

# S.P.O.V. \*

\* Student Point of View

## Good Enough

A student battling eating disorders finds recovery in her own self-worth. By SHANNON THOMAS, BMus'04

**F**OR EIGHT YEARS I WAS UNDER the oppression of anorexia and bulimia, bouncing between the two, never knowing which one I'd wake up to. From early childhood I'd been very compliant, eager to please, desiring to excel at everything I did. However, I never lived up to my own standards. I was a good violinist, but not the best; I was a good student, but not the smartest; I was thin, but not thin enough. By age 12, this feeling had evolved into "I am fat." I stopped eating lunch to cut down on caloric intake, and from that point on, I looked at food in terms of calories. Over time my food restriction became more severe, and I began throwing up my food in order to hide the anorexic patterns from others who didn't understand my passionate pursuit of thinness. I fell into the addictive trap that eating disorders offer, believing I could stop purging anytime I wanted. But that wouldn't happen until six years later.

This journal entry, written almost two years ago, reflects my battle:

*You chastise yourself for being so stupid to actually do it again. You command yourself that it can't happen again—no more bingeing, no more purging. But in the back of your*

*mind, you know you'll be back tomorrow. Back to punish and cleanse.*

*Perhaps this confession will be the necessary element that will stop this utterly disgusting and revolting behavior. What is it that keeps me from having self-control? What keeps pushing me to eat like a madman, purge like a drunk—worse actually? Food has no power—I give power to food rather than controlling it, or even controlling myself. I need the revulsion to food rather than the fatal attraction to it. Food is disgusting. I don't need to purge it; I*

*just need to stay away from the gross shit. Stick to the safe, clean foods. Life will be much easier that way. When I feel the urge to eat and purge, I need to think of this—think of myself in that bathroom barfing my head off—looking at my pitiful reflection in the cloudy water.*

Less than two weeks after this entry, I was back in a more anorexic stage and wrote this:

*Being vegan is helping—I feel much more in control for sure, and I'm losing weight. That makes me happy—curious how such a small thing can instantly affect my mood. Tomorrow I'm starting a new diet with a friend; she's really motivating me, too. It's nice that she understands. I just hope that I can actually do it. Dexatrim will help me—my friend ... even though they make me antsy.*



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was going to have an eating disorder for the rest of my life, condemned to live in darkness and depression, constantly dealing with the tyranny of anorexia and bulimia. But there was a part of me that hoped for something more, and I was willing to look for it in college, where I would be independent.

While at Vanderbilt, continuing treatment with Dr. Bermudez and Nan became more convenient because I no longer had to travel the three hours from my parents' home in Cleveland, Tenn. But leaving my therapist at home was a difficult change. I therapist-hopped until junior year, finding every excuse not to remain with one. Freshman year was filled with the normal difficulties of adapting to college life, depression, and new insecurities surrounding my body. The constant onslaught of an appearance-conscious campus and a serious relationship increased my longing to be unique and desirable.

My sophomore year at Vanderbilt, I returned to a more severe, restricted diet and began losing weight. By the summer I became vegan for purposes of hiding my eating disorder, making it OK for me not to eat while out with friends. I decided to lose as much weight as possible that summer, wanting to be a "good" anorectic. While at a summer music festival in Aspen, I found out my mom had cancer. I was scared and felt alone. I dealt with these emotions the easiest way I knew how: by focusing on weight and excelling at the violin.

Back at school the eating-disordered behaviors progressively worsened. During my junior year Dr. Bermudez and I discussed the possibility of my going inpatient again. This felt like my only option if I wanted to find any relief from the reality I was living. Every morning I awakened to a haunting decision: Do I eat? Or do I get rid of the meals I can't avoid? I calculated how many calories

I burned walking to class, practicing violin, and sitting at my computer. Regardless of what I was doing, I couldn't escape the fear of being "too much," feelings of worthlessness, and the frightening reality that I might be bound to my eating disorders forever.

By November my life was falling apart in every area. One particularly eventful day, I broke down in my apartment, overcome by

suicide, I hadn't understood the magnitude of my decision in the way I did that night. God was giving me an ultimatum.

Although I didn't realize how emotionally difficult the next few months would be, I chose life. I began to open up more with my roommate, Angela Cassette, even though I was afraid she might abandon our friendship. Angela and I ate meals together and

hung out for an hour afterwards, discussing my feelings when necessary. Giving her complete freedom to ask me about food and emotions was difficult because that was an area that had been completely and solely mine, but I knew it was necessary if I wanted to get better. I also started attending Victory Campus Ministries, where I witnessed living examples of God's love and power. I was surprised that even when they knew what I had been through, I wasn't looked down upon or treated differently.

Within two weeks of my decision, I had stopped purging—something I had previously done four to five times per day—and my food intake was at a healthy level.

Gaining weight was scary, but I had to believe those I trusted weren't lying to me. I wasn't fat. I couldn't see it yet, but I knew my eyes had been lying to me for a long time.

Strengthened by newly found support and realization of my worth, I began to deal with the things I had tried to mask with my eating disorder: self-hatred, lack of identity, dependency, rebellion and fear. The unraveling of these emotions was much more of a challenge than merely stopping the behaviors. I wasn't satisfied with retaining the anorexic mind-set. I desired more and realized that recovery isn't just an end or removal of unhealthy behaviors. Recovery is eliminating the thoughts that are behind the behaviors, the feelings of worthlessness and needing

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NATALIE COX

hopelessness. Afraid to leave me alone, my roommates insisted that I go to church with them.

I am aware of the fact that many readers may not believe in God; however, this is so much a part of my story that it wouldn't be fair or accurate to omit it. At this point I didn't want to have anything to do with going to church, believing I was beyond help and didn't deserve it. But to appease my roommates, I went. During the service I realized I had two choices: God or death. This was my last time to choose; I knew that. Never before had I felt the weight of my decision to choose life or death. It was as if I was standing on the bridge, ready to jump, and God was calling me to choose Him instead, to turn around. Even when I had attempted

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I took calculus in high school, so I only took one math class at Vanderbilt. I find math to be very useful in life. For example, I ate a banana with lunch. Before I ate it, though, I found the slope of the line tangent to its curve.

Astronomy taught me that the universe is a vast and mysterious place, but with geology I learned that even mysterious things can be boring. Philosophy taught me to add “-ism” to the ends of words if I want to sound intelligent. Also, the longer the word, the more important it is. History classes taught me that people have been behaving badly for thousands of years.

The Blair School of Music proved that if something is far away, I will never go there.

Peabody reemphasized that point and also showed me that taunting HOD majors never gets old. Engineering falls on the other end of the useful/interesting spectrum in that it is one of the most employable fields at Vanderbilt but also stab-me-in-the-eye boring. My good friend Erin is a BME student who likes to tell me exciting stories about her major. Unfortunately, these stories usually end with phrases like, “Then my project partner and I got really crazy and reconfigured the model! And we graphed the results!” Poor Erin. She may get a better job than I will, but she will never learn the art of lobster mangling.

And that’s about it. That’s everything I learned at Vanderbilt. College was fun, but it went far too quickly. My freshman year was

spent in the lobby of Branscomb. My sophomore and junior years revolved around the McGill picnic table, and my senior year has been a series of failed attempts at putting clothing on top of the Cornelius Vanderbilt statue. But that is over now. There’s nothing left for me to do except get a job and a mortgage and wait for the wrinkles to arrive. Well, that and learn how to guide cocktail-party conversations to the topic of lobsters.

*Claire Suddath started writing for the Vanderbilt Hustler as a freshman and has had a weekly humor column for the past two years. This essay was adapted from her Hustler column.*

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to be in control.

Today I find I am now the person I was meant to be, not consumed by the eating-disordered mentality. I have healthy relationships with my supportive parents and a group of friends, no longer isolating myself. I don’t compare my body with those around me. I don’t get anxious around food, constantly dwell on it, or find it necessary to make food journals. I don’t calculate calories, measure food or obsessively exercise. I don’t try on six outfits every morning, attempting to find one that “conceals my fat.” I know and believe that I am not fat.

I share my story not for my own healing but to show that complete recovery—physical and emotional—is possible. I’m not going to lie: treatment and recovery are not easy. It’s actually quite difficult, but I promise you that it’s worth it. To those who face the same struggle, I challenge you to believe for something better—you are worth it.

*Shannon Thomas, a violin performance major in the Blair School of Music, graduated in May.*

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## Song to Grits

By ROY BLOUNT JR., BA’63

When my mind’s unsettled,  
When I don’t feel spruce,  
When my nerves get frazzled,  
When my flesh gets loose—

What knits  
Me back together’s grits.

Grits with gravy,  
Grits with cheese.  
Grits with bacon,  
Grits with peas.  
Grits with a minimum  
Of two over-medium eggs  
mixed in ’em: um!

Grits, grits, it’s  
grits I sing—  
Grits fits  
In with anything.

Rich and poor, black and white,  
Lutheran and Campbellite,  
Jews and Southern Jesuits,  
All acknowledge buttered grits.

Give me two hands, give me my wits,  
Give me forty pounds of grits.

Grits at taps, grits at reveille.  
I am into grits real heavily.

True grits,  
more grits,  
Fish, grits and collards.  
Life is good where grits are swallowed.

Grits  
Sits  
Right.