

Laura's Story *submitted by Laura*

I grew up in a relatively stable family. From the outside, all was well. My mother and father were together, raising three beautiful toe-head kids. I'm the oldest of three, and my two younger brothers Peter and Daniel were very active in the community with sports. My parents were involved as well; my dad the coach of many a team, and my mother, a regular attendant cheering in the stands. I hated sports. I was, as my mother affectionately and almost apologetically surmised "the artistic one." While she was correct in a sense, I never quite felt as if this trait achieved the recognition and approval that sports did for my brothers. I remember taking up piano lessons in an effort to discover something that I was "good at". While I didn't necessarily mind it at first, I didn't like it enough to practice daily as my mother anticipated I would be doing for the amount of money she spent on the lessons and the new piece of furniture taking up the living room. I was in Jr. High School when I quit piano. This was the age when the slowly gnawing sense of inadequacy started to devour me.

This feeling surfaced as rebellion toward my over-protective parents, uncertain how to handle this uncharted territory of pre-adolescence. At school, and with my "friends" however, my insecurities were tracked like fresh blood; an easy kill for those who felt the need to prove themselves on a different level. I belonged to "the group"; nothing short of a playground cult whose members didn't exceed the age of eleven. Having moved in second grade from Dracut mass to Hudson NH, where the age cutoff was several months later, I was the youngest in my grade. That coupled with my late development made me, all the more, a perfect scapegoat for the anger, angst and confusion of about a dozen pre-teen girls and boys. Things like riding the bus, breaking for lunch, and going to recess were a source of extreme anxiety and dread for me rather than being a time of social recreational and rejuvenation for which they were intended. Each morning, I'd anticipated being tripped down aisles, and pushed out of my seat on the way to the morning playground where more ridicule, both physical and emotional ensued. Tag and hopscotch were replaced with games like seeing how mean they could be to me before I ran crying to the guidance counselor. Before I learned long division, I understood the meaning of the word manipulation. For whatever reason, I defended my place in "the group" with a vengeance when my parents, only having my poor attitude to go on, tried to separate me from them. In retrospect, I wasn't defending them per se, but I was defending the feeling of finally belonging to something, no matter how terrible the abuse. In any event, my thinking was such that lead me to believe there wasn't anything better out there for me anyway, so why even try? In a failed attempt to "snap me out of it", my father's forceful approach surfaced with fits of rage, and anger classified later in therapy as emotional and physical abuse. While he never laid a hand on me, the fear for my safety I experienced while watching him take things out on inanimate objects around me was just as damaging, and left me wishing he'd just hit me instead to get it over with. Separate from me, the relationship between my mother and father was less than ideal. In fact, my mother was never really satisfied in her marriage to my father. Before the middle school years, before I was old enough to start noticing the opposite sex, I felt a sense of inexplicable shame associated with such an attraction. I had seen my parents show affection toward each other a handful of times growing up, so I internalized said affection as wrong, and at best, uncomfortable. It seemed as if the only time they really agreed on anything; the only time my father was my mother's best friend, was when she needed him to discipline me. This dynamic sprouted a root of anger and bitterness I only recently unearthed and uprooted. While the hatred I had toward my father was apparent and obvious, the anger I had toward my mother didn't surface until much later and the damage grew far deeper. I was angry. Anger was bad (as proved through my father). I was becoming a

woman. Woman hood was nothing to look forward to (as implied through my mother). I, in turn, added another piece to the puzzle of what was to unfold later as a full blown eating disorder.

I left "the group" in the 8th grade, and started to hang around with new friends on the outskirts of "the popular group". While I was no longer faced with bringing up everyone's dirty lunch trays, I still encountered plenty of reasons to fall short of being accepted. Being of the socio-economic middle class family, I couldn't afford the brand name clothes or the other superfluous beauty treatments of my peers. From this, I deduced, I was ugly. At the end of 8th grade, I started dance classes at a local studio. There, I met two sisters, who were not only amazing at dance, but were absolutely gorgeous, with a flawless complexion and figure to match. For whatever reason, they accepted me, and for the first time in my life, I felt I had true "friends".

The art of dance, on the other hand, served the purpose of proving to me further, that there was nothing I was inherently skilled at. The ruthless wall of mirrors that matched my stare twice a week were proof; I couldn't kick high enough, couldn't spin fast enough, and certainly couldn't fit into a leotard as well as all the other girls in my class. My dance instructor, on occasion, would point me out in her frustration, as one who was clearly inferior to the rest. Though this didn't happen often, I was sensitive enough to have it affect me in an intensely negative way. It wasn't long before I grew to dread dance class almost as much as the grade school playground. My inadequacy also grew around the opposite sex. Boys swarmed and swooned around my dance friends. The girls at school always seemed to have some love interest in the picture. I, on the other hand, never felt comfortable enough to include myself as one of them. This is not to say that the feelings weren't there. Sure there were guys I liked, but the emotion never seemed to be reciprocated, and when they were, my awkwardness ensured that it never lasted long at all.

One thing I did have in common with every other teenage girl, was that I was additionally influenced, and made acutely aware of the media and culture of US society. The answer, or so it seemed, was to look good. And one of the keys to doing that was to lose weight. If I wanted to be accepted, pretty, happy, comfortable in my own skin, all I had to do was lose weight. So I tried it. The smaller I got, the less of me I'd have to hate right? And for once in my life, I discovered, I was good at something. Not only that, I was finally getting the attention I coveted for so long from my family and friends. Concern took the place of praise from my parents and dance teacher. I was told by my instructor that I wouldn't be able to dance if I kept losing weight. I was told by my doctor that if I continued, I'd have to put school on hold and go into the hospital. As I nervously faced my junior year; the most notoriously stressful year in high school, and another year of dance, these prospects were anything but deterrents. In November 1993, I was admitted into a medical hospital for a week to "get my weight up". In that week, I received more cards, balloons, flowers and visits than I had in any of my prior fifteen birthdays. It was there, I was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa, a disease I had heard of, but never believed I'd be afflicted with. When those words were spoken, I remember feeling both a sense of denial and relief. Finally, my pain had words, and those words were something people clearly paid attention to. For years prior, I had tried to voice my inadequate feelings to family and friends and they always feel on deaf ears. Now, I had a tool to use. I could get my needs for attention and love met, while simultaneously feeling there was finally something I could identify myself with. It seemed like a win-win situation.

To say the eating disorder made me feel nothing but terrible would be a lie. If I didn't get anything out of it, I wouldn't have been so sick for so long. Initially, I felt euphoric, in control, and victorious. These feelings waned of course, and in an attempt to find satisfaction, the symptoms of the disorder changed over the course of fifteen years; going from anorexia to bulimia to compulsive over exercising. The

eating disorder consumed me to the point where there wasn't any "me" left to consume. I bounced back and forth from one hospital to another for the remainder of high school, and the years that should have been spent in college. I barely made it to my senior prom, or graduation, and when I got my yearbook, I wasn't in a single candid photograph. I remembered feeling like an apparition of a self, like I had missed out. And I had. Instead of this propelling me forward toward recovery, I felt as if "I blew it now" and surmised the eating disorder was all I had. This way of thinking only had me clutching at my demise even more. I became despondent and listless regarding my life. A depression and starved mind coupled with a lifeless body had me wishing for death. In a way, the eating disorder was a slow form of suicide.

I started struggling with bingeing and purging just as hard as I had struggled with the anorexia after being released from a residential institution in NY five years into the illness. I spent countless hours and dollars numbing myself with my drug of choice; food. I tried maintaining some semblance of a normal life amidst all of it; I took classes at UNH Manchester, and tried to hold down a part time job during the summer when classes were out. I managed to deceive myself with fairly decent grades, and financial stability thanks to college loans. In retrospect, I was in strong denial. The eating disorder was not only my priority; it was my false god whom no thing or person could take priority over. Everything was part-time-- part time school, part time work so that I could make full time for the eating disorder. Relationships were also something I kept at a safe distance, with the exception of men who I offered up everything to, only to have my self-worth crushed even more when things didn't work out as I had planned, or when I was taken advantage of on a physical level. My emotional, social, and mental maturity slowed dramatically as I spent more time in various hospitals than I did out. The cycle was fast spinning, and is really quite a blur looking back on it now.

A turning point in my recovery came in the year 2000. My family and friends, desperate in hope, raised a huge amount of support through various fundraisers in my town, to allow me the opportunity to go to a residential Christian facility out in Arizona. When presented with their efforts, I decided that even though I didn't feel there was anything in me to save, all these people who did must mean something. When I got there, I was treated for the first time, as a person and not a patient. I was shown that the eating disorder was not just a physical or mental issue, but a spiritual one. Though I was raised Catholic, like other pieces of my life, it was in the background, never in the forefront like my Eating Disorder. The combination of a new place, a spiritual approach and my own openness to allow in more than the ED helped me to realize I didn't want to die. My life finally had value. I was there five and a half months and when I got home, I was somewhat of a healthy weight.

I started getting back on my feet, but after a series of events, including another date rape, the eating disorder was quick to come back. I feel it is important here to say that, despite my circumstances, it was a choice. I chose the eating disorder once I realized that life was just too difficult for me. I had not fully come to terms with the strength I would need to not choose the eating disorder -- still relying on the standards of the world and society to dictate my worth. Needless to say, I fell flat on my face. I was out of inpatient treatment for 2 years before I decided I needed help again. This time, however, I sought it myself, and wasn't forced into it. And so the roller coaster of the recovery process began again. Though somewhat slower than before, I fell back into the "in-treatment-out-of-treatment" cycle.

In the meantime, life happened. I transferred to the NH Institute of Art several years after I that particular residential facility, and majored in photography. I moved out of my parent's house, and into my own place which I was able to do from the money left over from the support raised to get me help. I got my own car, my own phone, and a steady job. Externally, things were going well. Internally, the

battle raged, intensified, and nearly claimed my life yet again on several occasions. The guilt I experienced for throwing away the gifts bestowed upon me fueled the fire. I felt terrible for doing what I was doing, but also felt that I couldn't stop. More appropriately, I didn't realize that I was empowered to do so. I continued to involve myself with other destructive patterns outside of the eating disorder which included partying, promiscuity, and drinking. After leaving a program in 2005, I began engaging in compulsive over-exercising. This lasted several years, and took the place of purging. I was again, under an enormous amount of self-deceit, thinking, since I wasn't vomiting, I was doing well.

A short time after, my world imploded. In one week's time, I found out that the man I was dating on and off again was sleeping with another woman, I had contracted the HPV virus, and my mother was leaving my father and moving into the condo I was staying at (she was paying for it through the fund money). The eating disorder intensified, I moved in with my 2 closest friends from art school, and I continued along the path of self-destruction. Things got worse. I started dating a man who I thought I loved, only to find out, he was cheating on me with one of my best friends I was living with. The bulimia wasn't doing the trick anymore, so I started drinking more heavily than before and combining it with the bingeing and purging. A short time later, my so called friend asked me to move out of the apt. (the lease was in her name) and the other friend I was living with backed her on it as she was unable to watch me destroy myself further.

I moved back home, which was probably, in retrospect, the best thing I could have done. I can see clearly now, that God ripped me out of that situation faster than I could wrap my head around it. I began the process of restoring my relationship with my father who was, by then, a changed man, and reconnected with a family friend who was finishing up his stay at a local facility. We ended up dating and I started doing better, seeking treatment again for my issues after graduating art school. I got a full time job at The Boys and Girls Club as their art director, and it seemed as if every prayer and desire of mine had been met. The problem? The eating disorder, coupled with depression, anxiety, and now drinking still had a death grip on my soul. I remember one night, sitting in a grocery store parking lot saying, "God, I have everything I could ever want here, but I'm miserable. What is wrong here? What am I missing?!"

From that point on, I decided that I needed to pursue a true level of healing once and for all. I contacted the Christian residential facility and asked them if I could return. They obliged, provided I come up with \$90,000 for 90 days. In desperation, I asked if there was any other place, along the lines of their program, where the care is free and the treatment is Faith Based. She gave me one website of a place that I had missed the age cut off for, and a phone number with a 603 area code. I asked her what other area of the country had the same area code as NH. The idea of having such a place right at my back door, after searching over fifteen years for the best treatment in the country didn't even register. Sure enough, the ministry was a little over an hour away.

After looking at their website, and learning more about their then 12 month program, I was somewhat discouraged. I didn't think I could ever do a full year of recovery, let alone do it on a working farm in NH whose many rules included not being able to have any contact whatsoever with my boyfriend. Upon going for an interview, my doubts increased as I learned that I would be working on various chores 20-30 hours a week, and that, unlike any other facility I had been to, the focus was not on the eating disorder which meant no nutrition counseling whatsoever. I was quite skeptical thinking, "I need someone who specialized in eating disorders, and I need a nutritionist. I need a meal plan." I searched high and low for other options and came up dry. I decided I needed to take the leap of faith, leave every comfort and freedom of home to try it.

I was able to see how the eating disorder wasn't simply a disease, but a stronghold in my life which encompassed pride, selfishness and self-hate. It reeked of festering wounds in my past not dealt with—a pain too intense for me to take on my own. I did have worth, and it had nothing to do with my achievements, appearances, or any other superficial standards by which I measured myself by in vain previously. The concept of forgiveness was another huge part of my healing. I choose to forgive others who have wronged me in the past, which released a huge burden of anger and bitterness I had been harboring. I choose also, to forgive myself, and walk in the light of truth rather than darkness.

If I'm making this sound like a simple solution, let me stop right here and say that the process toward transformation was anything but easy. The 13 months I spent in the ministry program were some of the toughest months I've ever experienced. But it helped to know that I didn't need to do it perfectly (if fact, if it seemed that way, something was wrong.) Is it still a battle? Of course it is. Every day, I fight the negative thoughts about myself; my appearances and my actions. But, personally for me, the battle is no longer in the mental or physical arena. It's in the spiritual one. It is an amazing personal achievement that after 15 years of cheating death time and time again, that I stand before you today, not just alive, but full of light and hope. The osteoporosis I was diagnosed with years ago has reversed itself, the HPV has cleared, and my organs are all in full working order. I thank God every day for what He has blessed me with. Sure there are days when I feel less than grateful, but I know that I have plenty to be thankful for.

I empower each one of you sitting here today with choice. Up at the ministry program, I kept hearing "You have a choice, Laura." and I wanted to scream. Ironically, this is one of the major things that helped facilitate my healing. I used to live, trapped by the confines of my past; stuck in the well of my trauma. For years, I felt that I couldn't get well. The truth was, I chose not to. This is not to say I had one more thing to beat myself up over. It did tell me, however, that I had a lot more power than I gave myself credit for. This is something that I still need to remind myself of quite often. A month or so ago, I joined a gym. Immediately, I thought to myself, "Well, here I go again. Just like before...no turning back now." That evening, I was able to realize that I had no obligation whatsoever to fall back into my past. Since then, I have not felt the tremendous defeat of that struggle. In fact, I rarely use my membership and don't feel the least bit bad about it.

I guess you could say, my priorities have changed. I no longer feel the drive to prove myself to anyone or anything and because of that, my life is not only richer, but so much more free than it has ever been before. While the day to day tasks (outside of the eating disorder of course) may look the same, my mind is no longer pre-occupied with food. I enjoy things now. I enjoy the company of others. I enjoy spending time helping those around me. I no longer look at events in my life as mere interruptions, appeasing me until I get my next fix. I experience true joy out of life now, and am able to see the gift that this life is. Every day I live a spiritual life and this sustains me and gives me strength I need to face the day. I've also gotten back into doing more artwork and poetry as of late, nurturing the creative side I've been blessed with.

I encourage each one of you today to recognize the eating disorder for what it is. Recognize it, and then fight it with a power outside of yourself. I pray that this story has given some of you hope, or at least made you ponder about the possibility of a solid recovery for yourself. It is possible for each and every one of you. Regardless of your past, there is a future of health and healing for anyone who is willing to believe it. I, myself, speak only from experience.