Ruth’s Story

My name is Ruth Taylor. I am 74 years old. A wife, mother, grandmother, friend. I have recovered from an eating disorder that took up, off and on, part of my middle years from age 29 to just 2 years ago. I am just now starting to reach out- no longer anonymously, in an effort to help as many others as I can.

In 1983 I wrote an article which was printed in the Boston Globe in the Living Forum column. Eating disorders were just beginning to make headlines. The following is that article with a few changes from the original:

“I am a 42 year old homemaker, the wife of a physician, and I have a disease- a devastating, potentially deadly disease. It may hurt the person, as some diseases do, but its uniqueness lies in how it diminishes the personality.

Imagine driving to pick up your child at a soccer game and your thoughts are about food. I listened to my family tell me about their day and wished they would disappear so I could focus on food. I needed time for myself before my children invaded our home. Time to satisfy my psychological hunger. I always believed there was a devil inside me, another body responsible for my actions. An aura would engulf me. I'd zone out. After this devil released itself from my body, it might return anywhere from an hour to a week later. I had feelings of guilt, shame and depression. I became withdrawn, and uncommunicative.

This eating disorder actually began during my husband's medical residency when I was the mother of 3 young children. Much of my day I was alone with food and babies. I had always struggled with my weight. I’d been a short, overweight preteen with a big belly, glasses, and curly frizzy hair. I didn’t look the other girls in my classes. I always joked about wanting to be 5’10” and 110 lbs. but those weren’t my genes. I had always been on one sort of diet or another. As a young mother I was now associating my weight with my lack of friends, my appearance and my shape. Eating was my secret and heavily guarded. At that time I didn't know I had a disease.

I remember being told of using eating disorders for weight management by my mother, who I pictured a saint on a pedestal. As a 41 year old widow she had managed to keep our family together. I trusted and worshipped her. Her best friend's daughter was doing it. It was 1969 and I was pregnant for the third time in 4 years. I don't remember how or when I first told my husband I had a problem. He asked if I wanted to see a psychiatrist. I wasn't ready to talk to anyone and he didn’t know what to do.

Years passed. Military service, medical practice, another child, growing children, sports, suburban life. My secret blended into my carpooling. My food problems increased steadily and I always confessed to my husband, which I now believe was part of the disease. My shame was so intense and immense I had to tell someone. I could no longer hold in all the pain. I was purging myself with words. Sometimes I projected blame onto him using his hours and his lifestyle as the cause of my problems.

I knew I needed help. A psychologist to whom I spoke of my secret (openly for the first time) suggested hypnosis, which had been successful with many compulsions. I realize now he didn't know much about food disorders. It was 1977. There was no proven treatment and little was understood about food problems. Hypnosis and psychiatry failed. Food management with a nutritionist failed. I was spending too much money on food and medical bills, spinning wheels and getting nowhere.

So many times I had promised myself I would exercise control. I could do it. I’d manage my problems myself. But the devil always came back.

In 1980 eating disorders were on the covers of all the teen and women’s magazines. They were acknowledged as a psychological illness and I knew I was no longer alone. I still did not tell friends, but contacted the local Anorexia Aid Society and joined group therapy. After two meetings I discovered I didn't benefit from hearing other women's stories and dropped out. I continued to receive the society's newsletter which finally offered what I considered my last hope.

There were experimental studies at a nearby hospital. Psycho-pharmacologists were looking for women for a study evaluating the success of anti-depressant medication in treating these diseases. They believed these women had a depressive illness. I became part of the experiment and for the first time I felt I was really getting help for my symptoms and not just probing the cause. I started on the prescribed medication, but a reaction to the drug caused me to be removed from the experiment. I continued to see one of the doctors for two years, during which time there were many trials and errors finding the right medication. Some worked, some didn't, some caused strange reactions, but to me the overall effect of a decrease in symptoms was apparent.

Finally, I met with some success. It enabled me to rid myself of my devil. I was no longer moody and I felt in control of my life. My mind talked to me about things other than food, my eyes saw life around me and I was able to interact with my family. Side effects of the drug became part of my life, but a part I could live with comfortably.

I was forced to give up the drug because of surgery and I was frightened my disease would return. I anticipated continuing again as soon as I had a clean bill of health. However, I did not resume the medication. It’s been two months that I have been asymptomatic. I feel confident that my disease is now past history and I believe I have been cured. “I concluded the article in 1984 by saying that I still have to fight food, as there are days I just eat too much. I still compare my body to others, but I can accept mine most of the time.

Now that this is all in the past, I can think of the years of withdrawal from my family, my isolation from life. I don’t know how I functioned. I was faking it. I can’t forget the lies, the secrets, the guilt and the depression my family lived with. Mostly I remember the lack of communication, an all-consuming need for me to be physically present but off in my own space. How naïve I was.

It is now 2015, 32 years later and the second half of my story of Hope and Inspiration begins. My devil continued intermittently until my recovery two years ago. I am calling my earlier story the saga of my relationship with food… eat, bake, cook, ruminate, envision, shop, hide, lie, diet, salivate, plan, taste, count calories, measure both food and body. I was consumed by food. For so many years I never felt satisfied. Imagine the dark hole I was in!

Why did it start? I wish I knew. Would I have learned about disordered eating if my mother hadn't told me. How did I end up like this? How do I rid myself of this devil I have now lived with for so much of my adult life. I have raised a family and I have 8 grandchildren. I am no longer consumed by food and food no longer consumes me. One of the sadder parts of my life is watching younger generations of my family grapple with their own food and body issues. Do I project my problems on them? I hope not, but probably. Do my children and grandchildren struggle as I did? For some, I think so. Is it genetic? In part. Do I identify with them? Absolutely. Do I blame myself? Unfortunately, yes. Is that realistic? Somewhat, but I continue to work on these issues.

Intellectually, I know this is not entirely my fault. I have had periods of good health. My devil never appeared when on vacation. I ate normally-whatever that means- and engaged in activities. I approached food appropriately. I had days, weeks, or even years when food was not an issue, when I did not obsess. And then all hell broke loose and I was into another cycle of indeterminate duration. How and why did this yo-yo cycle recur? I wondered if I were I doomed to live with this battle until the end? I needed a truce. I'm just too old to still be dealing with this stuff! My comfort food was no longer a comfort. It made me uncomfortable, creating more feelings of guilt and displeasure.

When the cycle returned with a vengeance about two years ago, I mentioned my problem to my doctor. Her limited understanding shocked and scared me. Her answer, briefly, was that this is learned behavior for dealing with stress." These lifelong habits are most difficult to break", she said. If only she knew how difficult; if only she understood the disease. With a chuckle, my husband said he responds to his stresses by playing solitaire. Imagine an eating disorder being so trivialized by a doctor or spouse. I felt so angry, alone and misunderstood, again.

Shortly after that, a woman my age in our community died. I did not know her directly, but her death affected me profoundly. I envied her and hated myself. She didn't have to put up with life any more. Life was too hard. I didn't want to hurt myself, but I was seriously depressed. I did not want to see a therapist. I had been that route so many times. Therapists hadn’t listened. They didn’t hear me. One slept during an appointment, one sent me on to a nutritionist and a hypnotist. I wasn’t getting the help I needed for my specific problem. Take a bath or go for a walk wasn’t the help I was looking for or needed. My marriage became difficult. I did not want a divorce or separation. I wouldn't and couldn't talk. I withdrew. I sulked. It was a very bad year. I wanted a pill to make it all better. I wanted it to go away; whatever IT was.

I planned vacations-my salvation. My husband and I always had a great time away, together. Vacations with no stress and unlimited time together always reminded me of why we got married, the joy and love of being together. Life got better, issues melted, but did not disappear. I had a new primary care doctor. She listened. She told me, in her kind manner, it was time to do something. I knew, too. The office social worker gave me several names. I must have been telegraphing my readiness.

I was given the names of several social workers and psychologists. Some only saw children, as if these issues don't exist with adults. Some insisted on a dual approach of therapy and medication. I only wanted medication. Having tried so many treatments including acupuncture and hypnosis, I was desperate for that perfect tiny pill. My best years had been in the mid 1980's with anti-depressants. Perhaps now, almost 30 years later, there was a new treatment.

I called a doctor whose name was on the list. I spoke with his intake person who said he could see me after January. I had a month to wait. Then a call, he was not taking new patients and I felt upset, lost, like a ship at sea. Then another call, he would be seeing patients one day per week. I was thrilled. I felt like a new opportunity had opened up for me. I was so hopeful and excited.

I started with a long, detailed history at an intake session with a social worker. I still believed my problems started when I was 10 years old and my father passed away. Today you’d call me a latch key kid. My childhood stopped abruptly and I was different from every other kid, not only in appearance. I did not have symptoms then, but I also have no memory of my father. My life’s story begins at age 10. My mother never talked about the family’s early years or about my father. She did not keep his memory alive for my brother or me. That was how she coped. I was a lonely, sad and unhappy child; later, a high school student with good grades, few friends and no social life; and still later, a college student who didn’t and couldn't quite fit in. I met my husband on a blind date, married, and raised a family. I was a mother and a wife. We had a beautiful family, a lovely home, and a comfortable lifestyle for which my husband worked very hard and we both wanted.

I had my secret. Looking for a substitute for the family I didn’t have growing up. We had three teenage girls and a younger son. The female hormones in the family were palpable. One daughter struggled for perfection and had her own food issues. Another daughter had serious self-esteem problems, tried to hurt herself and was hospitalized. My husband worked. We all had our own individual coping methods. We tried to hold our family together. We closed ourselves off. We took care of each other. We tightened the ropes around us as we spent more time together. I spent my time driving everyone to appointments, private time between my child and me. I got very close with those who were hurting. There was a period of family therapy. We struggled, followed various experts' advice as we tried to sort things out. I still had my secret. We moved. I got a job I loved. My children grew up, went to college, married, and had children. My husband and I had it all and I still had my secret.

We still have it all. The difference is that I have to help myself and I have never worked harder, spent more time on me, felt better or been more tired. At last I’m free to explore other interests. I have taken ownership of my disease. I am assertive, and tell people when they hurt me. I speak up. I have a better relationship with my husband. I see a therapist whom I love, she hugs me. She taught me to be honest with those I trust. She tells me and I know I am strong. She tells me and I know I am a good person. She tells me and I know I am beautiful. I also see a nurse practitioner who talks to me as well and monitors my meds. I do things like yoga that I thought was way out of my comfort zone. I love my yoga instructor too. I’m not spiritual but I am now aware of every part of my body. I have confidence. Almost two years into a new protocol and I am a new person, not obsessing about food and not frustrated by an occasional bump in the road. And others have noticed how I’ve changed! I have come a very long way with helping myself.

There was an early television quiz show, "To Tell the Truth", where clues to a person's identity helped others to name the hidden celebrity. And so I thought...Was I a fraud? Who was I really? What was my friends’ perception of me. I didn’t particularly like myself.

I used to be my own worst critic, being way too hard on myself. I now know how important self-esteem, self-deprecation and laughter are to self-worth. Was I aware of all this as a young woman? I was very good at shutting others and the world out. "Just leave me alone.”. I was happy or unhappy...I was alone... I was lonely...I was bored... Everything was right...Everything was wrong...I was tired...I was hungry...I was anxious, frustrated, upset, frazzled. Sometimes, I could almost feel it in my teeth. I needed excuses. All this elaborate dance around food did not make me any happier, didn’t solve any problems. I knew strategies to delay or distract my obsession, but once on that road there was no detour. Once I became fixated, there was no stopping me. My depression rooted itself in my very being.

Now I am working on myself, for myself, with help. I have dedication, determination, medication. I am happy, laughing and enjoying life. I'm finding time in my life for the therapy I didn't want. I am smarter. I no longer use euphemisms like "good" or "bad" days. I know I don't want to move backwards. I have taken ownership of my disease and I am doing something about it. I care about me. I am looking out for me. I am honest with those I trust. I am strong. I am beautiful I speak up and out when I am hurt, disappointed, or angry. I am trying so hard that I am tired. A few times I have

slipped. I feel guilty but not depressed. One time I even felt sick from my disordered eating. That was a first and truly a learning experience! When friends ask about my need for an afternoon nap, I tell them I am working on getting myself healthy after many years of abusing my body with terrible eating habits. And that is the truth!

I am so optimistic and confident about my future. I actually like me now. I even went to a high school reunion having avoided all 50 of the previous ones. I had always thought of myself as invisible during high school. Yet someone asked me to join their group and I was confident enough to go. Life is a challenge. There are and always will be new difficulties and struggles coming along. My husband and I can work them out together, perhaps solve them, perhaps not, but at least I know that 50 years of poor eating did nothing but increase my pain. Am I dependent on medication for this remarkable turnaround? I don't know, but I do know the freedom I now have is worth it. Finally, I also know I am too old for this stuff, don't want this problem any longer and I have done something about it. This time.

My husband now gets it! I want others in the medical field who don’t understand eating disorders to “get it”- the complexity, the pain, the depression, the mental and physical fatigue and symptoms. Lastly, I hope you don’t struggle as long as I have. There is hope, there are people out there and here who will help you. Just keep searching until you find them. New information, resources, research and people are always coming forward to help. I did it. You can too!