



Candy Girl

HOW I GAVE UP SUGAR
AND CREATED A SWEETER
LIFE BETWEEN MEALS

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FOREWORD

Last week I called up my old lover Sugah. You know how when you come back into town after being gone a long time and you just can't keep yourself from driving by his house, you know, just to take the trip down Memory Lane, and just by chance he's home and the lights are on and you think, wow, it can't hurt to just stop by and say hello. It's been a long time and he's not going to be interested in you (he's probably taken up with someone else by now) and you know you're not going to be interested in him because you're married to Healthy Eating now and you just know you won't break that commitment.

But Sugah invites you in and he's really glad to see you. He's watching reruns of West Wing with your mutual friend Cheetos, and Cheetos pulls you down to sit right between them and they wrap their arms around you and those old seductive feelings start up and you think, wow, I can stay here for a day or two. Hell, it's the holidays and everybody I know is coming over to the party and I can leave anytime I want to.

After a couple of days, Cheetos leaves and you're glad to see him go because your mouth hurts after he kisses you and your fingers turn orange from touching him, but Sugah is so sweet to you and he makes all the old promises and you think about leaving but it's so much easier to hang out there because your anxiety goes away and your burden of responsibility is buried under a few dozen wrappers. And then you can't quite zip your pants and nothing real tastes very good anymore and Sugah wants to spend all day watching Netflix and you need to go to work and he promises to come by on your breaks and he does and then he's waiting when you get home and it seems all okay and then it doesn't.

And so you bite the bullet and stop buying more tickets for the merry-go-round because it wasn't all that merry and you just hope Healthy Eating is waiting up and will take you back when you drag your sorry ass through the door.

IT'S NOT TOO LATE

Chances are that if you're reading this book, you're not 15. Or even 25 or 35. If you are that young, you're probably looking for another diet or hoping that I've got the miracle answer for how you can eat all you want and not gain weight or have health issues. When you've been to the refrigerator a few million times like I have, you've figured out that that isn't going to happen. Oh, we go on hoping but we know it isn't true. There are only a couple of answers that work: eat the right foods and not too much of them, exercise steadily and wisely, and, perhaps most importantly, heal your emotional wounds.

I'm 69 years old. I've been up and down the scale for the last 25 years, mostly up. And I have learned to eat moderately and exercise moderately and I can keep my weight at a much more comfortable place but only if I don't eat sugar. When I eat sugar, I binge on candy, ice cream, and other sweets and then somehow, some way, I slip into a space of WHY THE HELL NOT, and I eat everything I want: grilled cheese sandwiches, fish and chips, hot buttered naan, doughnuts, you name it. I throw off what feel like the shackles of abstinence and go hog wild. My dormant fat cells have a field day, and then in a few months the 30 lost pounds are 40 gained.

To be honest, I've been tempted to give up, to just be a fat old person. But I don't want to be a fat old person. It isn't the vanity of my earlier years that's calling to me anymore. It's the bad back, the threat of heart disease and diabetes. It's the difficulty of tying my shoes or clipping my toenails. I don't want to be incapacitated. Trekking in Nepal is not on my bucket list, but sitting comfortably in any movie theater or airplane seat is.

So one of my intentions is to preach the message that it's not too late. Whatever your age, whatever my age, it is not too late.

I hope the ideas and suggestions and questions in this book will give you the courage to make the changes that you need. And let's face it. I want this book to keep me inspired too. I want to write my way into lasting recovery from sugar and food addiction.

HOWEVER, IT SEEMS ONLY FAIR TO WARN YOU...

This book does not contain any magic solutions to the addiction to sugar and the obsession with food. If you're anything like me, you've spent a lot of time and money looking for that magic. You've suffered through diet after diet always to end up in the same place or worse. Although we don't want to believe it, and we may keep searching, we know that the quick fixes don't work and that the simple pill or mantra doesn't exist. But there is hope. And it doesn't take starvation or eating the same thing all the time or being miserable. It doesn't take seaweed wraps at a spa or six hours a day of exercise.

It may take a certain level of misery though, misery and desperation. It did for me. I had to get miserably obese, desperately tired of the merry-go-round of slow weight loss and fast weight gain and more and more limitations.

But it also takes some very good things, things you already have but may not have considered as allies and gifts in this struggle: your acceptance, your courage, your persistence, your sense of humor, and your ability to change your story. Here's how I changed my story and some ideas for how you can change yours.

A word about sugar addiction and alcoholism

I've been self-medicating with sugar and food for most of my life. For 20 years in the middle, alcohol was my primary addiction. I didn't know for a long time that the two problems are the same problem for me. But when I got sober in 1989, sugar again became my poison of choice. If you are an alcoholic who suffers from sugar and food addiction as I do, this book is for you. If you are not an alcoholic but you suffer from sugar and food addiction, this book is also for you.

When we talk to recovering alcoholics and addicts, we find a very common refrain: I started using sugar or food just like I was using alcohol.

— Phil Werdell, co-founder of ACORN Food Dependency Recovery Services

A word about anorexia and bulimia

Anorexia and bulimia have not been part of my path, so this book doesn't address those relationships with food. My eating disorders are on the other end of the spectrum: compulsive overeating and weight gain. However, all of us who struggle with food share many of the same difficulties. We all seek to find peace with food and to do that, I believe we need to create engaging and fulfilling lives between meals. Much of what I've written here may resonate with you even if the way we eat doesn't look the same.

How to use this book

I wrote this book to record my experience, strength, and hope around recovering from food addiction. Part memoir, part how-to, part ruminations and understandings, the book is loosely organized in sections of what it was like for me, what happened, what it's like now, and the tools I am using to deepen my recovery and prevent relapse.

You can read this book in the usual way: starting at the beginning and reading through to the end. Alternately you can use it as a meditation/journaling guide, using the 210 list in the back to find discussions relevant to your current circumstances. And then again, you can just dip in and out as you need it.

The Food for Thought questions in each section are great for daily journaling or for discussion with your recovery buddy or small group. I use them regularly in my own recovery. Note that you don't need a new special notebook or journal for this. Use one of the many you've already written three pages in☺. You can also post your responses and questions on the program's Facebook page @lifebetweenmeals.

The Tools for Change can help you get started. Other tools are available at www.lifebetweenmealscoaching.com.

I am so glad you are curious about creating a life between meals. It's given me a way out and I hope you will find that it does that for you too.

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Part I
THE WAY IN

HOW I FELL INTO SUGAR AND FOOD ADDICTION

I'm addicted to sugar

The word *addicted* gets thrown around a lot. "I'm addicted to *House of Cards* or *Dancing with the Stars*. I'm addicted to the Harry Potter books. I'm addicted to the French fries at Big Al's Burgers." This is meant to be cute.

But my sugar addiction isn't cute and its impact isn't benign. It's done a very negative number on my blood pressure and my cholesterol levels. It has put hundreds of pounds on my body. It has mired me in guilt, shame, self-loathing, and a myriad of other emotional miseries.

So why don't I leave it alone? Because I can't. I can't take it or leave it. If I take it, I can't leave it. It's a simple truth but a very hard one to live with.

Addiction is often characterized as an allergy in the body (an unhealthy response) and an obsession in the mind. Neither of these is cute.

I am also an alcoholic. In my case, this is not a coincidence, for alcohol in its many forms is just fermented sugars. Same allergy, same kind of obsession. Same misery. Not every sugar addict is an alcoholic and not every alcoholic is a sugar addict, but many of us are even if we don't know it or want to know it.

It isn't cute to be a food addict. It isn't romantic or dramatic either. There are some great movies about alcoholics and drug addicts, from *The Lost Weekend* to *Leaving Las Vegas*, from *I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can* to *Clean and Sober* to *When a Man Loves a Woman*. But nobody makes movies about food addicts, too much misery, too little sensationalism.

Food addiction is a crippling drudgery. If you have it, you know what I'm talking about. I didn't expect to have it. I fought the idea that I have it for decades. Now I accept that this is part of my journey. If it's part of yours, read on.

Three experiences that set me up for self-medicating with food

Before the age of 9, I have no memories that involve food. I have memories of school, of my parents, of my siblings, of moving from Portland to Denver, of rooms and yards and trips. But no memories of food.

Then when I was 9, three experiences changed me and I stepped into a world of hurt that needed soothing.

Experience #1

On a sunny afternoon in the fall of 1956, I was outside playing with my sisters, age 6 and 2. I had turned over my bike and was clipping playing cards onto the spokes so they would make that lovely clickety-clack when I ride. My youngest sister, Kerry, was turning the pedals and watching the gears go around. Somehow I stopped paying attention to her and moved away or turned away, and she stuck her fingers into the gears. There was blood and her howling face. Soon we were all screaming and my parents came running. They read me the riot act for being careless, snatched up Kerry, and went off to the hospital, leaving me awash in guilt and shame. If they spoke to me about it more reasonably when they returned, I don't remember. I know now they were terrified and that they thrust that fear onto me. That didn't help me at the time. At the time, I felt wrong, so wrong, useless, irresponsible, dangerous. At the time, I started turning to food to soothe my emotions.

Experience #2

When we'd lived only eight months in Colorado, my dad lost his new job and we moved back to the Pacific Northwest. While my folks waited for the Colorado house to sell, we stayed with my father's parents, who were caretakers on a big rambling summer estate along the Columbia River. Their home was a 3-room apartment above the garage with a bedroom for them and a couch for my mother and the baby. My brother and sister and I had to sleep across the road in what was called "the Big House," where the owners stayed when they came up each summer. Now it was shuttered for the winter. It had no electricity, no heat, no plumbing, just damp beds and a bucket in the corner if we needed to pee in the night. My mother would take us over each night and lock us in until morning.

I was terrified every night all night for the six weeks of this ordeal. My mother had little patience for my fears. She was not an unkind woman but she pushed away

whatever she couldn't fix as if it wasn't there. I had nightmares for years after we moved into a Portland suburb. I couldn't sleep if my parents weren't home. I couldn't sleep if the door to my room was closed and a light wasn't shining in from the hall. My mother had little patience for any of this either.

I know now that this was post-traumatic distress, but neither my mother nor I knew that then. The only remedy she knew was to tell me to "forget about it." I couldn't do that so I had to find another way to make myself feel better: food.

Experience #3

The new home near Portland meant a new school in the city. My early classroom experiences had been engaging and joyful. I had spent the first four years in a rural 3-room schoolhouse where classes were tiny (there were only five of us in my class: Mark, Linda, Buster, Kathy, and me). We got a lot of individual attention and we were free to wander around the room and find things to do when we had finished a particular lesson. Now I was in fifth grade in a regimented classroom in a city school. We were expected to sit still, be quiet, and fold our hands on top of the desk and wait while other children finished their work. We couldn't leave our desks without permission. We couldn't talk without permission. Already tortured at night, I was now tortured during the day.

Enter sugar, Enter addiction

After a few weeks at that school, I discovered the Little Store, a corner market two long blocks from our house and I began spending all my allowance, plus coins I stole from my father's dresser, on candy. I went there after school any day I had money and on Saturdays too. The freedom of childhood in the 1950s helped make this possible. I could always go for a ride on my bike. It isn't long before I was eating the candy in school, sneaking it all day from a small paper bag in my desk, one of the convenient kind that had a large wooden lid that opens up away from the teacher.

By junior high, we had moved across town but there was still a candy store on my way to school. My mother had first taken me there herself. On that trip, she had given me a dime and told me to choose something for myself. I bought 10¢ worth of chunk milk chocolate. One bite and I was hooked. After that, each morning I left the house in plenty of time. My mother thought I was eager to get to school, but in reality, I needed the time to stop at the Sweet Shoppe. I was almost always the only customer at 8 am. Mrs. Elliott, the owner, never remarked about what I bought or how often I was there. Maybe she was glad to have the business. Maybe she understood what I needed.

I didn't know, of course, that I was medicating myself. I didn't know that I was establishing habits and brain patterns that would cost me dearly later on. I did know that I was doing something bad. I told no one about this. I hid the candy. It was not that I didn't want to share it, but I had to be sure I had enough. And I didn't want it taken away from me. I didn't want my behavior monitored. More habits and patterns got ingrained.

And I knew for sure that I felt better when I got as much candy as I wanted into my system. My fear, my restlessness, my boredom, all went away.

Addiction and anxiety

As a child, I didn't know of course that what was happening to me was anxiety. I had a hard time sitting still, and my body was jittery a lot of the time. I didn't know that I had become hyper-vigilant. After the weeks of sleeping across the road in the Big House, I no longer trusted that my parents would be there for me and I didn't know how to talk to them about this. I was afraid of everything that I couldn't control so I tried to control everything. I went to bed at precise times. I checked the locks on the doors each night. I insisted that we have a fire escape plan. I learned the seven warning signs of cancer and continually checked myself for any sign.

My mother called my obsessive and compulsive behaviors "silly." In her mind, I should just get over it. I know she didn't want me to suffer, but she didn't have any way to understand what had happened to me, and I couldn't discuss my worries and fears with her. She clung to her own childhood belief that negative emotions came from too little to do, and she could always find more chores to give me.

For nearly a decade, candy was my best friend. It saved me from the rigidity and boredom of the classroom. It saved me from the seeming indifference of my parents. It saved me from some of the angst and loneliness of adolescence. In fact, candy saved my sanity. If I ate enough of it, the fear went away. I could concentrate on the sweetness and then when it was all gone, I could relax into the delicious feeling of being sated, of having had enough of what I wanted.

I had formed a tight bond with the salvation of sweets and I had learned how to take care of myself. When I discovered alcohol, that worked even better. And when I had to give alcohol up because it was killing me, my old pal sugar stepped right back onto center stage of my life.

Sugar and my early recovery from alcoholism

In September 1989, I entered a treatment center in Lynchburg, Virginia. Wednesday that week I had finally told my doctor the extent of my drinking and she arranged for me to go into a 28-day treatment program. I checked in at 4 pm on Saturday, still drunk. At 8 pm, I went to my first 12-step meeting. I was offered a cup of coffee and a doughnut. I didn't accept either because I was pretty out of it, but the next night I felt better and I had both.

I went to two or three AA meetings a day the first year I was sober. Every meeting had coffee and sweets of some kind: doughnuts, cookies, cake, candy. The treatment center itself had had an endless supply of cookies and a chest freezer full of ice cream bars. We were encouraged to eat all we wanted. In fact, the counselors recommended that we keep candy around at home or in our purse and eat some if we felt a craving to drink, saying that we needed to substitute for the sugar we were used to consuming in the alcohol. (At an AA meeting recently, a list of helpful hints for surviving the holidays went around. Tip #9 was carry candy with you wherever you go.)

We were all adults, of course, and maybe their assumption was that we could eat sugar in moderation. But I don't think that was the case. I don't think any of them, from the nurses to the counselors, who were all in recovery themselves, thought about the fact that we had all proven already that we couldn't be moderate. Nor did they think about sugar as an addictive substance. Beside, putting on a few pounds was preferable to pounding down a few drinks in relapse.

That first year, my sugar of choice was midgie Tootsie Rolls. It's not very good candy and I'm not sure why that became my obsession, maybe because it was chewy, maybe because unwrapping each little piece (quiet wrappers that don't rustle) gave me something to do with my restlessness. I didn't eat them except in meetings but I'd go through a bag a meeting. With 730 meetings that first year, I must have eaten a truckload. I ate other sweet foods during the day sometimes. I don't much remember. It didn't worry me how much I ate. I wasn't drinking and that was all that mattered.

I'd also long known that staying really busy kept negative feelings at bay. My mom was right about that. So I tried hard to stay busy enough so that I could stay safe from alcohol. That busyness helped protect me from the agony of the slow decline of my 10-year relationship with my boyfriend, which I could see would not survive my sobriety. I thought that if I ate enough sweets and stayed busy enough, maybe I could stay sober and not mind that our life together was over. It seemed a winning formula.

I left that relationship after 10 months of sobriety. He'd gotten far more serious about one of his other women than he'd ever been about me, and I found a new

teaching job 300 miles away. So I subtracted the jealousy and added loneliness. Of course I stayed connected to AA in my new town. More meetings, more cookies, more coffee. Evening meetings we went out for pie afterwards. Morning meetings we went out for pancakes. Nobody had a salad. Nobody had oatmeal. We ate sweets.

I often did well all day at work. The faculty dining hall served reasonable meals and I'd only occasionally buy a cookie or a piece of pie. But the evenings were tough. I'd get home about 4 and the AA meeting didn't start until 8. This was the cocktail hour, the drinking-as-transition time that I'd been doing for 20 years. So I started baking to fill the time. I got hooked on caramel brownies and would eat half a pan. I made cookies and consumed six or eight at a time—however many it took to get relief. The warm sweets gave me something to look forward to when I left my office.

Then in my third year of sobriety, my AA sponsor introduced me to Dove Bars on the drive back from an AA weekend rally. Dove Bars are an extraordinarily caloric ice cream bar. One bar and I was hooked. It became my drug of choice for nearly five years. I didn't care that I was putting on a few pounds, and then a few more, and then a few more. Although I wasn't staying healthy, I was staying sober and I was more at peace than I'd been in a long time.

Sugar and getting fat

The weight gain didn't hit me in the beginning. I grew up thin. I was a bean pole kid, shooting up to 5'10" as I hit puberty and weighing about 110 pounds. My mother encouraged me to eat what I wanted because clearly it didn't show up as fat. In fact, there were no weight repercussions of my free-for-all with food until I hit 35, and even then it was fairly easy for me to take the weight off for quite a while, mostly thanks to chronic jealousy and anxiety from my unhealthy relationships with men who were no more emotionally available to me than my parents had been. More habits and patterns.

During my drinking decades, I looked like a normal eater. I ate three reasonable meals a day. I ate dessert when it was offered and if it was something I liked. I ate a candy bar or two; I'd have a donut or a scone. I actually preferred chips and dip or French fries, salty fat foods. This is not surprising because my sugar needs were being met by four bottles of wine a day. I'd overeat occasionally. Who doesn't? But the weight stayed off.

Some alcoholics stop eating as their disease progresses. I didn't. Drinking made me hungry, hungry for pizza, popcorn, burgers, French fries—again the fat and salt to balance out all that sugar. I kept a well-stocked refrigerator as well as a well-stocked liquor supply. The combination of food and alcohol was the best tranquilizer I could find. I wasn't ever tempted by anorexia and although I threw up every morning for years, I was not bulimic, just toxic. I needed to feel fed, to feel full in order to feel okay.

In 1994, at five years sober, the weight was coming on. I'd been gaining about half a pound a month since I got sober. Weight gain that slow is very easy to adjust to. Your clothes gradually get tighter. You look for a fuller cut of pants or a little looser top. Then, what the hell, you just buy an 18 or a 20 or a 22.

A couple of years later, I watched 200 go by on the scale, a number I swore I'd never see. But then it was easy to see 202 go by and 205 and 209. I'd think about getting on a diet, eating a little less, but I never took action. I didn't like the way I looked, but I liked the calm that so much sugar and fat gave me. I was starting to slow down but since I was trying to relax anyway—that's why we're eating what we do and as much as we do, isn't it?—that mild sluggishness seemed a good thing. I didn't have as much energy but I didn't have as much anxiety either. I wasn't working so hard. That all seemed good. Numb equals good.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT, TOOLS FOR CHANGE

- 1 How do you relate to the word *addicted*?
- 2 What experiences may have started you on the road to food addiction?
- 3 Why and how did you start self-medicating with food?
- 4 How did food serve you when you were younger?
- 5 How have sugar and other foods continued to serve you?
- 6 What is your history of weight gain?

