the living diet

A Christian Journey to Joyful Eating

Martha Tatarnic

CHURCH
PUBLISHING
INCORPORATED

Dedicated to
St. David, Orillia
&
St. George's, St. Catharines

For a book study guide to accompany *The Living Diet*, go to *www.marthatatarnic.ca* or *https://www.churchpublishing.org/livingdiet*

Church Publishing
19 East 34th Street
New York, NY 10016
www.churchpublishing.org

Cover design by Paul Soupiset
Typeset by Rose Design

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tatarnic, Martha, author.
Title: The living diet : a Christian journey to joyful eating / Martha Tatarnic.
Description: New York, NY : Church Publishing, [2019] | Includes bibliographic references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018055701| ISBN 9781640651487 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781640651494 (ebk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Food—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Nutrition—Religious aspects—Christianity.
Classification: LCC BR115.N87 T38 2019 | DDC 248.4—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018055701

Contents

Introduction

We have an eating disorder. This struggle around how we feed and see our bodies plays out in a variety of ways, and contrary to the stereotypes, it is not confined to a particular age group or gender or to those who are especially obsessed with their appearance. Some of us desperately need to be thinner for health reasons. Most people believe, whether they really need to lose weight or not, that their lives would be better with fewer pounds. Some of us eat to protect or comfort ourselves. Many of us either eat mindlessly or obsessively, stuffing our faces on the run or counting every calorie and carb going into our mouths. Very young children, the middle-aged, seniors, and everyone in between, learn that indulging in food can be a means of filling a void, or that restricting food intake can be a way of asserting power. We are masters at finding and fretting over every perceived imperfection in our own bodies, even as we idolize the "perfect" bodies of the celebrities so glossily depicted in the media.

We are dissatisfied with our bodies, and our dissatisfaction turns into desperation, and our desperation turns into an obsession with food.

I struggled with an eating disorder. On the surface, I was trying to look the way I was taught to look by the culture around me. In a deeper sense, though, I was doing something much more damaging. I was embedding my deepest insecurities into the size of my waistline and believing that my feelings of alienation and despair could be forever lifted if I could just master my relationship with food and bring my body under control.

I was fed and coddled in this belief by a dense fog of media messages, learned eating patterns, cultural norms around dieting, and a nattering and nonstop verbal obsession around bodies—my body, your body, our bodies, celebrity bodies, athletic bodies. All of which taught me that the disgust, frustration, fear, and disappointment I felt about the food I ate and the way my body looked were entirely normal.

Vast amounts of money are channeled into telling us that the secret to health and weight loss can be unlocked . . . if we purchase the right product or adopt the magic discipline. Yet collectively we are getting neither thinner nor happier. We have a big, desperate problem, as big as the excess pounds we carry—both real and imagined—and all of the junk food and junk diets and junk body messages that we keep devouring in between. It isn't just that we are receiving bad teaching about food and bodies. We are also receiving bad *theology* about food and bodies.

Theology—talk about God—gives us language for who we are and what our lives are for. Bad theology makes it commonplace to talk as if food choices are only about me, as if eating is a merely individual act, as if my own pleasure is the ultimate good, even as I am taught that my body is a problem to be solved, or worse, a war to be won.

I am a priest, which means that I regularly have the opportunity to preach to my flock. That being said, I try to guard against "preachiness." At no point have I found that my self-righteous dispensing of advice has been an effective tool in facilitating transformation for others. I think of one particularly long stint on my high horse after successfully getting my baby daughter to sleep through the night after five sleepless months. I liberally preached to all of my new parent friends about my technique, assuring them that I had unlocked the secret to better sleep for them and their babies. None of them was helped by my "expertise," and I was humbled two years later when I discovered that nothing that I had previously done worked with my second child.

This book, then, isn't written from any high horse. After decades of obsessing about food and my body, I did experience healing. But let me be clear. I have never successfully lost weight on a diet. When I have cravings, I usually indulge them. I don't understand anything about gluten and whether or not we should be consuming it. I eat cake, and I enjoy it. This is not a dieting book or even a spiritual companion to your own weight loss program. This is not another part of the wave of internet faith teachers who tell you that God wants you to look after your body as a way of honoring God. I am not going to teach you how to pray instead of eat chips.

What I do have to offer is a rich collection of stories—some of them mine, many of them from the wisdom handed down through the Judeo-Christian faith. I have experience in how these stories allowed me to go from obsessing about food and my body to embrace joyful eating. I was a church-going Christian the whole time my desperation to lose weight was at its peak. It never occurred to me that my faith might have something to say about how I was eating and what I thought about my body. At best, I thought the Christian faith was silent on the matter; at worst, I would have subscribed to a vague notion that God was disappointed with my body too.

I was wrong. Jesus doesn't show us the way to drop pounds or lose inches. He also, thankfully, doesn't point us to a God who wishes we were thinner. The gospel he proclaimed is, however, concerned with the healing and health of our bodies.

But Jesus insists on a different framework. Bad theology teaches that health and healing are just about me. Jesus's gospel teaches that we can learn to honor and appreciate our bodies and our lives when we understand that our bodies and lives are in relationship with other bodies and lives around us.

Amazingly, in upending the bad teaching we have been given about our relationship with food, we might find that we are not just spiritually healthier, but physically as well.

All of the diet plans we could ever need or want are already available to us, teaching us to count calories or eliminate food groups or sign up for the right plan or product. None of them seems to make us any less desperate about food or any less dissatisfied with our bodies. It's time to reclaim the original meaning and intent of the word "diet." "Diet" is a word which comes from the Latin word *diaeta* (or the Greek *diatia*). It literally means "way of life" or "manner of living."

I call this book *The Living Diet* because through the teachings and model of Jesus, we are invited to see hunger, our bodies, and the way that we eat in an entirely different way. This way, this diet, allows us to break out of our own individual spheres of self-concern and into relationship, which is the truest identity of our bodily existence, and which is reaffirmed every time we put food into our mouths. This diet addresses our real eating disorder—our collective eating disorder—an

eating disorder that has left us with desperation and dissatisfaction as the norms for how we eat and what we see when we look in the mirror. This diet invites each of us, all of us, to discover the real joy of eating and the true gift of living this bodily existence.

part

1

Disorder

chapter
1

The Dangling Carrot

When I was nine years old, my brother bought a copy of *The Guinness Book of World Records*. I looked nervously at the picture of the Fattest Woman in the World. It was her thighs that captured my eye—roll upon roll of excess weight. Later, in the privacy of my own bedroom, I compared the picture to my own thighs. Laying the book carefully on the floor, I assumed a squatting position, noting with embarrassment the large amount of flab that bulged out along the inner side of my leg. I looked back and forth between what seemed like an enormous amount of flesh on my own thighs and the picture in *Guinness*, wondering if my thighs were as big as the Fattest Woman in the World's.

Looking through the actual photographic record of my nine-year-old self, I now recognize an astonishing thing: *I was not overweight*. There is no picture from my well-documented childhood that even begins to suggest the descriptions I assumed for myself—pudgy, chunky, bigger—whether they came from the words of others, or from my own imagination. But, at nine years old, I was already talking about dieting, already feeling guilty when I ate sweets, already envious of my skinny friends, already holding in my stomach, avoiding that squatting position specifically, and hoping that nobody would notice the many stray rolls that I saw disfiguring my body. Maybe if I wore baggy enough clothes and held my stomach at a certain angle, I could fool people into not seeing the extra flesh that was so obvious to me.

Did I mention that I was nine? Grade 4.

These obsessions were my constant companions through those growing-up years. I worried and compared, I dieted and relapsed. I took off a few pounds here, put them back on there. I felt stiff and awkward. In adolescence, I began to wear the shorter skirts and more form-fitting tops my friends were wearing, all the while hoping that people weren't twittering behind my back at how silly the fat girl looked trying to dress like everyone else. In comparison to my slimmer, prettier friends, I believed I was always being judged as wanting. Religion began to play a bigger part in my life but seemed to have nothing to say to my struggles with food and body image. If anything, I imagined that God would also be happier with me if I were skinnier. As I began to contemplate possible leadership in the church, I was sure that the message I would offer would be a lot more compelling to a nonreligious world if I were thin.

My life, beneath the boyfriends, friendship dramas, stress over getting good grades, and negotiations with my parents, was governed by three relentless thoughts:

1. What can I eat next?
2. I just need to lose X number of pounds.
3. Do I look fat?

Having My Cake and Eating It Too

I thought I had discovered the key to the universe when I figured out how to make myself throw up. There was a vision that was just beyond my grasp—a carrot leading me on. It was me in a slinky backless top, my smooth, toned, thin body modestly covered, except that one suggestive area. Along with the image, I could hear the surprised, admiring, even envious comments, "Wow, you look great!" "You've lost weight!" and "How did you do it?"

The idea was first presented to me by a friend when we were first-year university music students. I had eaten too much Mexican food and was feeling sick and bloated as a result.

"Just make yourself throw up," she suggested nonchalantly. Her words were revelatory. I could screw up and there was a way to wipe

the slate clean! Back in my dorm later that night, I waited until there was nobody else in the communal washroom and went into one of the stalls. I tried to purge, but as disgusting and bloated as I felt, I couldn't get my gag reflex to work. I went to bed, as I had so many times before, feeling heavy and ashamed.

In the years that followed, the unsuccessful diets kept piling up. Whenever I would make a resolution to restrict my eating, my cravings would correspondingly swell out of control. Out loud, I would blame my dieting failures on genetics. *It's because I am a Smith. Smiths LOVE food.* Inside, however, the more that dieting failed, the more I became convinced that dieting success is what I needed more than anything. I was increasingly desperate to be free of that nine-year-old girl holding in the embarrassment of her overly large stomach.

In my fourth year of university, that whispered suggestion rocketed back to me in a moment of searing insight. I was enjoying a night of board games and overeating with my closest friends. I surveyed the room. There was the friend who seemed able to indulge without gaining weight, and another who had recently lost twenty pounds. "Oh, it was easy," she said when we asked her the key to her success. "I just started walking and I guess the weight came off." Then there were the rest of us who still obsessed about the extra pounds we believed we had to lose. We were implicated by the easy slimness of the other two—clearly, the rest of us had deficits in willpower and self-care. Suddenly I knew the secret. Each of these effortlessly svelte friends would later stick a finger down her throat to get rid of the excess. It was a smart and easy way of having your cake . . . and eating it too.

The first time that I managed to bring back up the bad food I had eaten, I felt that soaring hope that I had felt so many times before. This time would be different. *I was finally going to lose weight.* Bulimia was the ideal boyfriend I had failed to notice until now—the quiet dreamboat who had been standing on the sidelines all along, beckoning me to address my wildest dream and my deepest insecurity by giving up the battle against my favorite security blanket. How had I so long failed to give myself over to this perfect companion?

My body reacted physically to the thrill of this new secret, to the loneliness I was trying to feed, to the addiction I thought I could control

by setting it loose. I started overindulging more regularly because I could. I became hungry because the world of food had become available to me, consequence-free. I got hungrier—a deep pit-of-the-stomach, rumbling, obsessive hunger. I woke up thinking about food. I went to bed thinking about food. I would plan out what I was going to eat the next day, and then I would reach the end of a long day of eating unable to face the fact that there was nothing more to stuff into myself. One night, while visiting my grandmother, I wolfed down a four-scoop ice cream sundae topped with two kinds of syrup, chocolate chips, and M&Ms. All I wanted was to feel full. I came to the end of it far too quickly and had to choke back the illogical tears of a spoiled child. The rest of the night stretched endlessly in front of me. There was nothing left to eat until breakfast the next morning.

My hunger was stronger than my gag reflex. I never lost weight. I never got my shining moment in the backless top surrounded by admiring friends asking me how I had managed to drop poundage. I never got to say, "*Oh, it was easy . . .*"

I stopped short of pursuing the extremes of the disease. Laxatives were appealing, for example, as a way to ensure effective purging, but the idea of anyone finding out what I was doing—the possibility of being called out to "get help"—reigned me in. I didn't want to be sick and damaged. I just wanted to eat a bag of Doritos and not have to live with the consequences.

I wasn't losing weight, but for a while there were other compensations. It was a religious experience, one that quickly became the focal point of my day. Originally my plan had been to use purging as an occasional corrective to a mistake, but "binge and purge" instead became something I did regularly behind closed doors. I planned out my mistakes, and I did so knowing that afterward I would be shiny and new again. I would be in lectures, or at choir practice, or out with friends, and I would be thinking about what awaited me later: too many slices of pizza, a bag of chips at the computer, a nauseating number of gummies while studying, all the while knowing that both indulgence and absolution were mine for the taking.

Indulgence and absolution ultimately weren't enough. Weight loss was still the dangling carrot. The harder I tried, the further that carrot

seemed to get from me. I became more and more convinced that if I were twenty pounds lighter, if I could just look good wearing one of those backless tops, I would meet my soul mate. I would be recognized and admired. I would be successful and loved. My failure to win the battle over those twenty pounds was a failure of my entire being.

I went to bed every night a mess of conflicting disappointments. I was disappointed to not be thinner. I was disappointed to be hungry. I was disappointed with what I ate that day. I was not exactly disappointed about being somebody who made myself throw up, but I was disappointed it wasn't working better. I was disappointed in myself for not being more committed. The food I had consumed, the emptiness that still ached inside, the acidic burning in my throat from purging, and the obsession about the next day's food choices combined to tie a rock-hard knot of anxiety that weighed down and bloated out every cell of my body.

I did eventually stop. I can guess now that I would have continued much longer down this road, with more damage to my body, if bulimia had yielded what I wanted. But I was about to begin a new chapter of my life. I was graduating with a music degree and beginning seminary in the fall. I had been claimed by a call to priestly ministry when I was fifteen, but had been mostly happy to park my faith life in a tidy and private compartment during college. It was a time for a new beginning. As a smoker might describe their cigarette breaks, binging and purging had become the focus and structure of my day. It wasn't serving me well, but it was nonetheless a supreme act of willpower, enabled by a change of cities, social circles, and studies, to give it up. I felt great reluctance, and I suffered several relapses. By the time I moved to Toronto that fall, I had succeeded in one thing. I had stopped forcing myself to purge.

It felt like the opposite of success. The outward sign of my eating disorder was gone. Inside I was left with one more feeling of failure. The obsessions raged on, but without a physical release. Inside, the lifelong pattern of body dis-ease tightened its iron grip.