
FOOD FOR THOUGHT PART 2: FOOD, MEMORY, AND SELF-CARE

Recently, Marvin, a regular story gathering participant, asked me if he was allowed another chocolate muffin. It was his fourth one that morning, and I found his question to be endearing, until he revealed to me that he had diabetes.

Horrified, I thought about all the previous times that he had been asking me if he was allowed another muffin or a vanilla wafer. I realized that in the past three months, Marvin hadn't just been asking me out of politeness, but rather, if I thought it would be okay if he ate a fifth or sixth sugary treat. If I had known about his diabetes, I wouldn't have encouraged him to help himself.

Worried, I found Marvin's outreach worker who quickly handled the situation.

"Sugar is bad for your diabetes," she said. "You know that you shouldn't be eating it, right?"

Marvin looked guilty, but a moment later, when the worker left, Marvin continued to help himself to another chocolate muffin, followed by another.

I was unsure of what to do, but I was soon interrupted from my dilemma when another participant, Justina, stopped by to show me her new manicure. A month ago, I had discovered a beauty school on Kingsway that offered complimentary manicures and spa pedicures from brand-new technicians in training. I had recommended the school to Justina and her outreach worker last time we spoke.

That day, I also had the same set of UV Gel extensions, in the same soft, sparkly lilac colour.

"You have great taste!" I said, holding up my fingers. Justina held her nails close to mine, *ooooing* in admiration.

"They match!" she finally exclaimed, looking thrilled.

Then she looked worried. "I'm sorry, but I forgot your name."

She slapped her palm over her forehead three times. "What's wrong with me? Why can't I remember?!"

She continued slapping her forehead, becoming furious and looking visibly upset by her momentary memory loss.

"It's okay," I said. "I'm Lindsay. Do you want to work on some colouring today?"

Justina stopped hitting her forehead and smiled in relief.

These two specific moments at The JHS story gathering session made me think of how we need to remember to take care of ourselves. How we need to be gentle and kinder to ourselves, whether through nutritious self-care, or sometimes even through small indulgences, no matter how seemingly superficial.

Yet I know that being kind or forgiving ourselves isn't always possible or even realistic, as most of the story gathering participants suffer from severe traumas and memories of their past and present.

Shelby is an example of current trauma and someone undergoing immense emotional and physical struggle. She and her husband are homeless and struggling to find a permanent place to stay in the city. They're also recent transplants from Toronto. They're both newer clients of JHS; Shelby loves to colour during the story gathering sessions.

At 4:51 AM one morning when I decide to walk to work, I happen to see Shelby curled up outside, half-asleep, on a doorstep of a small photocopying business on Kingsway. She's alone today except for her shaggy white dog, Billy, whom I adore. I've seen Shelby a few times sleeping in the park around Science World or crouching on a doorway, sipping orange juice. I also know that her favourite food is breakfast: a heaping plate of scrambled eggs, slightly burnt toast, crispy strips of bacon, and hash browns. From our previous chat, I know that she likes to reminisce about diner food. The memory of breakfast makes her smile and transforms Shelby's exhausted face into a happier one.

Billy lifts his large furry head, yawns, and I can't resist. I give him a belly rub and then scratch behind his ears. His tail thumps.

The next time I see Shelby, she's sitting in the scorching sun on a bench near False Creek. Pop music blares from a radio and Billy is lapping thirstily from a Styrofoam cup. It's terribly hot outside, temperatures rising to 30 degrees Celsius. Shelby looks as if she's bearing the full weight of the earth on her and its multiple unkindnesses in her bones.

She winces, wiggling her swollen legs and feet.

But she waves at me, despite her exhaustion, and I tell her about the beauty school where she can get a complimentary leg and foot massage.

"You deserve some pampering," I say.

Shelby beams at me. Billy woofs.

John S. Allen's book *The Omnivorous Mind* examines the complexities of the human brain and our evolving biological, cultural and societal relationship with food. He discusses the impetus for the reasons why our hippocampus has been actively collecting powerful memories of sustenance since the days of our earliest ancestors, where we relied on foraging and hunting purely for our survival.

Allen explains that the hippocampus is responsible for digestion, hormones, and memory storage, which is why our minds permanently commit the taste and texture of a specific food to memory.

Perhaps this is why fruits, vegetables, humus, cheeses, bran muffins, and whole wheat bagels are untouched when I used to bring them to the story gathering sessions. Our brains are wired to accept the foods of our childhood and to acknowledge them as comfort foods, and sometimes due to our upbringing, we aren't given access or knowledge to recognize that sugary and processed foods are detrimental to our long term health and our ability to be creative.

I'm also guilty of indulging in unhealthy, highly calorific food more often than I should.

One day when I finish work and arrive home at 11:45 PM, I run into Ryan in the hallway. He's one of my friendliest neighbors at JHSLM housing and loves to chat. To be honest, when I first moved into the residence in April, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. But my neighbours are some of the most caring, empathetic people that I've met. I've seen my neighbours frequently ask each other if they're feeling okay; if they need to find an on-call outreach worker at late-night hours when someone needs additional emotional support.

Ryan sees me holding a Coke Zero and frowns.

"Don't drink that!" he warns, looking horrified. "You could die of a heart attack! When we were kids, my brother used to do that and then they had to open him up and do surgery."

"Is he okay now?" I ask.

Ryan's concern is both heartwarming and sweet. He gestures at my half-empty Coke bottle.

"Yeah, but he got stitches all the way from his neck to his belly button. Lindsay, you really gotta be careful what you drink! My brother almost died from Coke!"

I reassure him that I'll watch my soft drink intake, and he looks relieved.

"I gotta go make a sausage and cheese platter for fifty people for tomorrow," he says, referring to his kitchen job at a restaurant. He then wishes me a good-night, before eyeing my soda bottle in disapproval.

With the end of July coming up, let's make a pact to nourish ourselves by eating more fruits, vitamins, and leafy green vegetables. But also, let's remember to be kinder, gentle, and more compassionate to our creative and most vulnerable selves. Let's remember that all of us, staff, volunteers, and clients, deserve the full benefits of self-care.

At The JHS, through the means of regular food sharing and story gathering, I want us to continue fostering a collective and ongoing memory of a safe, welcoming, and inclusive community.

I want to genuinely thank everyone who has participated in the JHS sessions and congratulate you all on helping to maintain such a nurturing environment.

And let's make a pact to eat more healthy foods in August.

Lisa Wagner, an employee of JHS, shares this simple and amazingly delicious recipe.

Lentil, Feta, and Grape Salad

2/3 c lentils (canned are perfect)
1/2 c red grapes, halved
1/2 c shredded carrot and/or chopped celery
1/3 c feta cheese

*Amounts are approximate - sometimes 1 c of lentils can be used. Fruit and veggie amounts can be varied depending on what's available!

Dressing:

3 tbsp olive oil
2 tbsp red wine vinegar
2 tbsp lemon juice
1 tsp fresh thyme (or freeze-dried thyme can be used, found in the produce section. Dried thyme would also likely be fine, just use about half. Thyme can be tossed in.

*Names of workshop participants have been changed to protect their identities.