

# The Cupcake Dialogues

By Geneen Roth

I've been thinking about chocolate cake recently. To be precise, I've been thinking about what happens when a piece of bittersweet flourless Chocolate Decadence Cake arrives at a table where a few friends and I have agreed to share the dense, sweet dessert. Eyes light up. Glints of mischief appear on people's faces. Oohs and aahs are exclaimed. The whole environment becomes vibrant, joyous, and thrillingly alive.

The waitress puts the cake down in the middle of the table, and for a moment, there is a feeling of reverence, of hushed silence, as if we were all experiencing a holy event. Forks are lifted. Eyes are cast down. Breathing stops.

Will it taste as divine as it looks? Will it be as good as the last chocolate cake we ate--or the first? Can we get a fork in there fast enough to procure a satisfying morsel or will our beloved friends take such big bites that there will be none left?

In *The House at Pooh Corner*, A. A. Milne wrote that for Winnie the Pooh, "Although eating honey was a very good thing to do, there was a moment just before you began to eat it which was better than when you were, but he didn't know what it was called."

Pooh might not have known what those food cravings are called, but I do. They're called desire. They're called anticipation. They're called wanting--and if we let ourselves feel them, have them, and love them for their own sake, we set ourselves free.

I realize that's a radical statement--if you let yourself feel the depth of your food cravings, you will set yourself free--but after 27 years of working with compulsive eaters, I've gotten the hang of what works and what doesn't.

Recently, I had an encounter with one of my students, who said, "I love cupcakes. I love, love, love them. Every time I see them, I have to eat every single one. I am helpless in the presence of a cupcake."

The story we usually tell ourselves about our lack of control--especially if it concerns high-fat or high-sugar foods--is that we need to discipline ourselves and stay away from them. Keep them out of the house. Lock the cabinet doors and throw away the keys.

Okay, maybe you haven't locked your food in a cabinet, but how about those times when you're certain that the potato chips have suddenly developed vocal cords and are calling you from across the room?

If you find yourself bingeing and dieting, making proclamations about which foods you absolutely can't have in the house only to find yourself, in a moment of madness, running to the store and loading up on those exact foods (and telling the clerk that they're for your daughter or that you're having a party), here's the million-dollar question: What are you wanting when you want those potato chips, the cupcakes, that Chocolate Decadence Cake?

I can hear you saying: The potato chips, of course! The chocolate, without a doubt! But remember what Pooh said: The moment before he put his hand in the honey jar was actually better than tasting the honey itself. Then ask yourself: If honey were truly what he wanted, why was it better to want it than to have it? Why is the race to the food cravings or the moment before you eat it equally if not more delicious than actually having it?

Here's a conversation I had with the above-mentioned Cupcake Student:

Cupcake Student: I want cupcakes.

Me: What about the cupcakes do you want so much?

Cupcake Student: I want the sweetness. I want the richness. I want the feeling of it in my mouth.

Me: When you have one in your mouth, how do you feel?

Cupcake Student: I feel calm, I feel loved, and I feel like everything is good.

Me: So, it seems as if what you really want is to feel loved, calm, and relaxed.

Cupcake Student: Uh-oh. Is this a trick? Did you just talk me out of wanting cupcakes?

Me: Nope. You can still choose to have them if you really want them. We're just trying to figure out what it is you really want when you say you want cupcakes.

Cupcake Student: Well, okay then, I do want to feel loved, calm, and relaxed.

Me: How about giving yourself permission--just for a minute--to want that? To want love?

Cupcake Student: But what if I know I can't have it? I just got divorced and I'm not dating anyone. What's the point of wanting love when I can't have it?

Yes, that is million-dollar question number two: What's the point of wanting something you can't have? Why not spare yourself the pain and turn to something you can have--food--instead?

The point is that when you give yourself permission to want what you want instead of replacing it with a substitution, you make contact with your heart's desire. Believe it or not, feeling the desire itself is incredibly, immensely, deeply satisfying. It's the desire--not its fulfillment--that nourishes you because it's the language of your heart. When you listen to that language, you hear your self. You return to your own true, deepest nature (which is, after all, what we thought that cupcake would do for us).

The things you want are bread crumbs leading you home. If you follow your desire for them, you get closer and closer to who you really are, to what you really want from this life. And what you end up discovering is what good ole Glinda told Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*: It wasn't the ruby slippers, it wasn't the balloon, it wasn't the Wizard. Dorothy had always possessed the power to get herself back home--just by wanting it so much.

It's not the cupcakes, it's not the potato chips, it's not the chocolate cake. If you give yourself permission to want without judging or dismissing your desires as crazy, you, too, have the power to return yourself to what you want most: the center of your own stunning, tender, radiant heart.

You, it turns out, have been the cupcake all along.