

My time in the wilderness

Overcoming food anxiety

Elizabeth (Schrag) Wipf

To survive in the wilderness, three basic things are needed: food, water, shelter. The Israelites knew this well. They could carry their tents, but when they reached the land of Marah, they had not taken a drink for

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three days. To find the water bitter—unpalatable, probably unsafe—dismissed the small hope they had found. So God showed Moses a branch, Moses chucked it in the water, and the Israelites drank.

Not long after, the Israelites arrived at the Desert of Sin. With hunger pangs in their bellies and no sign of food on the horizon, they began to pine after the meatpots they had left back in Egypt. The Lord, hearing their complaint, sent manna and quail and instructions to know the satisfaction of enough. It took

some time, but eventually the Israelites learned how to trust in God’s provision. No longer controlled by the hunger in their stomachs or the fear of starvation, the Israelites were fed in more ways than one.

The story of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness touches on a human reality that manifests itself differently throughout space and time: food anxiety. Although the word *anxiety* did not appear until the late fifteenth century¹ (in Thomas á Kempis’ *De Imitation Christi* of all places), anxiety is what the Israelites were experiencing: a troubled state of mind from the worry and fear, in their case, of what they will eat.

When I have heard the story of the Israelites preached on, and when I have preached on it myself, the Israelites’ anxiety is referred to as “complaining.” This phrasing makes for a nice introduction into the systems of

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., “anxiety” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), www.oed.com.

empire that enslave us and for which we long nonetheless. But the pulpit cannot always be a place of prophecy; it must also be a place of pastoral care. The story of the Israelites gives us a unique insight into the food anxiety our parishioners—and ourselves—live with on a daily basis and prepares us for an incarnate food theology that can heal us all.

It is no wonder that food is a source of anxiety. Of the three basic elements needed for survival, food takes up the most mental space.² Assuming we have access to adequate nutrition, water, and housing, our

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minds still must navigate the basic act of eating. We must make choices about what we will cook, how much to make, and what ingredients are needed. We must pay attention to our bodies, for although our stomachs determine whether we are hungry, so do our energy levels and ability to concentrate. Every time we sense the need to eat, there are questions

we must answer: What is there available to eat? How much time do I have to prepare food? What do I want? What do I need? Is this good for me? Is this bad for me?

In addition to our own basic need to eat, we are bombarded with images and information about food. Food preparation videos pop up on our Snapchat feeds along with diet-transformation stories; a scroll through Instagram shows decadent cakes, post-workout smoothies, and lots of fit women in sports bras and leggings (if the camera can make you gain ten pounds, it can also help you lose fifteen); and if you type in “diet” on Pinterest, you will get specialized plans for Keto, paleo, vegan, whole foods,

² To clarify, this is written to an audience primarily composed of pastors and church leaders in the North American Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. The amount of energy that goes to securing water increases significantly for the 790 million people across the globe who do not have access to clean water. Likewise, the 1.6 billion people with inadequate housing experience an anxiety unknown to many middle-class North Americans. The food anxiety addressed here will also not address the food insecurity 1.9 billion people worldwide experience. To use the language of the day, this is an essay about “first world problems.” See “Global WASH Fast Facts,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, April 11, 2016, https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/global/wash_statistics.html; “Global Homelessness Statistics,” Homeless World Cup, Homeless World Cup Foundation, November 3, 2020, <https://homelessworldcup.org/homelessness-statistics/>; Max Roser and Hannah Ritchie, “Hunger and Undernourishment,” Our World in Data. Global Change Data Lab, October 8, 2013, <https://ourworldindata.org/hunger-and-undenourishment>.

and so on. We no longer need the cereal and Big Mac commercials popping up between TV shows; we have done “diet culture” to ourselves.

Even as the body positive movement gains ground,³ with the amount of time allocated to finding, preparing, and eating food and the amount of refined content we absorb on a daily basis about food, food anxiety and eating disorders continue to thrive.

What does food anxiety look like?

I entered adolescence in the late 2000s. The ideal body type then was a carry over from the early MTV days: rail thin. I had hips before Kim Kardashian “broke the internet” or Nicki Minaj was a household name. By the time I reached my late teens and curvy became cool, the damage had already been done. After a period of intense stress, the disordered eating patterns I had started at thirteen developed into a full-blown eating disorder.

It was a comment by the petite new girl in grade eight that set me off. “Your butt is so big; maybe you should try some squats.” Although her lack of knowledge about building muscle mass should have prompted me to ignore her, the embarrassment of being called out in front of my peers for being “fat” undid the normal relationship with food I had until then. Overnight I became horribly self-conscious and unable to engage with freedom the act of eating.

I went hungry for most of high school, eating the bare minimum with a few huge meals every week. I destroyed my body’s ability to navigate feelings of hunger and fullness. In my first year out of high school, a combination of working construction and emotional distress led me to gain thirty pounds. To lose it, I went right back to starvation and binge cycles.

As my stress levels grew, my body began to reject gluten. As I changed the situation I was living and working in and learned what I could eat and what would make me sick for days, I began to eat healthier and—with many, many hungry nights—lost weight.


Knowing that the hunger was a sign of weight loss—and still holding to my ideals of rail thin—I began to follow an increasingly strict diet. Soon there was no room for foods I had always loved, such as ice cream and cheese. The anxiety and guilt I experienced when eating my favorite,

3 The body positive movement is a social media-led movement that pushes back against the use of white, thin, able-bodied women in advertising by declaring all bodies—regardless of color, shape, size, and ability—are beautiful.

dairy-filled foods led me to feel so sick when I ate them that I needed to cut them out altogether.

This need to eat perfectly and clean led to the development of orthorexia: an eating disorder where the drive to eat healthy creates a downturn in the patient's overall health.

After another period of intense emotional distress, my orthorexia developed into a combination of anorexia and bulimia. I ate 1200 calories a day, striving for the days when I could eat less. I ran five to seven miles every day, arriving back at my apartment completely spent and shaking.



My eating disorders were no longer about food or weight; they were about control. They had become a way to find relief from the extreme anxiety I lived with daily, even as they caused it.

When my body could no longer stand starvation, I would binge—often on healthy versions of my favorite foods—and then force myself to puke it all back up. Guilt was better than anxiety.

Food lost all sense of sacredness. Even as I entered into the mystery of Eucharist and creation in my academic work, in my personal life, I broke every theology of bodily care I had developed. Potlucks, free lunches, and even communion became sources of anxiety for me. If I ate in front of other people, surely

they would think I was fat and gross. Or if I went and was expected to eat, I would have to explain why I probably could not eat what was available.

A year and a half into my eating disorder, my anxiety had grown so large that I was bingeing multiple times a day and no longer ate “normal” meals.⁴ When I could not binge and purge—like when I was walking home or in class—I would scratch deep red marks on the inside of my arm. My eating disorders were no longer about food or weight; they were about control. They had become a way to find relief from the extreme anxiety I lived with daily, even as they caused it.

Healing

For Christmas that year, I got a tattoo of the Hail Mary on the inside of my arm and a prescription for anxiety meds. With my named desire to

⁴ I was anxious about eating, not eating, eating “right,” eating and then getting sick, any social situation that involved food, and, mostly, about getting caught.

overcome my disorder, I wanted God to come in and take it away from me with the heavy hand of grace. She did not.

It took another year and a half of immense effort to learn how to eat normally. For another six months, I continued to binge. Even as my mind

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was putting the tools in place necessary to stop, my body kept denying that effort. It was not until my bodily situation changed—until I was in a place where I felt safe and where food was treated as sacred—that I was able to be transformed.

Just as God provided the Israelites manna and quail in the desert, I know too that God gave me the people I needed to show me the way of a right relationship with food. It was not on my time, and it was not as forceful as I would have

liked. Instead, it was the slow and arduous path of transformation.

Through a combination of incredible friends who loved me as I was, a handful of intuitive eating Instagram accounts, weekly blog posts showing up in my inbox, and a lot of academic work, I was able to create a theology of food.

As with the Israelites, so too my transformation required me to learn how to be satisfied with enough. I had to relearn how to listen to my body's cues of hunger and fullness and to honor them. I also had to relearn what it means to use food to celebrate and to grieve and to nourish.

A practical approach

My story is one of food anxiety taken to the extreme. I am the exception, not the rule. Yet my story, like the story of the Israelites, can become a powerful teaching tool to think about the ways we do or do not develop healthy theologies of food.

When we sit in scriptures of eating and drinking, of water into wine, bread into body, and twelve baskets of leftovers; when we sit in the prayer that comes before a meal; when we sit in the creation that produces the abundance on our tables, we sit in the presence of God. When we notice the real, daily presence of Jesus in Scripture and the way that presence carries over—God-in-the-flesh—to grace our meals, we stand in resistance to a culture that replaces one diet trend with the next and makes money and power off of our insecurities.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to walking with people through food anxiety. Crap happens. And there are people like me whose understanding of food and life and feeling safe becomes so messed up and broken, it becomes devastatingly destructive. But when we build communities where food is a sacred gift and where God is never far from the table, we build hope for the broken, anxious, and disordered, and we learn to trust that God will come and provide the rest.

About the author

Elizabeth (Schrag) Wipf is a student in the Master of Divinity program at Canadian Mennonite University. She also works half time as the pastor of faith development at a Mennonite Church Manitoba congregation in Winnipeg. Although she grew up in rural Kansas, she has now made her home outside of Steinbach, Manitoba, where she enjoys gardening, cooking, and walking her dogs.