

FEEDING YOUR SOUL

My friend Alex and I sat out on the deck at our neighbourhood cafe. We were laughing so hard that another customer had to put on her headphones, probably so she could concentrate on whatever she was working on.

We were laughing about Alex's banana costume that she got from Amazon (Prime overnight I might add - why on earth can you get a banana suit on Prime?), to use for a video that she did with a friend. It was a fun, silly video...one that makes me laugh every time I watch it. We were talking about her process of tuning into her silliness. It ends up that her videos that have been a great source of silly for her, started at a dark time when her beloved stepdad was dying. She was also at a difficult point in her work, still not clear on which direction it was going. She made the choice to do her 'silly' videos just for herself, so she could have fun, so she could feel nourished.

I always love talking with Alex. She's a soul sister, on a similar journey but 25 years behind me in terms of age. She's considering having children, I'm planning for semi-retirement. Anyway all this to say that our laughter and conversation lead to the spurting of 'The Joy Project'. It was decided then and there that as I do my work of writing, branding, social media'ing, and all of the stuff in between and around it, that I will have joy, rather than thinking about it as a slog.

I yearn for joy. You yearn for joy. We all yearn for it. We are in fact programmed to seek it out. It's so much about FEEDING THE SOUL.

Joy is part of the bigger picture of nourishment.

Nourishment, as I see it, is the encompassment of all that feeds us as spiritual beings in a physical body.

Nutritionally, we need food, air and water. The right fuel will nourish our cells, brains, the structures of bone, muscle, connective tissue, organs, and the form and function of every system and part.

Mentally, nourishment comes from curiosity, exploration, creativity, challenges of the mind.

Emotionally, it comes from having good relationships with self, intimate others, community, as well as being in relationship with everything else that is in our circle of influence.

And what about the soul? What feeds it?

To be clear about what the soul is, I like Deepak Chopra's clarification the best. I am not quoting him because I heard this many years ago and may not say it the way he said it, but here is my take. Spirit is the larger quantum field of 'all that is'. Call it universal energy, God, higher self, whatever works for you. The soul is our personal experience of it. I like that because it claims that it is through our soul that we can have a personal experience of the great magnificence.

You know you're feeding your soul when you are in tune with what makes you feel fully alive. You will be fully present. In a moment of presence, there is no place else that you would rather be.

Feeding the soul can and does encompass all of the other parts of us. It will often nourish one or more of the aspects of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. But it is not limited to one or the other.

In my book, *Jump Off the Diet Treadmill*, I tell the story of a mindful eating experience that was soul nourishing, and a comparative one that has all the right raw materials, but was hardly an experience of feeding my soul.

My partner Barry and I took some classes in tantric yoga, which is a practice that is dependent on being present. In one of those classes, we spent at least 15 minutes taking our time to explore, and eventually eat a single raisin. It required an engagement of all of the senses, and the reward was the most luscious raisin that I have ever eaten. It amazed me how many different hues and textures that I could see as I held that raisin up to the light, how it felt in my mouth and finally when I was able to burst it open to expose its juicy sweetness, how rich in flavour it was. How can a single raisin be so nourishing? I was fully awake to my senses. There was not a thought in my mind that was outside of the experience I was having with that raisin.

Compare that to the full plate of salad that I ate a few nights later, as I was rushing to get to a 7:00 meeting. Was I fully awake, fully present to that experience? No. I could feel that my body was in an anxious state. My mind was half-way out the door. I couldn't tell you anything about the flavours, textures or delight of eating that salad. Being nourished was dependent on my presence, not on the salad's capacity to provide nutrition, which it does by the handful.

The salad is an example of a meal that may do well to nourish the body. However when it comes to nourishing the soul, presence is the most basic raw material. To be present in the physical world, you have to engage your senses. (Presence in the mental, emotional, spiritual worlds require different types of engagement).

Without soul feeding, we're doomed for finding anything we can to take care of the genetic need to feel good. We have been programmed for seeking out pleasurable experiences otherwise our species wouldn't survive. We wouldn't seek food and water which keeps us alive. We also wouldn't be inclined towards sex which keeps us reproducing. On a more individual level, if we don't feel good, we are less likely to have the desire to be alive. We

increase the chance of suicide or slowly killing ourselves through the life choices we make.

The neurochemicals - serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin, GABA, endorphins, to name a few - are designed to contribute to our sense of well-being. Without their alignment, our sense of feeling nourished dwindles. We then seek other ways to soothe ourselves, to make up for the lack of presence or joy. That's when an overindulgence in food, alcohol, drugs, sex, facebook, video games, or any other not-good-for-you-and-you-know-it activities come into play. They each set up a temporary feel-good pathway in the brain and body which gives you comfort in the moment. But in the long run, we all know that the good feeling is not sustained. It dissipates rather quickly and either you keep eating/drinking/smoking to make it last as long as you can or you drop into a more negative state than you were in before.

These activities are not a problem in and of themselves. The problem is when we don't have control over them. When the balance tips too far on the teeter totter towards what I call **'comforting self-harm'**, then it is a good marker for needing more nourishment. The opposite end of the teeter totter is **'evolving self-care'**. This is the commitment to taking care, of nourishing our selves.

There is another aspect of the brain that I want to mention before we launch into the soul feeding practices.

When you feed your soul you will also be balancing both hemispheres of the brain. The left side keeps you focused and prepared and helps you maintain self-control. Too much time spent in this side of the brain however, leads to self-criticism, judgment, inflexibility, and an inability to see the larger picture. Feeding the soul taps you into the right side of the brain that is open, flexible, creative, compassionate, connected to the bigger picture. Also, if you are a seeker of spiritual experiences, then this is the side of the brain that you want to spend more time in. As human beings we naturally spend more time

in the left hemisphere than the right. It's like we have to water and cultivate time spent in the creative, open, expansive part of ourselves. When we do, we create a natural willpower that we don't have to work at. In other words, the overeating, over-drinking, other over-indulgences become easier to control, rather than a constant struggle. We get to relax into ourselves, rather than feeling like we're always fighting our inclinations.

PRACTICES IN FEEDING YOUR SOUL

I was inspired by the idea of nourishing the soul a number of years ago when I read an article in a magazine on spirituality. It asked its readership to share one of their favourite activities that they do to nourish their soul. The mag published it as '52 Ways that Our Readers Feed their Soul.' . Out of all that were listed, the one that I remember most was from a woman who wrote in to say that when she is stuck in traffic, she pulls a bubble container from the glove compartment, rolls down her window and blows bubbles at the other drivers. It makes them laugh, gives them ground for connection and lights up an otherwise boring drive. What struck me was the absolute simplicity of her choice. At a time where nothing better is going on, she does something for a couple of minutes that costs her next to nothing and spreads good will to those around her. It required her only to be willing to risk 'foolishness', but she did it and for that she was rewarded.

Sometimes we need to go out on a limb to feed our soul. We need to do something that pushes us outside of our comfort zone. But you get to choose how much you do that. Some soul-feeding activities will be easier for you, in terms of the time commitment and risk component. Go for the low hanging fruit, the stuff you can do easily and readily so that you can practice making it a daily occurrence. Then you can step into bigger projects as you're ready.

Write down 30 things that feed your soul.

Feeding your soul means that it brings you totally into the present moment, with no place else that you would rather be. If this process doesn't come easy for you, as it doesn't for many people, here are some ideas to consider:

* Mindful and meditative activities - reading of spiritually inspiring books, prayer, listening to audio of guided meditation, chanting, 3 daily gratitudes, etc.

* Pampering yourself - bubble baths, spa treatments, doing your own nails in beautiful colours, creating a new outfit with clothes in your closet, going to movies and/or concerts, etc.

* Nature-based activities - lying on your back looking up at the clouds, going for walks on wooded trails, collecting shells, sitting or walking by the beach, watching the flow of a river, cross country skiing, making snow castles with your children, etc.

* Creative endeavours - dancing to some favourite songs, writing poems, blogging, listening to music, playing the piano, knitting, photo collaging, taking pictures, etc.

* Promotion of self-growth - attending lectures, reading inspiring books, philosophizing with friends, documentary films, journaling, taking a course just because you want to, etc.

* Activities for fun and relaxation - hanging out with friends, exploring areas of the city you've never been, going on adventures with the children in your life, visiting art galleries, etc

* Generating love - playing with your cat or dog, connecting with someone on a heart level, holding a baby, volunteer work, giving and getting a hug or a massage, talking with a close friend, doing something loving and unexpected for your mate, random acts of kindness, etc.

These are only examples of the endless possibilities for feeding your soul. You need to consider what is personal and juicy for you. This will give you outlets that are more fulfilling and sustainable than 'comforting self-harm'.

If you can't find 30 things that feed your soul, don't fret. You're not alone.

We get good at what we practice and if you are not practiced at feeding your soul you probably have missed out on catching many of the opportunities to do so. As a result you're not even sure what works for you. Relax. Take some deep breaths. Seriously. Take some deep breaths right now.

It's okay to only have 5 or 10 or even 2. We all need to start from where we are and grow from there. Whatever number you have, you can take the next step.

Make a commitment to do at least one of the items on your list every single day. Make your commitment doable so you have success at sticking with it. Maybe you will start with something that only takes 3 minutes like watching a funny youtube video or listening to a song that moves you, or taking extra time to get down on the floor to play with your cat.

Being in the practice of feeding your soul when you are not in the midst of a food craving or craving something else that is comforting self-harm, makes it easier to redesign your choices when you are facing soul hunger. So don't wait to start. The time is now. Right now. Yes, go and do it!! Every time you give yourself the gift of feeding your soul, you are creating a brain pattern that is easier to return to, and will eventually replace food (or other substance) as your source of comfort and joy.

What does your soul crave?

Make a list of '30 things that feed your soul'.

You know you are feeding your soul when you have a feeling of aliveness and are fully present in the moment.

What does your soul crave?

Make a list of 30 Things That Feed Your Soul

(You know you are feeding your soul when you have a feeling of aliveness and you are fully present in the moment.)

1	16
2	17
3	18
4	19
5	20
6	21
7	22
8	23
9	24
10	25
11	26
12	27
13	28
14	29
15	30

Review your list. What do you commit to doing on a daily basis over the next week?(Keep it simple. Choose what is doable and repeatable.)