

*The Cherry Pie Paradox:*  
*The Surprising Path to Diet Freedom and Lasting Weight Loss*

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Cherry Pie Paradox* is not a diet. There are no calories, carbohydrates, or points to count, nothing to measure or weigh, no foods to avoid. Besides, who likes to be told they can't have a piece of freshly baked cherry pie? That's why we eventually topple off the regime and the weight returns, along with an extra helping of shame.

The perfect diet that permanently resolves your weight “problem” does not yet exist. If it did, we wouldn't have a multibillion dollar weight-loss industry and more than 70,000 books on the subject. If the perfect diet existed, America's obesity epidemic would disappear; instead more of us are overweight than ever before. Finally, if the perfect diet existed, you would not have picked up this book.

I believe diets are edible Band-Aids, covering the wound without dealing with what's causing it. Diets are for people who want *other* people to tell them what they should and shouldn't eat—so when the diet doesn't work, it's not *their* fault. Diets are for people who believe food is more powerful than they are, so they don the latest diet as if it were a garlic necklace that could ward off vampiric donuts and killer tater tots. Lots of luck with that.

So what *is* this book? It's a door to self-discovery, a road map for action to heal the underlying issues that keep the problem in place, and a step-by-step process to help you reach your natural best size.

### The Origins of The Cherry Pie Paradox

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Half a lifetime ago, I was a self-styled expert on dieting; I was also an expert at cheating on diets and berating myself for my diet failures.

I had been overweight as a teenager. Even after I lost the extra pounds, the emotional scars from that episode and from our fat-shaming culture lingered. I became hypervigilant about my weight and spent the next twenty years tinkering with the latest diets to prevent a relapse.

Then, my husband died of cancer in mid-1974, leaving me with our two little ones to raise alone, as well as many *feelings*. Some of those feelings were not surprising—grief over the loss, and anxiety as I contemplated a scary future as a single mom with few readily marketable skills. What I didn't expect was a tsunami of *unacceptable* feelings: anger that Edward had ruined my perfect life plan; guilt that I hadn't been more loving and caring in the final year of his life; and crippling shame about being obsessed with something so shallow as what I weighed, when my kids had lost the father who adored them.

Eating helped me manage those feelings—or so I told myself. But the more I ate, the more I obsessed about my weight. Every night, I designed a new diet for myself, and within 24 hours I had cheated on it. I hated myself for being so out of control.

I hit bottom six months after Edward's death. I sat on the couch, wallowing in self-pity, and mortified by my petty concerns. In my left hand, I held a jar of crunchy

peanut butter and in my right, a large spoon. Yet another diet book lay open on my lap. The floor was littered with tear-soaked tissues and travel brochures from a friend who thought it would help if I got away.

But a trip would be pointless, because wherever I went, there I would be. And I'd be eating.

Suicide seemed like the only other way to get away from myself. I couldn't figure out how to kill myself in a tidy way, so I went straight to imagining myself dead, stretched out lifeless on the couch. (I've always had an active imagination.) Even though I adored Heather, then 6, and Ethan, 3, more than anything in the world, my thinking was so warped I failed to recognize my death would make them orphans.

Continuing to spin my tragic fantasy... the coroner would arrive to examine the body. He would lift my bulky sweater and... oh my God, he would see my hidden fat. That did it. Suicide was out. The mortifying truth: vanity saved my life.

[Today, I can laugh at my melodrama. At the time, however, I felt the claustrophobic desperation of a passenger who's strapped into their seat in a flaming airplane hurtling towards earth. I remember too well the anguish and crushing shame. So if you are in that place, I hope you can get professional help.]



I threw the diet book on the floor with the rest of the litter. If I was going to live, I had to leap off the diet hamster wheel. Heather and Ethan might end up with a fatter mom, but I had to find some other way to regain my sanity—let the tortilla chips fall where they may.

A concerned friend, Chérie Carter-Scott, stepped in to help me lift my gaze beyond the agonies of the moment. She used her coaching skills to ask questions about my vision for the next part of my life. But all I could think about was losing weight.

“What if the obstacle—your weight problem—is the path?” she asked. “Instead of shoving down those feelings with food, denying that you're eating what you're eating, and beating yourself up for all your diet failures, how about

letting what you call *your problem* be your teacher? Could you learn something by being present to your experience in the moment, as painful as it might seem?”

I had to admit that everything I'd tried had only made me more miserable. What did I have to lose? I would start by trying to pay more attention to what I was eating and how I was talking to myself. I decided to enlist all five of my senses in becoming more mindful of the food that somehow (*mystery of mysteries!*) arrived in my mouth.

The paradoxical effect of such focus was that I began to feel more hopeful and more in control of myself.

And then a few days later something happened that shifted *everything*.

## Breakfast with an Alien

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I had delivered my kids to the home of another parent from our children's nursery school for a morning play date. Carol was just sitting down to breakfast and invited me to join her.

I expected some coffee and maybe a piece of toast. Wrong. Carol's breakfast was cherry pie, fresh from her oven. My brain spun. Pie for breakfast?

“Oh, no thanks,” I said primly, “I don't eat pie; I'm trying to lose weight.” I grabbed a cup off the counter. “I'll take some coffee though. Black.”

“You sure? It's a pretty fine pie, if I say so myself.” She cut herself a large piece and transferred it to her plate, red juices flowing. My salivary glands sprang into action.

In my world of nutritional Dos and Don'ts, pie was a definite Don't. But what really got my attention was who was eating this rich breakfast: tiny, slender Carol.

We sat ourselves in the breakfast nook, Carol with her pie and me with my coffee, trying not stare as she savored each bite. Then, with half of the wedge still on her plate, she patted her tummy with a gesture of satisfaction, pulled the garbage can over to the table and tossed the rest of the piece.

Whaaaat? Perfectly good food! Cherry pie! Just tossed! In the garbage!

It took all my restraint not to dive into the can after the half-eaten slice. If I were a cartoon figure, smoke would have poured out my ears. Carol's behavior called into question everything I'd believed about dieting and being slim.

I tried to make sense of what I had witnessed. I had a vague memory of reading an article that described two categories of thin people—“true thins” and “fat thins.” *True thins* were slim on the outside and never worried about their weight or what they ate. This was Carol. *Fat thins* might or *might not* be carrying extra weight, but nevertheless obsessed about what they ate and were unable to shake their “fat” self-image. Even though I might look slim enough to others, I was undeniably a *fat thin*.

The humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow revolutionized therapeutic practice in the early 1960s with his novel approach to mental health. He believed that studying the behavior of healthy, productive, mature individuals provided more useful information about psychological health than the prevailing practice of studying those with emotional issues.

Had I been relying on advice from diet experts who had only studied people with weight problems? At best, these folks had lost weight and become slimmer on

the *outside*, but my hunch was that many remained *fat* in their heads, doomed like me to chronic weight worries. What if I looked instead for guidance from natural slimness masters—*true thins* like Carol?

This was my eureka moment. I knew that nothing in life is fixed, and that within each so-called absolute is the seed of its opposite. The Taoist yin-yang symbol is a perfect expression of that truth. You can't know hot without knowing cold, light without dark. I just had to discover, awaken, and nurture the *thin* seed that had to be lurking somewhere inside my *fat* head. [I use the words "thin" and "fat" as shortcut terms, but I attach no particular number of pounds or body mass index to either word. Insert your own personal definitions or phrases. See chapter 1, The F-Word, for a deeper discussion of these loaded terms.]

I decided to study how *true thins* related to food and their bodies, comparing these discoveries with my own thinking and behavior.

The next few weeks were intense. I watched other people of all shapes and sizes as they ate, and I quizzed them about their attitudes toward food. I also became my own lab rat, observing my behavior as objectively as I could. I took voluminous notes on what I ate, how my body sensed hunger and fullness, what situations made me want to eat, and how many self-serving excuses I created for eating when I wasn't hungry.

Most importantly, I searched for evidence of my own inner thin self. Whenever I caught a glimpse of what I began to call my thin behavior, I heaped myself with praise. Sometimes I pretended I was Carol (WWCD-What Would Carol Do?) to give that inner *thin* self a workout.

To my amazement, the extra pounds began to come off. My depression lifted, and I felt a new surge of energy.

One night I awoke with the name "Thin Within" lighting up my brain. It perfectly matched what I wanted to *be*. And sharing this method of inner exploration with other fed-up dieters was what I wanted to *do*. [Quick aside here. As much as I loved this name in 1975, today the word "thin" is no longer alluring to most of us. See Chapter 1.]

I had no idea if the enormous shift I'd experienced in my own relationship to food and my weight would work for anyone else, so I drafted a series of classes. Five women in the neighborhood volunteered to be my guinea pigs for the first Thin Within seminars. We launched in my living room in May of 1975.

To my astonishment, over the next few weeks all of us lost weight and everyone loved the process of discovery. We marveled at our creative excuses and the myriad ways we'd found to avoid taking responsibility for our behavior. It became clear that weight problems don't erupt out of nowhere; they're often a solution to other issues with long-buried histories—birth-family dynamics, trauma, and cultural pressures.

Over the next few months, I taught additional groups, refining and adding to the course material. By October I knew the Thin Within program would soon outstrip my ability to manage it by myself, especially as a single parent. (As my sanity returned, so did my desire to be the attentive parent my kids deserved, thank goodness.)

In late fall, I took on a partner, Judy Wardell Halliday, who had experienced similar weight struggles. She had a background as a psychiatric nurse and we seemed

to have complementary strengths. I acknowledge with gratitude that without Judy's enormous contributions, Thin Within would have died of my exhaustion. Instead, it thrived in the San Francisco Bay Area over the next few years, enabling hundreds of participants to make peace with food and their bodies.

In 1980, I sold my share of Thin Within to Judy and returned to school for a graduate degree in public health. Shortly after, Judy became a born-again Christian and began altering the program to be Bible-based.

Since then, many weight-loss programs have adopted and adapted many of Thin Within's revolutionary principles. *The Cherry Pie Paradox* maintains the framework of my original step-by-step transformation process, significantly updated with lots of new material I've incorporated from four decades of experience in Asian mindfulness traditions, and following new developments in neuroscience and the psychology of behavior change.

Today, given the strides made in body positivity (appreciating our bodies no matter their size or shape), some writers would retire all references to "fat" and "thin" because they're about appearance, not substance. However, political correctness aside, these terms refuse to die in our trash-talking minds when we look in the mirror or try on a new outfit, so I use them where necessary. Please understand, I am talking about your thinking and behavior, not your appearance.

And, in case you're wondering, I have not dieted since 1975 and remain slim. If you offered me a piece of cherry pie for breakfast (and if I were hungry), I would accept with pleasure.

### Is This Book Right for You?

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Of course, I think *everyone* would benefit from a healthier, more satisfying relationship with food and their bodies by following these practices. However, what will be most helpful to you depends on whether your concerns are relatively recent or have been ongoing for decades, and whether you want to lose weight or just make peace with food and the body you have.

**If you've been a chronic yo-yo dieter**, you will have accumulated a lot of negative mental baggage. Your weight issues have become a problem of **over-attention**—listening too much to the trash-talker in your head, and of **under-attention**—not being mindful of your body or your food. You'll need time, focus, and patience to free yourself for good. It's important to do all the exercises sequentially.

**If you never worried about your weight... until one day in middle age** you could no longer zip your jeans, or the doctor announced your health would improve if you lost weight, or you looked down at your expanded waist and wondered, *What the hell happened here?* You had always thought of yourself as a "thin" person. This is a problem of **under-attention**—ignoring what your mouth and body have been trying to tell you. The eating, hunger, and body awareness exercises ("SuperTools") should reawaken your inner sylph.

**If you simply want to feel good about your body as it is, whatever your weight, this process can help you too.** It's tragic to dislike the only body you'll ever receive. You have a problem of **over-attention** to the trash-talker in your head. I hope some of the mindfulness exercises and SuperTools help you

befriend the body you have and allow you to enjoy the foods you choose to eat without guilt or shame.

**If you have a medical condition that requires you to avoid certain foods, eat frequent meals, or follow a special schedule, or if you have issues with bulimia or anorexia, please follow your doctor's orders first.**

This book provides an experiential exploration that requires your open-minded curiosity and willingness to experiment. You can follow the program whether you're carnivorous, gluten-free, vegetarian, vegan, Vietnamese, Mexican, or Bulgarian—because it's about how you eat, why you eat, and how much you eat, not *what* you eat.

You will experience shifts in many dimensions:

**In perspective:** from harsh judge to curious researcher, from fighting a “weight problem” to implementing a freedom project

**In self-image:** from “fat” to “right-size-for-me”

**In self-talk:** from making excuses to getting results

**In habits:** from self-defeating behaviors to empowering choices

**In awareness:** from mindless stuffing to developing a discriminating palate

**In attitudes toward food:** from tempting hazard to sensory pleasure

**In relationship to your body:** from out of touch to attentive appreciation

**Your future is created in the present moment.** Yesterday's half-gallon of ice cream is in the past and tomorrow's buffet extravaganza has not yet happened. What gets in the way of being here and now is your constantly yammering internal critic and other ancient junk—unexamined habits, tired excuses, squashed emotions and dreams, and your self-limiting stories about who you think you are.

The present moment is your only opportunity to choose more wisely, and you have it within your power to do so. You deserve to eat what you love and love what you eat. You deserve freedom from disquieting or oppressive thoughts and an end to hostilities between you and your body. You deserve to live in a body you treasure, even if occasionally it might need a fresh coat of paint. You deserve to leave this problem in the dust, so you can fulfill your real purpose in life.

You can do this.