

Geneen Roth Interview

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Ocean Robbins: Welcome to the Food Revolution Summit, where we explore how you can heal your body and your world with food! This is Ocean Robbins and I am joined by my dad, John Robbins in welcoming our guest Geneen Roth. In the past thirty years Geneen Roth has worked with hundreds of thousands of people using meditation, inquiry and a set of seven eating guidelines that she sees as the foundation of natural eating. Geneen has appeared on many national television shows including the *Oprah* show, 20/20, NBC Nightly News, CBS Early Show and Good Morning America. She has written monthly columns in *Good Housekeeping Magazine* and *Prevention Magazine*. She is the author of nine books including *The New York Times* bestseller, *Women, Food and God, Lost and Found*, and *When Food is Love*. She is a beacon of what it means to bring consciousness to our relationship with food and has inspired so many people to look at food choices and relationship with food as a doorway towards self-knowledge and towards healing and towards transformation. Geneen, we are just so excited to have you here with us. Here to interview you is my dad, John Robbins.

Geneen Roth: Thank you Ocean. Thank you John, thank you for having me.

John Robbins: Well thank you Ocean for those words and thank you Geneen for being with us. You are very dear to me and I am very grateful that you have taken time out of your very busy schedule to speak with us and our listeners.

Geneen Roth: Yes, I am really happy to be here.

John Robbins: One of the things that I have always loved about your work Geneen and the way that you share it is that you tell your story and your journey with so much transparency and honesty and authenticity. This enables people to feel okay in themselves as they listen to you. Can you talk to our listeners now about the path that you have taken and how you have come to have such a conscious and healthy relationship to food after having started out in a very different place?

Geneen Roth: Yes, yes, right. I did start out I would say rather mad in terms of madness about food and the size of my body because I believed starting at age 11 that my body and the fact that I was overweight was what was wrong with my life. And somehow in the way that kids have magical thinking, that if I could only fix my body I could fix my family and fix myself and whatever was wrong with me. So I started dieting and over the years I went on increasingly more extreme diets. I started out with sort of the normal diets, limiting myself to 1,000 calories a day, and then I just got more extreme. By that I mean I went on the *All Grape Nuts Diet* for a month. I went on the *Prunes Dietetic*, *Motts Applesauce and Meatballs Diet*. I went on the *One Hot Fudge Sunday a Day Diet*. I was on diet pills for four years, addicted to them between fifteen and

nineteen without knowing what was in them or caring because all I wanted was to be thin.

Then I increased the madness by beginning to starve myself. I became anorexic. I read a book called *Survival Into the 21st Century* and convinced myself that if I only ate a few little nuts a day and a handful of sprouts, I would not only be healthy and survive into the 21st century, but more importantly I would be thin. I got down to 82 pounds. That was when I was maybe 23 or 24. But because, as I say, the fourth law of the universe is that for every diet there is an equal and opposite binge; every time you go on a diet you go on a binge. I went on a horrendous binge after that. I doubled my weight within two months and at that point was suicidal. I realized I didn't want to live life like that. I was 28, maybe 27 or 28 and I just couldn't bear living with that kind of self-hatred. It was the loathing actually that got to me. It was the fact that I looked in the mirror and I felt like I couldn't stand the being that I was.

Do you want me to continue or do you want to ask another question?

John Robbins: Well, I do want you to continue because from that place, looking in the mirror with so much loathing, you have somehow come to a place where you have helped so many people become more conscious of their patterns around food and to use those patterns as a path to awakening. Somehow your journey with your body image and I guess you would say eating disorders has brought you to a very centered and beautiful place. I am sure our listeners want to know how you got there. What were the steps? What happened for you? What choices did you make? What awareness occurred? How did you do it?

Geneen Roth: Right, of course. Well what I have only told you this far is about the madness and the self-loathing. When I was at the depth of the suffering, and it really was suffering, and I think many, many, many people would define their relationship with food and their bodies and what that has to do with their psyches and their lives as suffering, when I was at the depth of that I had executed a plan to kill myself. It was a couple of days away and I knew how and when and where I was going to do it, and I don't know exactly how this happened. The Sufi's call it sort of the dazzling darkness. There was a moment where I was sitting on the floor of a bookstore obsessing about killing myself where I understood in a flash that the one thing I had never done in the 17 years that I had gained and lost over 1,000 pounds, the one thing I had never done was become curious about my relationship with food. I had never used my relationship with food as a doorway into understanding how food was sort of a stand in for my feelings and for particularly feelings that I felt like I wasn't allowed to have or places in myself that I couldn't express any other way that I would then express through eating.

So there was a way that I had felt like I had given up on myself a long time ago. I felt at my core that I was damaged and that I was not loveable

and that if someone had scratched away at the surface of me, of all the sort of top layers of the effervescence and the effusiveness and the intelligence and all of that, that what they would find was someone who was doomed and damaged. There was no way of changing that. I believed there was absolutely no way of changing that, that that is who I was.

So food, for many, many years became the only sweetness that I had. The only way in addition to having sweetness in my life that I could express the despair that I felt about who I was and about what I believed was my inability to change that. And so the fact that I just kept on getting bigger and bigger and bigger, I realized it was a way that I was in many ways expressing that I had given up on myself, that I felt like I couldn't have what I really wanted which was a sense of belonging here and being welcomed here on this earth and this sense that I was worthwhile as a human being. If you can't have that and if you believe that you are not worthy of the very life you have and that you have been given, then you take what you can get and you take it in any form that you can get it in. I took it in the form of food and at the same time used food to express the despair. I didn't realize all of that in that moment of sitting on the floor of the bookstore. But I did understand that I had never, ever lived as if, which is what I started doing after that.

I lived as if my relationship with food made sense and tried to understand the code language of it. It was as if my relationship with food was like brail and I had never been taught to read with my fingers. I was a blind person. I had never been taught to read with my fingers but somehow I understood that if I could teach myself to decode the language then I would understand what I was trying to say, both to myself and to the people around me and that I would also find more effective ways to give to myself and to nourish myself than food which although it was also giving to me, it was also hurting me at the same time.

So that was the beginning. I started the very next day after that I started asking myself when I was hungry and what I was hungry for. So I gave myself a couple of weeks to do this. When you have given up and you are ready to kill yourself, there is not much to lose by trying this. I gave myself a couple of weeks to follow my hunger and my satisfaction and also become curious about myself. In those days it was living as if I was worth it, living as if I was worth a basic amount of kindness because the harshness and the cruelty and the violence that I directed toward myself really were staggering, the way that I talked to myself. I would not allow myself to talk to myself like that for those couple of weeks and that in combination with feeling like I didn't need to diet anymore gave me the feeling that; "Wow, I might actually belong here on this earth." There was a feeling of being let out of prison and a feeling like I wasn't going to be punished by some big mother in the sky if I ate the wrong

thing on a particular day. That I could actually trust this being that I was. So that sort of gives you the sense of the beginning.

John Robbins: It certainly does and it is a very profound transition from food as an expression of despair in an unconscious way to becoming curious about your relationship to food which is, I am hearing, what you did. And finding in these profound issues of whether you are worthy of love and kindness and care and nourishment or not, what are the real hungers underneath your food desires? I am thinking of something that you have written that has always stayed with me. I find it fascinating, I find it provocative. You wrote, "The way you eat is inseparable from your core beliefs about being alive, no matter how sophisticated or wise or enlightened you believe you are, how you eat tells all."

Geneen Roth: Right.

John Robbins: Can you explain some of what you mean in that statement?

Geneen Roth: I can. The one word you forgot or you didn't read after that was, I wrote the word "bummer" after that.

John Robbins: Oh! I didn't know that!

Geneen Roth: Yes. Because when people first hear that, they think "Oh no! Oh that can't be true. Please tell me that is not true!" I think because most of us if we haven't paid attention to the way we eat, and many, many, many people haven't, even people who consider themselves very conscious and aware, don't consider that their relationship with food is an expression of their beliefs. They don't see that. So with something as basic as the food we put in our mouths many times a day, to actually get that it is an expression of what we believe, because really when you think about it, we are always transmitting our beliefs in everything we do, in the way we interact with a salesperson on the phone, in the way we interact with somebody at the bank. Do we think that we are better than them or they are less than us or do we believe somebody is better than us? If so, how do we react? Do we believe that animals deserve our respect or not? Do we believe that we are worthy of respect? What do we do in the middle of a fight? What do we do when we are hungry? When we are cold? When we are sick? When we are tired? How do we interact then? How do we both treat ourselves and how do we treat other people? In every moment we are transmitting our beliefs. So it therefore makes sense that we are transmitting or expressing our beliefs in one of the most basic relationships we have in our lives which is our relationship to food.

So, for instance, if I take a couple of helpings - let's just use something like mashed potatoes. If I take a couple of helpings of mashed potatoes when I am really not so hungry in general and it is apparent that what I have just taken on my plate, first of all doesn't match my hunger but second of all is trying to make better something that has nothing to do with food, one thing I could be saying is; "What I really want is not

possible. So I will just eat instead.” Another thing I could be saying is; “I can’t either contact or express how I am feeling at this minute,” which could be bored, sad, lonely, angry, or any number of emotions “And because I can't contact that or express it, I think I will just numb and sedate myself with food.”

That is just really a teeny little snapshot of something as innocuous as taking more food than our bodies are hungry for in that moment. There could be a wide variety of things that we say. For instance, if we eat at our desks and somebody from the Huffington Post just interviewed me and wrote a piece about that. We were talking about emotional eating in general and that, emotional eating is eating when you are not hungry, not stopping when you have had enough, eating without regard to the bodies need for food, but also, and I do talk about this a lot, it is also about the particular relationship you have with what you eat in the moment. So, are you sitting at the computer and at your desk and eating? Are you Facebooking, emailing, Tweeting? Are you on the phone while you eat? Are you eating in your car? Are you eating while you are doing errands? Are you eating rushing around? Where is your attention in any given moment and do you feel like you deserve your attention?

So when you are eating at your desk, what you are basically saying is; “My life is such,” and if you do this constantly, you know, we are not just talking about one time; I am talking about the pattern of your eating. If you are eating at your desk, what you are saying is; “My life is structured in such a way that I don’t have time to both nourish myself and do X.” Whether it is working or emailing or roaming the internet for hours, “I am not placing myself first here.” I am not talking about I you have children or anything like that, I am talking about a basic notion that you have about your relationship with food. What this person said to me is, “Well I work in a culture where everybody eats at their desks.” I said to her, “Just because you are working and living in an insane culture doesn’t mean that you need to be insane.”

I think it is about that, about taking a very close look at the basic things we do in our lives and our relationship with food is so basic that it is a doorway, it is a reflection, it is a mirror of how we are living our lives and treating ourselves. Chances are, if you treat yourself like that then you treat other people like that. So it is a snapshot and a doorway, as I just said, to deeper beliefs about what is possible for us and what is not. If you have given up about nourishing yourself or paying attention and therefore enjoying food, because eating at your desk is not just, “I am in a rush,” it is that when you are eating and doing something else, you are not actually paying attention to the taste of the food. So you are robbing yourself of pleasure. You are not actually paying enough attention to how hungry you are because you don’t have that much attention to be paying attention to your own hunger level and the internet at the same time or the piece you are writing if you’re a writer for the *Huffington*

Post or if you are a writer like I am a writer or you're a writer or if you are doing anything, research on the internet, you don't have that much attention. So you can't pay attention to your hunger level. You can't pay attention to pleasure and nourishing yourself. You can't pay attention to how satisfied or full you get because you are paying attention to something else. So you might as well be saying, "I am eating compulsively," in the moment because you are not paying attention to any of the things that are feeding yourself and truly loving and being kind to yourself requires.

John Robbins: I hear you saying that the way we feed ourselves and where we eat and the level of attention we are bringing to the experience, or not, it says something about the beliefs that we carry in our minds and in our hearts about our lives and our worthiness and our reason for being alive in the first place.

Geneen Roth: Yes.

John Robbins: It seems to me that our entire culture actually has some kind of gigantic eating disorder. Many of us, as you have said and others have, use food as a drug to hide from our feelings, to anesthetize ourselves, to escape. We live in a culture where there is so much denial and make believe, it is a culture that in many ways breeds addiction. When I look around I see us eating a tremendous amount of food that isn't good for us, that is produced in a way that is not good for the earth and often involves inflicting extreme suffering on animals. Globally now we have a billion people suffering from illnesses caused by inadequate nutrition, many of them are starving to death. Then we have another billion people, many of them in this country who are overeating and suffering from illnesses caused by obesity and too much food. So the question that I want to bring to you is; Do the insights that you have developed in terms of your and others personal relationship to food have any applicability to our cultures eating disorder, to our cultures overall relationship to food?

Geneen Roth: You know I will take it in terms of answering your question from the personal level which is really all I can do. I think that when one person changes then that person affects everyone they come into contact with. Do I think that the level of disordered eating has reached stunning proportions right now, both in what you described as the poverty level and also the obesity level? Yes. When I look around – I just came back from New York and had a hard time finding organic food. When I questioned people in restaurants about where the food came from, often they didn't know. Sometimes they did, but often they didn't. I think the awareness of how the food we put into our bodies affects our bodies and the body of the earth, the awareness of that is...I have to believe, because otherwise I couldn't be doing this work for thirty years, is increasing. And the level of numbness and sedation is also staggering.

So I think both are true John, and I think, because I see this in my

retreats that I teach. I have been teaching retreats for about thirteen years, twice a year; some of the people that I work with, about half of them have been coming back year after year after their relationships with food have healed. They don't create suffering for themselves anymore in their relationship with food. They come back just for the increasing awareness they have of their lives. What I have seen is that their lives have changed hugely and because of their lives changing, it changes the lives of their children and their spouses and their people at work. Some of them are writing about it, teaching about it and so it is one step at a time here. Will the change happen fast enough to make a difference in the balance of unconsciousness and consciousness? I don't know.

John Robbins: Well you are certainly rowing in the boat very strongly and persistently for these thirty years to get us to the other side of the abyss of unconsciousness. You have helped so many, many people. I have heard you use another phrase that I have found provocative. I have heard you say, "The world is on your plate." When I hear that I think of the rainforests that are cut down so we can have cheap burgers. I think of the methane and the other greenhouse gases that stem from feedlots and factory farms and I think also of the profound risks that we are taking today with genetically engineered food. When you say "The world is on your plate," what are you thinking about? What does that phrase mean to you?

Geneen Roth: It means many things on many levels. I think the first thing that it means to me is when I teach eating meditations and I ask people to look at the food that they have taken, to be aware of everything that was required to get this food on their plate. That of course has to do with people, it has to do with rain and wind and sun. Sometimes it is about chemicals. I mean it is just a whole range. Usually the places that I do these eating meditations are vegetarian and so there are no animals involved but there are still a lot of people and a lot of toil and work that is involved. So I want people to be aware of their earth and everything that is involved there and really to increase the consciousness of what it takes, even if it is just an apple. It is not an object. It's a thing. I mean it is living – it is something that somebody had to grow somewhere that grew on a tree that involved the earth and involved water and there were a lot of resources and all of that. So that is one level.

The next level I talk about it on is more of the level that we were talking about on before which is; "What did you take on your plate? How does it relate to you and what you really want and the beliefs that you may or may not be acting out through what you took on your plate?" So it has to do with quantity and amount and kind of food because many people use food, particularly those who consider themselves to have a difficult relationship with food, many people use food as a way of numbing themselves or pushing down their own aliveness. So I ask them to look at what they have actually taken, the kind of food, what is it? Is it a lot

of bread? Is it a lot of potatoes? Is it green vegetables? I mean I usually don't go through, because I don't believe in giving people a prescribed in my own work, I don't give people a prescribed diet because I find that even with my eating guidelines people take them as rules and then rebel against them.

I want people to be curious and kind, and I really want to emphasize kindness here, because the kindness part is crucial. There is curiosity about what am I doing? What do I believe? How am I using this food? And then there is kindness about what you discover. I think I was so harsh and cruel to myself for so many years and I find that people's inner dialogue with themselves about their relationship with food is merciless. So I really try to bring in the element of kindness.

There was a 2007 study done at The University of Texas by a woman named Dr. Kristin Neff who discovered that when people who had problems with food were given reassurance, she had a couple of control groups. One group was given reassurance about what they were doing with food, about overeating basically. The other one wasn't. When the people who were given reassurance, in the end were those that ate less than the people who didn't. When questioned it turned out that people believed that they would only change by criticizing themselves, not by being kind to themselves. So we have this basic belief, which is another one of those beliefs that we carry that we express both through our relationship with food but really, it is a core belief that the only way that I will change is if I deprive or force or shame or punish myself. That is not how people change.

So I really talk about kindness. I call it "The Mae Mobley Practice" and this is from the book, *The Help* where Aibileen says to the little girl that she is taking care of every morning, "You are good. You are kind. You are important." What would it be like if we actually talked to ourselves like that? If when we stubbed our toe we didn't say, "Oh shit!" but "Oh sweetie." And when you start cultivating a different kind of relationship with yourself, curious and kind, then there is much more spaciousness and willingness to ask yourself about your relationship with food. "Is this the kind of food I actually want to be eating?" When you have compassion for yourself you are more likely to also have compassion for the earth and for the animals. When you feel deprived and when you feel that you are hanging on an edge and that food is your only source of comfort, there is a way of, "I am going to give this to myself and I am going to get that no matter what it does to anybody."

When I used to be on a binge I used to feel like every creature in my path was in danger because I wanted that food so badly I was willing to mow down anybody that came in my way. Now obviously I didn't do that. I didn't mow people down but there was such a fierceness about needing that food to survive when you are on that kind of level where it is the only goodness you give yourself. Then there is a lack of empathy

and compassion towards other living things because it is all about you surviving in that moment. So we are trying to change or I am in my own work and with the people that I work with sort of trying – not sort of, really working on changing the direction, the orientation of our lives so that we are kind to ourselves. We can ask ourselves the hard questions. Because if you ask yourself that question; “What am I doing to the earth by eating this food?” and you feel like you are not getting what you really need, your sweet self, your precious self is not getting it, you are going to be less likely to care.

John Robbins: I want to ask you one last question. There is so much that I love about what you are sharing here, Geneen, the curiosity and the kindness. The understanding that our food issues can, when we become aware of them, lead us into our hearts, lead us into our souls. I experience you as one of the wise ones of our time who are speaking and writing about the relationship between food and the human spirit. So what I want to ask you in closing is; at this point in history, with all that is at stake today in our personal lives and in the greater unfolding of life on earth, what do you see as an important thing that we need to remember?

Geneen Roth: Wow, that is quite a question John. Because I think I would say the two things, and they are twins to me, are awareness and kindness. That what you pay attention to grows. When you pay attention to what is here, to the beauty, to what is right about you, to what is right about hearing birds sing for instance, a very, very simple thing. Just waking up in the morning, where does your mind go? What are you paying attention to? Our friend Lynn Twist has talked about people, the first thing they think about when they wake up in the morning is; “I didn’t get enough sleep,” and the last thing they think about is, “I didn’t get enough done today.” To really become aware of your mind and how it functions and how it leads you around by your nose basically into convincing you of stories about what is wrong internally on a very deep level. I want people to know that we have a choice about how we think and where we put our attention that no matter how old you are or young you are, change is possible. It is really possible and with all the new information with brain science, what we found out is that the brain is plastic and that it makes a difference, this moment, this very second matters in terms of where you’re placing your attention.

So where are you placing your attention and to understand that most of what we think and most of the directions that we give ourselves, most of our thoughts are based on our history. Our conditioning is based on, as one of my teachers says; most of us follow instructions given to us ten or twenty or fifty years ago by people we wouldn’t ask for street directions from today. We don’t realize that most of our lives are lead from these old beliefs and instructions that we haven’t questioned that are basically negative and have no relevance to what is actually true right here, right now in our lives and on earth.

So question your mind. Know that you can change. I love the quote from the mentor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who said something like, “Don’t ask what the world needs, ask what makes you come alive because what the world needs are people who have come alive.” I want people to know, yes, that is true. And you can come alive in your own life by questioning your mind, your usual thoughts, by realizing that you can change and by being kind, exquisitely kind to yourself.

John Robbins: I want our listeners to know that they can find out more about Geneen Roth and her insightful work at the website: www.GeneenRoth.com. I want to thank you Geneen for your penetrating insights into food, into the hungers in the human heart and for your liberating perspectives on living with awareness, humility, curiosity, kindness and joy, even in the presence of our own suffering.

Geneen Roth: John, I wanted to add one more thing besides thanking you and telling you that it has been a huge pleasure as always to talk to you. If people want to study online with me, they can also do that and they will find out all about that at the website that you mentioned, www.GeneenRoth.com.

John Robbins: Well I am sure man will and those who do will get great benefit from doing so. Your light is a very bright one Geneen and it has become so through a journey that you share so honestly and exquisitely. It is liberating to all of us who listen and who join you in this path. Thank you for shining it and thank you for being who you are.

Geneen Roth: And you too, you and Ocean. Thank you for doing this. I am sure so many people are going to be helped and have a light shine inside their own hearts from this.

Ocean Robbins: I certainly hope so and we just want to thank you again. We have been talking with Geneen Roth, the author of many best sellers, including *Women, Food and God* and *Lost and Found*. Geneen, again, thank you for your vulnerability. Thank you for your love and kindness and your affirmations of the compassion that all life deserves.

Geneen Roth: Thanks Ocean.

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