me to follow in her footsteps." They fought over food and body size, and Roth fantasized that, if she could be thin enough, she could please her mother and make everything all right.

When she was twenty-two, Roth traveled to India, where she lived alone for four months in an eight-by-ten-foot room with no running water. "It was a turning inward to something much bigger than myself, or the family I grew up in," she writes. "I started believing again in goodness, in kindness, and in something far vaster than I could see."

After her return from India, however, Roth went through a personal crisis: "I didn't know what I was doing. I had no idea what I was good at, or what I could do, and being of service in some capacity felt crucial to me." Unable to control the direction of her life, she turned to something familiar that she could control: her eating. She became anorexic.

When she got down to eighty-two pounds, Roth realized what was happening and made another change: she went back to school to study medicine. Within two months, she had gained eighty pounds. "It was at that point," she says, "that I realized I was really, truly ruining my life. . . . The size of my body, how much I weighed, what I put in my mouth, what I didn't put in my mouth, what my life was going to be like when I lost weight — this was the center around which everything else revolved."

At this crucial juncture, Roth took a writing workshop with poet Ellen Bass and began to put her experiences down on paper. Her relationship to herself changed once more. She also read Susie Orbach's *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* and "realized for the first time that maybe I wasn't a crazy person; that perhaps what I was doing around food had some meaning, that there was some logic around it. . . . I also understood immediately that dieting would never work."

Roth went on to write several best-selling books on food,

self-love, and the relationship between eating and intimacy, including *Breaking Free from Compulsive Eating*, *Appetites*, and *When Food Is Love* (all Penguin). She has garnered a huge following of readers who feel she speaks directly to the pain of overeating and underlying issues of deprivation. Though her subject matter is serious, she addresses it with humor, kindness, and even unabashed joy. She invites us to celebrate pleasure by eating exactly what we want, with awareness, and also to be willing to "lose the suffering contest." She has led "Breaking Free" workshops around the country for two decades and recently added intensive retreats.

In person, Roth is warm, engaging, and charismatic. Her home in west Marin County, California, is full of color and light, with a view of the grassy, rolling hills around San Francisco Bay. She lives with her husband, Matt, her beloved and very fat cat, Blanche, and their new puppy, Celeste. As we talked in her sun-filled kitchen, Roth would occasionally cut off a hunk of Gruyère cheese and offer me a taste without missing a beat.

**Lertzman:** You've said that willpower, discipline, and commitment are "irrelevant when it comes to dieting." But isn't self-control what dieting is all about?

**Roth:** I used to believe that if I deprived and punished and frightened myself enough, then somehow I would change. But those strategies involving willpower and discipline — so celebrated in our culture — weren't leading me anywhere. In fact, I was killing myself. I began to sense that the way out was through love, openness, and trust, but I didn't feel

any of those for myself at the time. Still, once the idea of love and trust occurred to me, I knew that I could never go on a diet again.

**Lertzman:** You are described as being a pioneer in the anti-dieting movement, but your work is more of a psychological — and perhaps even spiritual — approach to food and eating.

**Roth:** First of all, our culture deals with eating and dieting and food as just a women's issue — and a banal one, at that. New diets come out every month. Diet books are always on the bestseller list. But people generally don't think of dieting, weight loss, and food in a particularly deep way.

Sometimes dieting is seen as a feminist issue. That can be incredibly helpful, but it's not broad enough. Other authors approach the subject from a serious health perspective, but our relationship with food goes so much deeper than that. It's not just about what you put in your mouth.

Food is both concrete and metaphorical — it's something

**At every workshop, I ask, "How many people have lost weight before?" Everybody raises their hand. "How many of you were ecstatically happy after you lost weight?" Two people raise their hands. "How many people believe that, when you lose weight again, you will be ecstatically happy?" Everybody raises their hand again.**

we deal with every day, but it can also be a doorway that leads into the hidden rooms of our lives. My relationship with food is a microcosm of my relationship to being alive, to my beliefs about trust, pleasure, deprivation, and nourishment. But looking at these deeper, underlying issues is considered subversive.

**Lertzman:** Especially if you're advising people to carry a piece of chocolate around in their pocket.

**Roth:** Yes, some people actually think I'm saying, "Eat whatever you want, whenever you want." That is not what I'm saying at all. I'm saying: "Look; pay attention." Most people have hardly enjoyed a meal in their life. There's no joy or pleasure in food for them, because there's so much "I should, I shouldn't, I can't, I'm going to feel guilty about it afterward." I teach them how to slow down. I'm basically saying, "We have a choice: we can taste what is in our mouth and utterly enjoy ourselves, or we can remain unconscious of it and be in pain." People don't know there is a choice. It doesn't occur to them that they can actually enjoy eating.

Giving them a piece of chocolate is a way to introduce them to pleasure and awareness. At my workshops, there's an exercise in which we practice savoring a single chocolate kiss. Once, a man told me that he'd been bingeing on chocolate kisses for twenty years and had never eaten just one. The one in his mouth was always the precursor to the ten that came after it, and the two bags after that. But when he actually allowed himself to have one, and was present while eating it, he didn't want another one. "It's when I feel I can't have one," he said, "that I want twenty."

In a normal dieting mentality, giving that man chocolate would be like handing an ax to an ax murderer. "I'm *supposed* to eat chocolate?" people say. "But I'm already forty pounds overweight." Yes, and you're forty pounds overweight in part because you're not allowing yourself to have what you're having anyway, and you're not paying attention while you're having it. I am asking people to stop, just for a moment, and think: Have I ever enjoyed chocolate, really? Do I know how to enjoy food? Does it bring me pleasure? I know I'm bingeing all the time, but am I paying attention to even one thing I'm eating? The answer is no.

So I am saying: "Show up, not just for meals, but for your life. Taste the food. Sit down. Focus on what you're doing." What's the point of eating chocolate if you're not going to have a fabulous time doing it? You're missing your whole life, because you never let yourself have it.

**Lertzman:** But if something brings us pleasure, don't

we want to do it more? Don't most Americans already "treat" themselves with rich food?

**Roth:** That's a good question. I also work with people on the experience of what it's like to have enough. So many emotional eaters have a sense of never getting enough. They approach life from an inner sense of poverty, and no amount of food, sex, clothes, or money will satisfy them. I ask them to question the notion of being forever deprived, to recognize that it is in their minds, though probably based on a real experience of having felt deprived in the past.

As a child, I couldn't get enough of my mother's love. But I was not in control of my mother. As an adult, I was in control of how much food I ate, so I ate more to make up for not having had enough of something vital in my past: in this case, love. I felt deprived and poverty-stricken when it came to love, and that became part of my motivation for eating compulsively. For the first twenty-five years of my life, I had a constant feeling that I could not get enough. Realizing that I could get enough food — and still lose weight — was a major turning point.

If you want to lose weight, you can do it by eating only when you're hungry and stopping when you've had enough. But this thought is frightening to most people, because it means taking responsibility and trusting yourself. It goes against the machinery of the culture — particularly the \$33 billion-a-year diet industry. Most people like to be told what to do, especially when it comes to food. That's part of the lure of diets: they make people feel like children again, because they tell us that we cannot be trusted to handle food; that we are not capable of making up our own minds and having control over how we eat.

**Lertzman:** Why do you think people want to be told what to do?

**Roth:** It's easier. Many people say to me, "I am tired of thinking about food. I don't want to spend one more second thinking about it. Just give me a set of rules, and I will follow them." But the problem is, people always break the rules. Something in them says, "I don't want to do this. I'm not going to do this. In fact, I am going to do the opposite of this."

Dieting perpetuates that cycle of making rules and breaking them, which leads into deeper issues of the heart, such as craving nourishment and gratification, and yet not really allowing yourself to have it. It perpetuates the belief that if I am good enough, I'll be safe.

*(end of excerpt)*