

Content Warning: Eating Disorder

Hurling Toward Love

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I left the wedding reception hoping to not be seen. I knew I would have to be quick, otherwise my absence would be noticed and upon my return I would have to come up with an explanation. Luckily it was a short drive from the venue to my house, maybe five minutes, so I was confident I could do it and return in roughly fifteen minutes total. I'd had a couple drinks at the reception and I knew I shouldn't have been driving, but I couldn't do it at the wedding, so I had no choice but to drive home and do it as quickly as possible.

I kicked my shoes off at the door, leaving them still tied in double knots. I went into the bathroom and took a couple deep breaths in the mirror. I washed my hands and took my shirt off. I knelt in front of the toilet and lifted the seat up. Another breath. Then I stuck my right index finger down my throat and wiggled back and forth on my uvula. After a couple wiggles I hit it just right and I could feel it coming. I pulled my finger out and put my head deeper into the toilet. A vomitous amalgam of the chicken and beef and potatoes and greens and beer I had consumed at the wedding splashed into the toilet water. I wiped my hands with toilet paper and stuck my finger back in. I repeated the process three more times, until I felt that my stomach was completely purged, and I flushed the toilet. My eyes watered heavy and the bathroom was now a soft blur of what it had been earlier. I washed my hands, scrubbing hard up to my forearms, brushed my teeth and tongue like I was trying to start a fire in my mouth, put my shirt and shoes on, and drove back to the wedding reception.

Before I go any further you should get a sense of who I am. I'm twenty-three years old, six feet and one inch tall, and my weight vacillates between 175 and 180 pounds. My body mass index is 23.3, well within the average range for my age and weight. My body fat percentage, I would estimate, is around fifteen percent. I work out at least four times a week, a combination of weight training and cardio. I'm healthy inside and out, and I've been a casual bulimic for over two years now.

I say I'm a casual bulimic because I'm not like the others. My purging isn't a problem, unlike the 4.7 million women and 1.5 million men in the United States who struggle with bulimia. I'm different than them. It hasn't caused any of the health issues I've read about. I can go meals without purging. I can go days without purging. I can even go weeks without purging. But sometimes, when I binge and I feel especially disgusted with myself, I like to purge and wipe the slate clean. I do it sparingly and responsibly.

These are some of the things I tell myself after a purge, after I wash my hands and look in the mirror, taste the leftover vomit in my mouth, and run my tongue across the film of stomach bile varnishing my teeth.

I've been an overeater all my life. Some of the clearest memories I have of my childhood involve food, like the time I was nine years old and I ate forty-seven chicken McNuggets and two large fries in one sitting. Or the time I was eleven and I ate five fully-loaded chili dogs and an extra-large strawberry milkshake and got so sick I threw it all up just minutes after I took the last sip of the milkshake—this moment turned out to be more prognosticative of my future than I had imagined at the time.

I don't know what it was about food, but it was my first true love. I could never get enough of it. I loved the way it felt to chew and taste all the fat and grease and sugar and doughy carbs. And the more I ate, the more I wanted. If I opened a box of cereal, I ate until the box was finished. Same with a bag of chips. I ate half-gallons of ice cream at once. I never let a pizza go unfinished. Every meal I ate until I couldn't eat any more, not because I was full but because there was nothing left to eat. The result of my overeating, as is usually the case, was being overweight.

Going into middle school was terrifying to me. I remember living in constant dread in the days leading up to the first day of school. I barely slept, and when I did I had the same nightmare: changing in the locker room before and after gym class and being exposed, all the other boys seeing the rolls on my stomach, the protuberant love handles squeezing over the waistband of my boxer briefs, the sag of my chest. I, like many overweight kids, had become an expert at using my clothing as a shield. To the untrained eye the right fitting shirt could melt twenty pounds right off me. But I knew I would no longer have this protection in the locker room.

On the first day I hoped to find a locker hiding in the back corner to call mine and change by every day, but I was one of the last boys to the locker room and there were no more hidden areas to change in. I snuck in among a small group of classmates and tried to change without notice. Halfway through putting my gym shirt on I heard someone say to me, "Whoa dude, you're fatter than I thought you were."

My cover was blown on the first day and everything I'd feared had already come true.

"Yeah," I faked a laugh, "guess I am."

At a doctor's appointment when I was thirteen I was informed that I was in the 99th percentile in weight for boys my age. I weighed 180 pounds, roughly what I weigh today, but I was ten years younger and almost a foot shorter. I had always known that I was overweight, but I didn't think I was *that* overweight, that if I walked past one hundred fellow thirteen year old boys, ninety-eight would weigh less than me, would look better than me.

And yet even with this information it didn't stop me from overeating, nor did it get me to start exercising. If anything, I doubled down. I told myself I could never lose the weight, I didn't want to stop eating, I liked the way it made me feel in the moment, so I would adapt. I started wearing two shirts at all times—a white undershirt and my shirt-shirt over it—to provide a layer of

security between myself and what people saw of me. I would slink to the back in all social situations. If I wasn't seen then how could others perceive me as being overweight and undesirable?

It wasn't until three years after that doctor's appointment that I decided to make a change and try to lose the weight. My weight had ballooned up to 200 pounds, still the heaviest I've ever been. I don't remember the exact moment that I decided to make a change, but when I did my lifestyle was flipped on its head. My relationship with food went from indulgence to deprivation, and my relationship with exercise went from deprivation to indulgence. I counted every calorie that went into my body. I afforded myself 1,500 calories per day, and the thought of exceeding that total even by one calorie terrified me. My daily diet went exactly as follows:

Breakfast: three egg whites with hot sauce, one packet of instant oatmeal.

Lunch: salad with grilled chicken, apple.

Snack: can of tuna, protein shake.

Dinner: grilled chicken or steak, brown rice, black beans.

My exercise routine was equally strict:

Morning: twenty minutes on the elliptical.

Afternoon: weight training class at school.

Evening: high intensity cardio.

The desire and pursuit to lose weight consumed my thoughts. All day my mind thought about calories eaten and calories burned, protein, fats, carbs, the "good fats," the "good carbs," the most effective exercises for burning fat and building muscle. The comfort I once found in polishing off two pints of Ben and Jerry's or a dozen Krispy Kreme donuts I now found in the burning hunger in my stomach every night as I lay in bed, or the sore muscles I woke up to every morning.

I lost forty-five pounds and grew a couple inches along the way. There was a seismic shift in the way people viewed me and subsequently the way I viewed myself. I started receiving attention from girls, which was something I had never received before nor thought I deserved to receive. Attention, and what I perceived as love, became my new addiction. I craved to be craved. It felt empowering to know I was not only seen by others but seen positively. I had spent most of my life trying to not be seen, and now I wanted nothing more than to be seen, to be at the center of everything, and to be loved for it. It felt good to finally feel good about myself, and this only bolstered my incipient eating disorder.

I knew that to be loved by others I needed a body they desired, because when I was overweight, and still the same person, I felt none of that love. So I ramped up the diet and exercise. If I overate at one meal, I skipped the next or did an extra fifteen minutes of cardio at night. I avoided eating out at restaurants and places where I wouldn't be able to weigh and track my food. I scheduled my life around my workout schedule—I would have missed a funeral before I missed a session on the elliptical. And I had convinced myself that it was all worth it. The hunger

I felt from a lack of food could be sated by the attention I received; no food tasted as good as the attention felt.

But of course there were binges. I couldn't maintain my ascetic diet and exercise routine all the time. I had days where I ate an entire pizza and an order of breadsticks for dinner, or ate two bags of Twizzlers as an afternoon snack, or ate \$30-worth of fast food. And even some days where I did all those. Old habits die hard. Nevertheless I always counteracted the binges. I only ate 500 calories a day for the next two days, or I did two hours of cardio a day for the next week. My life has always vacillated between deprivation and indulgence. I've always struggled to find the middle way. One taste of something and I go all in; one taste of something else and I'm all out and onto the next thing. My belief has always been: if anything is worth doing, it's worth going to the most extreme ends of doing.

It's what many refer to as the addictive personality—once I do something I find pleasure in, I can no longer do it in moderation. But I believe it's a simple desire to feel good, to feel love, from something and not knowing when the something that makes you feel good has started to hurt you. It's the short-term respite that in the long-term works to destroy you.

On Thanksgiving of 2018 I binged. I ate, I'd estimate, up to a pound of turkey, half a pound of ham, four big pieces of cornbread, a quart of stuffing, two quarts of cheesy potatoes, half of a cherry pie, two slices of pumpkin pie, four chocolate chip cookies, and a big bowl of mint chocolate chip ice cream, even though I hate mint—I just wanted to eat more and it happened to be within reach. I was stuffed. My stomach felt like a giant bloated flesh balloon. Then I had an idea.

I snuck off to the bathroom furthest away from everybody so they wouldn't hear me. I'd never done it before, but I'd heard about it and how effective it was at keeping off weight. I knelt in front of the toilet and jammed my finger down my throat. Nothing happened. I tried again and I gagged. I tried a third time and my Thanksgiving feast came back up. I continued purging until my stomach was emptied and I felt all the air in my stomach balloon had been deflated.

This was a revelation to me. This was when I thought I had finally figured everything out: No more binges followed by extreme calorie-cutting, long cardio sessions, and two-a-day workouts. I thought I could have my occasional binge, purge, and then go on like nothing had happened. And this was how I lived for almost two years.

I afforded myself one purge session a week. I kept it strict to only one because I remembered reading somewhere—I don't know where—that someone becomes a bulimic when they purge on an average of two times a week. I wasn't going to let that title apply to me. And there were even weeks where I didn't purge at all, so I knew I was doing OK with it; I was purging responsibly. I could play both sides of my love affairs: I could binge the foods that made me feel good, and I could purge and look good and feel good about myself. I thought this was the middle way that I

had sought for so long. I thought I could finally abandon my Jekyll and Hyde lives of deprivation and indulgence.

But bingeing and purging isn't sustainable, I soon found out. It's exhausting to purge. When you take that last bite and know that it means moments from now you're going to be gagging over the toilet seat, wiping vomit off your hand, eyes welled up, and questioning why you binged in the first place, it feels Sisyphean. You binged to feel good and now that you're done bingeing you feel bad, so you purge to feel good again and the boulder falls back down the hill, and it's time to start pushing upward like you've been doing for so long. And that's all not to mention the disappointment you see when you look in the mirror as you wash your hands, the corrosion you taste on your teeth, the itching pain you feel on your scratched uvula. You wonder why you've thrown yourself so mercilessly in such an inimical and unwinnable cycle. And didn't you do all this to feel love?

There's a French term, *amour-propre*, that you may not be familiar with. That's OK, you know what it means. *Amour-propre*, when translated to English, means self-love. Scroll through Instagram for a couple minutes and you're bound to see a post championing the importance of self-love. If not, search #selflove to be inundated by these posts—as of my writing this, there are 59.1 million #selflove posts on Instagram. Whether it's to raise awareness of the dangers of body dysmorphia, advocate the importance of self-love on mental health, or to receive internet karma points, the posts are everywhere. And I think this is a good thing, but *amour-propre* needs further attention to truly understand it.

I was introduced to *amour-propre* when I read Saul Bellow's 1997 essay, "Graven Images." Bellow used the idea of having one's picture taken and not being happy with the picture as the vehicle of his essay. "We have been trained by the camera to see the external world. We look *at* and not *into*, as one philosopher has put it. We do not allow ourselves to be *drawn* into what we see. We have been trained to go by the externals. The camera shows us only those, and it is we who do the rest." The camera, Bellow believed, has brought the external to the focal point of one's being, and in the process it's painted over the internal with a coat of vanity and self-obsession. And, ironically, the *self* being the external self, not the reflective consciousness of the self as psychology defines it. It's a disingenuous, artificial kind of self-love that's contrived from external influences that tell us *what* we should love and *why* it is so lovable.

This may seem contradictory to the idea of self-love—love derived from within, unalloyed, and devoid of influences outside the self—but it coincides with the earliest philosophical theories of *amour-propre*. Blaise Pascal was one of the first philosophers to write in depth on *amour-propre*, and he abhorred the very idea of it. He believed self-love was egotistical and vainglorious and that he who loves the self puts the self in the place of God; it aggrandizes the self into a deity worthy of worship, an unequivocally sinful act. François de La Rochefoucauld shared this view with Pascal, believing that self-love turned men into idolaters of themselves and tyrants of others. And this sentiment was further echoed by Pierre Nicole and Jacques Abbadie. It's a good

thing these men didn't live during the age of Instagram because they may have suffered a collective aneurysm after scrolling for a couple minutes.

It's in the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau that amour-propre was defined and delineated from another kind of self-love. Rousseau believed that amour-propre required the approval of others first, that self-love wasn't possible until others deemed you worthy of love. Like the camera in Bellow's essay, extrinsic perceptions determine one's assessment of personal value: Your nose is crooked and ugly only because you've seen straight noses and have been told they're desirable; your eyes are too far apart and ugly only because you've seen proportionally spaced eyes and have been told they're desirable; you're overweight and ugly only because you've seen abs, muscular shoulders, vascular forearms, burgeoning trap muscles and have been told they're desirable. Amour-propre, according to Rousseau, is impossible in a vacuum—without others to serve as barometers and validators, amour-propre self-love is as illogical as asking how much the color blue weighs.

There is, however, another kind of self-love according to Rousseau. It's called amour de soi. Amour de soi is a natural kind of self-love, and it's independent of outside influences. It's the most innate, primeval, and simplified source of self-love, e.g., the cavewoman gathers berries to eat because it makes her feel good to eat. This kind of self-love hasn't been polluted by something as toxic as societal standards. It's so simple it's almost animalistic: I love myself enough to make myself feel good. This is the kind of self-love I thought I always sought, and I've told myself it's the self-love I want. Why wouldn't it be? It certainly seems more sustainable and healthier than amour-propre, doesn't it? But deep down I know I've been chasing amour-propre. Without external validation how could I know if I was worthy of self-love? So often are our judgments inhibited and influenced by others, so what makes the judgment of myself any different? And Rousseau would agree with this. He believed amour de soi died with humanity's signing of the social contract.

Perhaps amour de soi did die with our transition to society. Perhaps, also, these French philosophical terms are just that—jargon of the bygone intellectual elite. Amour-propre or amour de soi, it's all semantics. It means nothing when I look in the mirror after a binge and purge and make a decision to either be happy or disappointed in what I see. Although I write about it, I assure you I don't stand in the mirror and deliberate on the self-ethical pragmatism of amour-propre or amour de soi in regards to my own self. The decision is reactionary: I look bad, or I look OK. But I agree with the parameters Rousseau set on self-love; it's not an all-encompassing term. There's a contrived and socially manufactured kind of self-love—amour-propre—and then there's an atavistic and simplistic kind of self-love—amour de soi. Unfortunately, English doesn't have succinct terms to differentiate these two kinds of self-love. Language, after all, can be very limiting. So the onus is thrust upon the self.

It's amour-propre that has influenced every purge of mine. It's the belief that if others don't find me physically desirable or worthy of love then I'm not worthy of loving myself. It's basic crowd psychology. And yet isn't it the result of a kind of amour de soi that brings me to purge in the

first place? The binge. Every slice of grease-slathered pizza, every fatty double cheeseburger, every bowl of chocolate-chunked ice cream, every cookie, every bag of candy, every source of saccharine happiness that food brings me, it's all for me and only me. No one influences the happiness I feel from it, and no one else experiences the happiness from it. It's a war of attrition between amour-propre and unmitigated amour de soi, yet the sad reality is that there can be no unequivocal moral victor. Both sides have their faults. And there's no third objectively correct option. Once again, language, whether French or English, fails us, and the onus is on us to create an abstract, non-linguistic kind of self-love.

I don't have a word or term for it, the middle way between amour-propre and amour de soi. Amour-propre deracinates the self out of self-love, and amour de soi, if unchecked, I believe, is detrimental in the long-term. So this is all I got. At the time of my writing this, I haven't purged since the wedding reception—seven months ago—and I've had no desire to, either. Of course I've had some binges. We all overeat now and then. Only now I've accepted the occasional binge as part of my being, not an aberration that needs to be erased from my gastrointestinal hard drive immediately. Every time I overeat and go into the bathroom, it's a struggle against the behavior I've normalized. It's a struggle to accept the person in the mirror, but it's something worth struggling for, and lately I've been better than ever at overcoming this struggle.

And is it always going to be like this? I doubt it. I'm sure there will be a binge, or many, in the future where I convince myself the only solution is jamming my finger down my throat and tickling my uvula until all the remnants of my binge have been transferred to the toilet. These thoughts will arise eventually. Will amour-propre or amour de soi be on my mind? Not in the slightest. I will, however, be cognizant of the unsustainability of the binge and purge cycle. I will remind myself that it's OK to be OK with myself, despite what others may think; that I'm stuck with myself as long as I exist, so I better get comfortable with him because he's going to be around a while. I am not the sum of others' perceptions. I am simply myself, nothing more, and that's the most comforting realization I could ever have.

That night of the wedding reception I returned later than I'd hoped. It took me about a half-hour round trip. The whole drive back I was worried about what others thought of my absence, the questions they'd have once I returned. When I came back, I grabbed another drink and went to the dance floor and met with some friends. They all welcomed me. None of them mentioned my absence, none of them seemed to notice. It was on nobody's mind but mine.

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