

CRAVING HOPE

A SPIRITUAL COMPANION
ON YOUR WEIGHT LOSS JOURNEY



BY JONI WOELFEL

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PUBLICATIONS

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FOREWORD



Joni Woelfel is a true spiritual person. Her approach to all of life's problems is to solve them through thought, meditation and prayer. To Joni, life is a spiritual journey to be felt and savored along the way. Therefore I should not have been surprised when Joni told me she was writing a book based on a spiritual approach to weight loss, but I was. I was also rather skeptical about such a book until I finally read it.

As a medical practitioner for more than thirty years, I know that few medical problems can be more frustrating than the patient who wants to lose weight but cannot, in spite of having tried many approaches. Medical professionals use body mass index (BMI) as a standard measure in determining whether or not someone is overweight. (To determine your BMI, visit this website from the Department of Health and Human Services: www.nhlbhsupport.com/bmi.) Overweight is defined as a BMI of 25-29.9. Obesity is defined as a BMI of 30 or more.

The negative effects of obesity are many. Studies have shown an association between excess body weight and various diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, and some forms of cancer (uterine and breast cancer in post-menopausal women, colon cancer in men).

Some people have given up altogether on traditional weight loss and diet plans and are willing to go to extreme lengths to lose weight. Consider, for example, that the *Min-*

neapolis Tribune reported that in 2007, 205,000 Americans had weight reduction surgery at an average cost of \$17,000-\$25,000 each. That means that as a nation we spent over \$3.5 billion dollars on surgeries to lose weight.

For some, even surgery is not enough. Recently, at the University of Minnesota, researchers have been experimenting with implanting an electrode designed to stimulate the vagus nerve and “trick” the brain into thinking the stomach is full, thereby blocking the sensation of hunger. At the present time, say researchers, the device “shows promise.”

Additionally, countless Americans have relied on so-called “diet pills” to help them lose large amounts of weight. Many of these drugs are backed by vigorous marketing plans, but they all come with the admonition to “use in conjunction with a balanced diet and exercise program.” Since the vast majority of diet pills on the market are called herbal or dietary supplements, they are not regulated and can make virtually any claim they want. Most are only supported by testimonials from paid users. The Mayo Clinic reviewed nine of the leading weight loss pills and found them either ineffective or dangerous. If effective at all, these pills rarely seem to work long term because users are not required to change their lifestyles. Some new medications, FDA-approved, have come onto the market, such as Alli, an over-the-counter version of Orlistat. These capsules, taken three times a day, are supposed to promote weight loss by interfering with fat absorption. It will be interesting to see how they work in practice.

These new and sophisticated weight loss methods are just the latest innovations for those carrying unwanted pounds. Other methods, including psychotherapy, hypnosis and acupuncture have had variable success, sometimes causing a short-term weight loss but nothing that can be sustained over the long term.

Clearly, whether we want to lose weight for health reasons or to look good for our high school reunion the task is daunting. Many people seem to need something more than science to help them lose weight and keep it off.

Craving Hope is not the first book to offer a spiritual approach to weight loss, but it is unique in that it delivers what it promises: “a spiritual companion on your weight loss journey.” This ninety-day weight loss program merges the practical with the spiritual. Unlike other approaches that rely merely on inspiring the reader but fall short on the “how to,” Joni Woelfel weaves a spiritual outlook with sound medical ideas to help readers develop the will power and inner strength that they need. And she knowingly allows that some of the inspiration needed to bring about the desired weight loss will be derived from the shared group setting where her suggestions and the experiences of others can be discussed and members can learn and take inspiration from each other.

As in her previous books, Joni writes with a creative energy and passion that speaks right to the hearts of readers and should make *Craving Hope* a popular and successful approach to weight loss.

Robert R. Thompson, M.D.

INTRODUCTION



When we are called to complete a task that stretches us to new heights and yet we know that we have the capacity to do what is being asked of us, we are experiencing what spiritualists and psychologists call *flow*. That has been my experience in writing this book. An energy seemed to envelop and propel me—providing the spiritual guidance I needed each step of the way.

I recognized early on that while I was researching the spirituality of weight loss through the lens of an investigative reporter, what I really wanted to examine and describe was the spiritual interconnectedness we receive as we enter the fullness of God. How could I experience and visually portray this, I wondered? Inspired by the exercises of Saint Ignatius, I envisioned a wall of blocks. I realized that each day, block by block, I was reconstructing the way I experienced and interacted with the world, health, how I nourish my whole self, and the outreach work I was called to do. Passion surged through me as the foundation for my ninety-day weight loss journey revealed itself. *I would build a block wall in my backyard.*

Every day I added a block, each weighing fifty pounds. This was part of my spiritual exercise as a deeper understanding of discipline and creativity guided me. With my husband's help, I placed the blocks in rows eighteen long and five high. Of course life went on as the wall grew higher and higher, but that wall was a constant part of my daily experi-

ence. In the end, I was left with what I call my Blessing Wall. The sheer magnitude of it—weighing in at 4500 pounds—serves as a permanent external reminder of one of the most enlightening inner journeys I have ever made.

It is a privilege to offer these ninety reflections to others who are wondering how to include spirituality in a quest for weight loss.

How to Use This Book

Those readers who know enough about nutrition to customize their own weight loss plan may simply follow these ninety meditations chronologically. Most readers, however, will probably prefer to use this book in conjunction with a sound fitness/weight loss program. There are a number of programs out there that are available online, in books, or involve membership in an organization. In this book we will not make judgments as to the pros or cons of any particular approach.

Each of the ninety reflections contains a reflection question. While we have provided you with some blank space to write down your responses, you may find yourself with much more to say than there is room. I would recommend keeping a notebook close by in which you can write your full answers.

Workbook Pages

I have included five workbook lessons that conclude each of the book's five parts. Designed for use in any small group setting, whether affiliated with a parish ministry program or not, they will serve well as a way to reflect on recent accomplishments and plan for the future. Individuals using this book will find the lessons helpful as well. Each workbook lesson draws in readers with an opening prayer, explores the issues that arose during the just-completed section of the book, and closes with a brief prayer to encourage readers as they embark on the next part of their weight loss journey. If used in a group setting, the group's facilitator may choose to supplement these lessons with time for personal testimony, prayer intentions, or any other activity.

A Personal Letter

Dear Reader:

Countless books have been written offering so many ways to lose weight that you may be wondering “Why do I need to buy this book?” The truth is that many of those books completely ignore the personal and spiritual aspects of weight loss and instead focus only on the science. So much emotional baggage comes along with all the issues surrounding our weight and physical appearance that I felt the need to include this personal letter of encouragement.

Perhaps you have just been told you need to lose weight by your doctor for health-related reasons, or you are looking to improve your overall sense of purpose and self-esteem and losing weight is one part of that. Or maybe you are in the same boat I was in before I started my weight loss journey: confident and self-assured regardless of how full-figured you may be, but somehow all of your clothes have decided to shrink. “How on earth,” we wonder, “did that happen?”

That question is exactly why I decided to make this ninety-day pilgrimage. Like you who are just beginning Day 1, I had no clue as to what the answers would be. In looking back, however, I can see how profound the journey actually was.

You are in for an adventure that includes some hard work, but the revelations you will arrive at are so worth it. More than ever, experts are saying that the over-emphasis on the purely practical, physical aspects of losing weight do not work long term. The reason is that people are not taught how to find their natural weight or to understand what life in the body really means. They completely misunderstand the definition of will power and they do not consider that our bodies respond to our life stories through our mind/body/spirit connection.

My goal in writing this book is to help you come into a new awareness of spirit through tuning into your unique

body in new and life-giving ways that free you from focusing on superficial goals while ignoring the whole-body experience of a weight loss journey.

Even after finishing my own ninety-day journey, I continued to lose weight by living out the natural wisdom I had learned. Through mindful, intuitive eating coupled with a sense of spiritual centeredness, I eat when I am hungry and stop when I am full. It is such a joy to understand the depth of what it means to nourish oneself.

Remember: It's not about holding ourselves in—but opening ourselves to God, life and self-care.

You can do it. I am cheering you on!

Joni Woelfel

THE BEGINNING



*According to the grace of God given to me,
like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation,
and someone else is building upon it.*

Each builder must choose with care how to build on it.

—1 Corinthians 3:10

The gray, rainy day stood in sharp contrast to the brilliant green foliage in our backyard as my husband and our son began laying the foundation for my wall of building blocks. The process had many steps, beginning with cutting back the lush undergrowth.

Once this was done, the ground had to be raked and prepared for the wooden boards that would act as a mold to contain the wet concrete while it dried. My husband and son mixed batch after batch of sand, water and cement in a wheel barrow—back-breaking work. This was then dumped into the twenty-four foot mold that lined the back of our property line.

As I watched out the window, I lit a candle in commemoration of the grand event and said a small prayer for grace and blessings upon the summer about to unfold. I felt full of excited anticipation as I realized that the physical concrete foundation mirrored the spiritual foundation of the ninety-day weight loss journey I had just begun.

I watched as my husband and son began leveling the wet concrete with trowels and felt a sensation of leveling in myself. Shifts were going on within and there was a readiness

to meet life on its own terms, to challenge myself, step out of my comfort zone, and to explore the spirituality of weight loss.

The wall we were building in our backyard was not meant to serve as a boundary or division between our yard and the beloved woods beyond, but rather to define a space set aside as a sanctuary. Later, after I'd brought my husband a cup of coffee and we were resting, a cardinal flew into the tree top directly above us, whistling vigorously. I imagined him as a flaming red messenger, sent to usher in a new era with promises of things to come. All of a sudden the sun peeked out for a moment, drenching the landscape with brilliant gold. Thus began the journey which became this book—and a foundation upon which others could build their own inner spiritual blessing walls.

STAGE ONE: BECOMING READY



*Today, we enter the phase of readiness.
Perhaps for some time it has been nudging us
or perhaps we suddenly recognized its arrival,
whereas before it was ignored and hidden.*

*Regardless of how long we have been
“not” ready or “maybe” ready,
today is different: We are ready.*

We are summoned, called and invited to change our lives.

The journey begins...

DAY 1: FIRST GRACE

The body is the soul presented in its richest and most expressive form. In the body, we see the soul articulated in gesture, dress, movement, shape—in countless expressive forms. —Thomas Moore

Isn't it funny how an ordinary, plodding day can become one that changes our lives? I was eating a candy bar when my attention was drawn by a woman on television whose body, medically speaking, was fifteen years older than her true age. She was sedentary, fatigued, depressed, overweight and addicted to diet soda. The “before” and “after” footage as she took on a challenge to lose weight—and came out the other side a changed, vibrant woman—prompted me to think: *If she can do it, I can do it.*

Experiencing the grace to take the first steps and the unexpected determination to do it is a miracle. We are on a pilgrimage, a journey of the body, mind and soul. As we begin this ninety-day quest, we wonder:

- What will be revealed?
- Will I be able to stay true to my goals?
- How will I be changed?
- What is God asking me to examine, face and release?
- As I lose weight, what will be the spiritual gains?

REFLECTION QUESTION: How would you describe your physical, emotional and spiritual state as you begin this journey?

AFFIRMATION: Today, on the very first step of this new journey, we are ready to begin the process of self-examination. Looking in the mirror, as we face the truth of our body's condition, we send unconditional love and encouragement to the person we see. We embrace the heart and fullness of who we are from the inside out.

DEAR GOD: Thank you for the tenacity that surges through me, propelling me forward to secrets waiting to be revealed.

DAILY MANTRA

If he/she can do it, I can do it.



DAY 2: CLARITY SUMMONS

A Japanese poet once wrote, "The world grows stronger as each story is told." Perhaps that is what keeps us telling our stories to one another—challenging us to embrace new ways of understanding what a holy life is all about. The more we tell our stories, the stronger our connection becomes to that part of ourselves that brings us into relationship with a larger Mystery and a larger Call. —Mary Ruth Broz, RSM, and Barbara Flynn

I've begun making my first, small change through my commitment to walk a half hour every day. I winced a bit when I stepped on the scale today to face my true weight, but even so, persistence is drawing me forward like a magnet. My physical goal is to lose weight during these ninety days; my internal goal is to understand how the stories of my life influence my body and how I nourish myself.

While still emotionally vulnerable, we take on this first challenge with much anticipation. It can be quite daunting as we set out and face the challenges of not only defining self-discipline and self-worth but opening ourselves to truths we have not been able to face. We move forward with confidence that forthcoming enlightenment will clarify our vision and increase our ability to be proactive as we become healthier and kinder to ourselves.

REFLECTION QUESTION: If you were to write a prayer to God expressing your unique needs and asking for spiritual assistance, what would you say?

AFFIRMATION: Each of us is here for specific reasons, and the possibilities for reciprocal loving, nurturing and being are limitless. Our readiness to come into the fullness of these truths is an intimate process between us and God.

DEAR GOD: Thank you for sending me the courage to explore ideas I have not been receptive to before.

DAILY MANTRA

*My body has hidden stories
to reveal.*



DAY 3: MAKING THE PROMISE

When you're on a journey, and the end keeps getting further and further away, then you realize that the real end is the journey. —Karlfried Graf Durckheim

I just returned from my daily walk, symbolic of stepping out on the unknown journey before me. I am wondering about the new rhythm these healthy habits will bring to my life. This daily journaling helps me stay accountable to the promises I make to myself.

Our ninety-day journey is not just about losing a set amount of pounds, but rather of taking the back roads into the reasons why we have gained more weight than is good for us. While we don't know where this journey will take us, we sense that *versatility* is at the heart of our commitment. We know from past experience that when we overlook this important quality our efforts at achieving lasting results are doomed. As we ready ourselves to receive insights and grace, we do not focus on the final results, but rather the messages along the way that are uniquely meant for us.

REFLECTION QUESTION: What obstacles have held you back from participating in a weight loss plan in the past?

AFFIRMATION: As we learn to make changes that will improve the quality of our life, we don't have to be rigid. We stay in the flow of our day, flexible yet mindful of our determination and unfolding plan.

DEAR GOD: As a deeper understanding of who I am unfolds in my heart, thank you, God, for helping me grasp the significance of all the ways that you speak to me.

DAILY MANTRA

I am flexible and versatile.



DAY 4: THE NATURE OF ELASTICITY

Like a rubber band, we can stretch our spiritual horizons further than we ever imagined possible.

In order to progress sensibly, I have to be careful not to tax myself too much, yet still stretch myself enough to improve health and promote weight loss. This is a problem many overweight people have. In the past, I have often been over-enthusiastic at first and ended up hurting myself, becoming discouraged and ultimately quitting before I've had a chance to really make a difference. It is important to take note of past patterns like this.

Spiritually and physically, muscles want to be used respectfully, but not protected so much that they atrophy. As seasoned dieters who have many foiled attempts behind us, we set out as responsible risk-takers who understand that our aim is coming into the wholeness of self with God's guidance. When practicality merges with spirit, we have the formula for extending our possibilities beyond the borders of our present limitations. Our range of opportunities for success increases greatly.

REFLECTION QUESTION: As you get started, what form or style of exercise appeals most to you? Are you taking multivitamins?

AFFIRMATION: When we begin a new fitness regimen, we may notice that our bodies are tight and inflexible, but as we work a little harder each day we find ourselves able to touch our toes or bend down to the floor. Our mind and spirit work in much the same way, and the more we strive for it, the easier it can be to attain insights.

DEAR GOD: Thank you for your encouragement and readiness to offer as many second chances as I need.

DAILY MANTRA

I am a responsible risk-taker.

