

Wanting to Be Thin vs Being Thin

Adapted from Breaking Free from Compulsive Eating by Geneen Roth

When we want, we can dream about what it will be like when we have. When we want, we create the beginning, the middles, the endings of our dream. We're in control. When we spend our lives wanting, we can dream about how it will be when we get exactly what we want. That incurs no disappointment. No risk, no vulnerability, no chance of being hurt.

When we spend our lives in the present moment, with what we already have (the other side of wanting), we lose control. The things we love get lost or shattered or stolen. People leave us. People die. As soon as we realize the preciousness of what we already have, we realize someday we may lose it.

Wanting To Be Thin.

There is a huge difference between being at a lighter weight and wanting to be at a lighter weight. In fantasy, being thin changes your entire life. Being thin allows you to feel good, to feel pretty, to feel powerful. Being thin changes your dress size and with it, your wardrobe. Being thin brings people close, attracts the long-awaited relationship. Being thin gives you credibility. In a fantasy about being thin, you stop wanting and become the wanted. And then, something happens that you didn't plan on - you lose control. What happens when our bodies change and our perceptions don't?

For you, of course, being thin will be different. You will be able to handle it, you will know how thin is thin enough and you will be happy and feel powerful. You will wear clothes that tastefully emphasize your slimness. The intense preoccupation with your body will be gone and you will be able to concentrate on other areas of your life. And you will be fluid and languid and sensual.

Which is exactly what wanting is about: the persistence in believing that getting what you want will change your life, no matter what the evidence. This is never more apparent than in people who lose significant amounts of weight. Though they find being thinner not what they expected, they will lower their goal and believe that the new goal, once achieved, will make everything better. They say that due to specific circumstances (which have since changed) they need a lower weight, but next time...next time will be different.

It's the wanting we want. Not the having.

People describe wanting to be thin as "consuming their lives," "intense," "overwhelming," "the thing beside which everything pales." Words that are usually used to describe a love affair or a reason for being alive.

Wanting to be thin pushes reality to the outer edges, dismisses it as only temporary until the real you, the essential you, can show your face. Whereas wanting to be thin is consuming and passionate and selective, being thin is like having corn flakes for breakfast and going to work. It's pleasant when you're slipping into a new party dress, but there are still bills to pay, dishes to be done, and a life to live. You must still learn how to give love and how to compromise, how to say no and how to risk failure. You still have to make sense of the conflicts within you and, inevitably, of someone you love disappointing you. During all those years of wanting to be thin, you put your life on hold and created a cushion between you and the aspects of living that were not in your control. Wanting to be thin protects you from the unfairness of life; it funnels the grief and sadness and pain of being alive into the grief and sadness and pain of being overweight.

When you spend your life wanting, you never get down to the actuality of living.

It takes great courage to admit the fantasy of wanting. Wanting loses its seductive power when you recognize that it might trap you instead of free you. When you can see being thinner for what it will be - not just a smaller body but a life lived in the muck and glory of the present rather than in dreams of a gilded future - the wanting will be stilled.

How much of your time do you spend wanting? Many say from 50 to 95% of their lives. Which means that by the time they die they will have spent at least half of their lives in shadows, wanting without having - and dying without living.

Yesterday I took a walk on the beach at sunset. I was walking on the hard part of the sand, the part near the water, remembering what I'd once heard Joseph Goldstein (author of *The Experience of Insight*) say, "We think we have to be overwhelmed with feeling and desire and passion to feel alive, when this," and he pointed to his body, "is an incredibly complex and fascinating energy system. As it is. Without anything added." As I walk, the lights of the boardwalk began to twinkle, washing the shore in a blaze of metallic gold. Appreciating what we have takes away the struggle. Then we live.

What To Do About Wanting Besides Having.

On a practical level, it is important to put wanting into perspective by examining how it actually feels to want, by examining the fantasies it creates and how those fantasies keep you trapped in endless cycles of more wanting. To examine wanting vs having, complete the following:

1. Things I want that I don't have:

2. Things I've wanted that I've gotten:

3. Wanting allows me to:

4. How my life would change if I got those things:

5. How my life has changed now that I have what I wanted:

Look over your answers carefully. Check reality against fantasy. Think about people you know who have gotten the things you want. Are they happy? Do they have what you think having would bring you? And what about the things you already have? Did they create what you had hoped for? For how long? What happened to the wanting when it changes to having? Do you think next time will be different? How?

Talk with others, are their experiences similar to yours? What can you discover from your own experience?

Tomorrow, when you wake up, imagine that your body is absolutely fine the way it is. What happens? Remind yourself throughout the day that you already have what you want. Now what? Where does your attention go? What takes the place of wanting? What is the morning like when you aren't always wanting something else? The afternoon? The evening? What is your day like when wanting is absent?