



## Our Stories: Hope Egan

Most of my childhood memories revolve around food: Chasing after the ice cream truck's bells like Pavlov's dog. Snooping for Pop-Tarts after Mom bought groceries. Eating pizza topped with crushed potato chips in the grade school cafeteria.

I didn't think too much about it, though, until 1990 when I visited my mom in a thirty-day, twelve-step-based inpatient treatment center for food addiction. There I learned about compulsive eating—the kind that cripples the heart, the mind and the soul, as well as the body. I immediately understood that this wasn't just Mom's problem—it was mine too.

For several years I avoided twelve-step groups to address my compulsive eating. Why? Because God was their solution.

God? Didn't He have anything better to do than keep me from eating another Matt's Chocolate Chip Cookie? I had always thought that He disappeared after freeing the slaves from Egypt and parting the Red Sea. (*The Ten Commandments* movie was an integral part of my childhood faith formation.) Turning to God for help was not an option I seriously considered.

My preoccupation with food continued and I eventually hit bottom. In 1992 a car accident on

Thanksgiving meant that I couldn't exercise. In danger of packing on the pounds, I confessed my fear to my therapist. She affirmed that three trips a day to the candy machine for Reese's Peanut Butter Cups was not normal, and she urged me to go to Overeaters Anonymous (OA).

Where did I get my goofy eating habits?

Raised by a health food nut mom and a junk-food junkie dad, I naturally developed confused eating patterns. My taste buds craved Dad's chocolate cake, but when I'd unpack my sack lunch, I was always disappointed to find Mom's carrot sticks and tuna sandwiches on whole wheat bread.

In college and beyond, the floodgates opened to years of pent-up sugar demand: I rejoiced in Gummi Bears and cookies galore. I cycled between healthy and crazy eating, always using rigorous exercise to support my sugar habit.

Back to my therapist. Still skeptical (but desperate), I listened to her and attended my first OA meeting in January 1993, where I learned more about food addiction. How, for example, could someone like my mom eat so much "healthy" food but still have an unhealthy relationship with it? I learned that food idolatry is an internal issue—both emotional and

spiritual—that affects many people, regardless of what they look like and regardless of how “healthy” they are eating.

What really struck me at these OA meetings, though, was the emphasis on God. I was surprised by how “normal” the God-focused OA people seemed. In spite of their stories about how God had changed their lives, I decided to be my own “higher power.” Not surprisingly, my life got worse.

One evening, after a particularly gut-wrenching phone conversation with my mom, I broke down and sobbed. Why was I always so mean to her? I realized that I needed serious help, so I begged God to restore my life to sanity. (Besides my crazy eating, I had virtually no success with family or romantic relationships, and I was a borderline compulsive shopper.)

After taking that leap of faith, my food obsession surprisingly began to ease and I abstained from eating sugar for longer than I ever had. But while my food choices improved, my relationships with God and with other people were still inadequate.

Having been raised in a secular Jewish home, I just assumed that it was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who I sought. But I eventually wondered about Jesus. After all, in spite of living in a predominantly Christian culture, I didn't really know anything about this supposed messiah. I was curious to learn about Him, so I did some reading. My research made me think that Jesus might not be such a bad guy after all.

After trying to “turn my life over to God” for three years—but still not really knowing Him—I went to Safe Place, a small Christian

faith community that was an offshoot of Park Community Church in Chicago.

I was fascinated to learn about the God of Abraham from the Bible's perspective. Familiar stories like Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, and Joseph (of Technicolor Dreamcoat fame) were actually woven together as part of God's bigger story. I even learned the answer to The Question that had nagged me since childhood: “And then what happened? Where did He go?” I was relieved to learn that His story continued to unfold and that He was alive and well and still working in people's lives, thousands of years later.

I loved being part of this faith community that took God so seriously; my perspective on this topic had, obviously, radically changed. And the Christian teachings about relationships and living life were so compelling that I began to think maybe Jesus was The One. Who else could have inspired such wisdom about marriage, dating and sex? I eventually couldn't help myself: I became a committed follower of Jesus.

Oy! What was a nice Jewish girl like me doing following Jesus? It seemed odd, but the more I committed myself, the more my food compulsions eased and the better my relationships became. My lifelong bumpy ride was finally starting to smooth out.

Then I found out I had candida, a systemic yeast infection that infiltrates the entire bloodstream and whose treatment is a strict diet. How strict? Let's just say that it's easier to list what I could eat than what I couldn't: fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, beans, certain whole grains,

fish and chicken. How would I survive without sugar, dairy, wheat, yeast or processed foods?

I cried for days when I learned that I'd have to fix three meals a day—from scratch—for at least three months! The thought of cooking for real, for every meal, sounded tedious and tasteless, and I didn't know where to start, especially since my cooking repertoire was limited to eggs, pancakes, cookies and macaroni and cheese.

How did I survive this long without knowing how to cook? Salad bars and frozen dinners. Simple cheese sandwiches. Dinners out with friends. An occasional pizza delivery. My diet was certainly not as bad as in my pre-OA days (grazing all day on a box of chocolate crumb donuts) and possibly healthier than the average American's. But my diet was far from ideal.

Several books on eliminating yeast from my diet motivated me to prepare three wholesome meals a day, even though I could barely boil water when I began. In spite of the cooking trauma, candida turned out to be a huge gift. Not only did I learn how to cook, but I looked better and felt healthier than ever. By the time I was healed, I enjoyed my home cooking more than eating out!

Even with the blessings, I wasn't sure what to do next. Did I have to eat healthy forever? It obviously couldn't hurt, but the "candida diet" did get tiresome. And more importantly, what did God think about all this?

By this point I had fully committed my life to the God of the Bible, which meant seeking His guidance in all areas of my life. But what, exactly, did He think about my food? From my experiences in the Christian church, it seemed

like celebrating with rich desserts and avoiding fruits and vegetables was the norm. And pork—something the Bible frowns on—was usually served on religious holidays like Christmas and Easter.

What was I missing?

Thankfully, I wasn't the only person to ask these questions. In the last fifteen years, dozens of fascinating books have been written about God, the Bible and food. In addition to reading other books, I read Dr. Rex Russell's groundbreaking book, *What the Bible Says about Healthy Living*, which answered a lot of my questions. Of course God cares about what we eat! He intelligently designed our bodies, our digestive systems, our immune systems. And He intelligently designed our food: all types of plants and animals that perfectly match our bodies' nutritional needs.

I knew that other people struggled with food choices, so I began speaking about this topic at churches and women's events, which is how I met Amy, who sheepishly confessed that she had been eating and cooking "God's way" for most of her life and wanted to teach others how.

Within a few months, Amy and I started a monthly cooking club where we shared our wisdom and excitement about God's design for eating by actually cooking with a group of people. Each month we created recipes to cook and provided handouts of these recipes for each participant to take home. We were clearly onto something: why not take it a step further and publish our recipes? We did and this cookbook is the result.

Seeing the impact our recipes have had on

people's lives, we're convinced that God is at work, so we want to share our story with you. While we can't be in the kitchen with you personally, we can help you set up your kitchen and give you tasty recipes that are relatively simple to prepare.

We hope you enjoy our cookbook, and we hope you will share your success stories with us! Our prayer is that by submitting this area of your life to the One who created you, your life will be richly blessed and you will be a blessing to others.



## Our Stories: Amy Cataldo

Struggling to feed three kids—in a healthy way and on a budget—wasn't easy for Mom, who became a single parent when I was only six. So she joined a food co-op and our family's wonderful world of whole foods began: whole grain flour, pasta, nuts, dried fruit, nut butters and even weirder things, like nutritional yeast and textured vegetable protein.

Like Hope, I coveted my friends' Skippy and Smucker's sandwiches on white bread. I tried to trade my lunches for theirs, but no one was interested in brown bread or natural peanut butter. Eating my dried apricots, I quietly endured teasing and loud exclamations like, "Eew! What is that?"

But Mom persisted, so I grew up eating home-cooked meals from scratch: if it came in a box, we probably didn't eat it. Thankfully, this upbringing conditioned my taste buds to prefer home-cooked, healthy meals, and I learned how to cook because of it. By junior high, my sister and I were regularly cooking dinner for the whole family.

When I started college in 1990, my busy schedule and tight budget forced me to change my eating habits. For the first time, I relied on cheap convenience foods, and I ate out

more than I was used to, too: Pizza Hut pizza and sandwiches became staples. And when I expected to study until late, I often drank several large espressos before the night was over.

Even though I didn't eat horribly, I still missed healthy home-cooked meals. By graduation, I was looking forward to finding an apartment, having my own kitchen, and cooking from scratch again. For me, it tasted better, it was better for me, and I really loved doing it.

I landed a consulting job for a big firm, so I traveled constantly. Sadly, the return to my childhood eating patterns had to wait another four years. Meanwhile, I tried to make good food choices, but airline meals and hotel food left me few appealing alternatives.

Eventually I burned out. A slave to my job, I had no work-life balance. I was ready for a Change.

The need for Change—with a capital C—was more than just wanting a new job; I needed an entire lifestyle transformation. My work seemed meaningless and I felt physically sluggish from my travel-heavy lifestyle. I was also avoiding something that had been gnawing at me for several years: God. Was He real? Should He be part of my life?

Feeling paralyzed, I needed a kick-start. After reading the classic job-hunting guide *What Color Is Your Parachute?* and taking a formal aptitude test, it became clear that I was a natural teacher. I quit my job and entered an eight-week specialty program that helped business professionals become math and science teachers in the infamous Chicago public schools. In the fall of 1998, I started taking public transportation to work (an hour each way, often sitting on the bus with my high school students) and earning half of what I used to. It wasn't glamorous, but it was exactly what I needed.

Thankfully, my new lifestyle allowed me time to ponder my faith.

After my parents divorced when I was six, my mom found great comfort from God, so our home revolved around our Pentecostal church: we attended services Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night and youth group on Thursday night.

During this time I absorbed plenty of information about God, Jesus and the Bible. But this head knowledge sharply contradicted my actual experience: most churchgoers seemed hypocritical and legalistic. And after my dad died when I was fourteen, the church, as a whole, didn't love our family the way we needed to be loved. (In spite of the divorce, my dad was still a big part of our lives.)

The contradictions I saw at church and the pressure to attend so often, stifled any desire that I had to seek God or attend services on my own. I went to college and conveniently avoided church and anything related to it, including God.

As part of my life's overhaul in 1998, I realized that I had kept God on the shelf for long enough. I was sitting on the spiritual fence and it was time to make a decision about my faith, one way or another. I wanted to investigate the Bible in order to make up my own mind about God, so I joined a women's Bible study at Park Community Church in Chicago.

During that time I tangibly experienced God romancing me in a way that I can't explain. I soon claimed my own faith in Jesus (as opposed to something I merely inherited from my family or church). For me, it wasn't a huge stretch to admit that I fell short in many areas of my life and that I needed God to heal my wounded soul, or to believe that by turning to Him in faith He would heal me. But that was just the beginning: since then, I've been learning more and more about the God I have committed to and what this commitment means in my daily life.

Even now my struggles with the church haven't completely evaporated. But my faith in Christ has grown strong and I've felt a greater calling to care for my body as a gift from the One who created me. How do I do this? One way is by trying to understand God's design for eating. For example, I realized that even an occasional cup of coffee caused me to have severe withdrawal headaches when I wasn't drinking caffeine. I knew this probably wasn't God's design or desire for me, so I slowly weaned myself off of it.

A few years earlier I had started reading about healthy eating, and I began to understand all the scientific reasons why I ate the way I did. In 1997 I read *Spontaneous Healing* by Dr.

Andrew Weil, which explains that certain foods are actually toxic, while others are healthy and life-giving. Clearly, there was some intelligent design behind the foods that Mom fed us.

In January 2002 I read *What the Bible Says about Healthy Living* by Dr. Rex Russell. Now it made sense: not only does God care about

me, but He also cares about what I eat and He designed food specifically for the human body. And after hearing Hope speak at our church, I knew that I wanted to partner with her to share this information with others. The rest—which you read in Hope’s story—is history!