

Having it all... Then what?

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'inevitable,'
author says

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The idea was to indulge in self-nourishment with Geneen Roth, the popular workshop guru and best-selling author of *When Food Is Love* (Penguin Books, \$14). Aromatherapy massage and a leisurely lunch. Eat and explore women's hunger for wholeness, which is the heart of her new book, *Appetites: On the Search for True Nourishment* (Dutton, \$20.95).

Plans for a relaxing day morphed into a wild gallop from sauna to restaurant to hotel to TV interview to airport — the sort of clock-watching, food-gulping, high-turbo day that many women experience as daily reality.

But that's OK. Because the endless race is exactly what women in her workshops complain about all the time. It's why she wrote *Appetites*.

"Women are pushing, pushing, pushing, going after this ideal life, not taking time to be with our own lives at all," she says. "I think there's a sense that we keep chasing this ideal as if it's going to make us happy

when we get it."

For some, the ideal is to be thin. The women who trek to her food workshops think being thin will dissolve their pain. They've tried everything, she says: diets, fasts, exercise, no-fat regimes, stomach stapling, jaw wiring, anorexia, bulimia, suicide.

For others, the ideal is to create a family, get the perfect job, find a loving relationship.

Whatever the goal, many achieve it and end up disappointed.

So *Appetites* addresses the big question: What happens when our dreams come true — we get thin, rich, famous, married — and something is still missing?

She should know. She wanted to get famous and she did, sort of: hit the media circuit, did everything from *Oprah* to *NBC Nightly News*.

Still, she writes, something was missing:

"Every time we do something, dream something, achieve something that we think is going to fix what is wrong, every time we do it for what it will bring us rather than for Please see 'NEXT' on Page 6C.

'Next thing' is constant objective of author, workshop whiz Roth

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the joy of the act itself, disappointment is inevitable. But rather than allow the pain of this, we switch to the next dream. A bigger car, a smaller body, a different job, more fame."

Here in Dallas, arriving at the spa, Geneen Roth looks famous in that chic anonymous way: black leggings, black leather boots, and a hazel chenille sweater that perfectly matches her eyes, which are wide and shining despite an 18-hour day that started with being soaked by thunderstorms and zipping through two TV and radio interviews.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" the masseuse asks, staring.

Ms. Roth, who lives in Berkeley, Calif., has never set foot in the place. Must be all that TV exposure.

After aromatherapy massage she pops into the sauna. "An armoire fell on me recently," she says.

"It really hurt my back, so now I have to have weekly massages. Just now, having the massage, I was thinking how often I'm in a massage and I'm thinking about the next thing."

For years, it seems, she's been thinking about the next thing. Getting thin, getting married, getting famous. First she lost weight, then she got married, then her book *When Food Is Love* hit the *New York Times* best-seller list after she appeared on *Oprah*.

Her drive to the top started with huge hunger: She gained and lost 1,000 pounds over 17 years.

"Then I realized that it was connected emotionally, that I was not just crazed and out of control and lacking will power," she says. "I was using food to express things that I didn't feel capable or confident of expressing any other way. Like, come closer, go away, I'm lonely, I'm sad."

As she worked through her own emotions about eating and weight loss, she started leading very small groups of women in her living room — the start of her Breaking Free workshops, which she's conducted nationally since 1979.

Her theory, called revolutionary when developed in the early '80s, is to stop dieting and eat what the body wants when it is hungry, trusting that once the emotional reasons behind overeating are addressed, the body will eat what's healthy.

Lots of authors today are writing about women and wholeness. What makes Ms. Roth different is her "unbelievable microscopic honesty," says

Dr. Christiane Northrup, co-founder of Women to Women, an innovative health care clinic for women in Maine, and author of *Women's Bodies*, *Women's Wisdom* (Bantam, \$14.95).

"She doesn't hold back. She writes objective truth with compassion, so you feel it nourishing your body."

At Beau Nash in Dallas, Ms. Roth peruses the menu, a nourishment guru in action.

"I'm real hungry," she says.

She orders a Caesar salad, "very light on the dressing." And the grilled salmon, "with the butter sauce on the side." Reaching for a big chunk of fresh wheat bread, she eats and talks, always aware of ticking clocks and pressing deadlines.

"I'm going to talk with my mouth full," she says as she begins lunch.

"Scuse me while I pick my teeth," she says as she finishes.

This is a woman who's easy-as-pie to be with. She's like a long-lost best friend, even if you've just met. Maybe it's how she strips herself away in her books, truth by unflinching truth.

This is a woman who, to help her mother, will stride into a grocery store wearing an old raincoat over a nightgown, rubber rain boots, sunglasses and a baseball cap — and greet fans, like the checker behind the counter, who recognize her.

This is a woman who writes: "I've spent 20 years in therapy and 13 years of Buddhist practice trying to change, trying to convince myself that I am no longer unseen, unwanted, fat or ugly, and that the past is gone — be in the present, Geneen, get over yourself..."

This is a woman who says her craving for fame was really just emotional starvation. Food, she says, is her favorite metaphor for nourishment and hunger of all kinds.

"I loved being on *Oprah*," she says. "She was great. But the difference between me now and then is that I thought being famous was going to do what I thought being *thin* was going to do, which I thought being in a *relationship* was going to do, which I thought having work I loved was going to do.

"Being famous for me didn't have so much to do with money as with being seen, and being valued, and having other people think I was valuable because I didn't think I was valuable."

Three years later, she says she's learned to value herself much more

than before. It wasn't fame that did it — it was a severe case of vitamin A poisoning. She misunderstood a doctor's prescription and took a mega-overdose. It took a year for her system to completely recover.

"I lost about half of my hair," she says. "I could barely look in the mirror, because from the vitamin A poisoning I also had bright orange skin, and three huge baseball-sized dark brown blotches on my face. And I had no eyebrows or eyelashes. My lips were so chapped, and I was having nosebleeds constantly. So I could be sitting here talking to you, and my nose would start bleeding. Then I had these welted rashes all over my body, and I was itchy. So itchy I couldn't stand it."

Life peeled away her outer layers, so she was forced to focus on her inner life. While reflecting, she also pondered what women in her workshops kept telling her.

"They were saying, 'OK, we need to go to the next step here. Because we use food to fill these unfillable hunger, but we also use our desire for success and the perfect relationship and the house and the money — we use all that in the same way. We're hungry.'"

Ms. Roth finishes all the salmon, leaves most of the rice, pushes her plate away.

So what are women *really* hungry for?

"I think to know themselves as valuable, as being enough," she says. "Not just getting enough or doing enough or working enough or having enough, but actual *being* enough. The kind of you that's you-ness, and me that's me. The thing that makes me me. To just know that who *I am* is enough."

"Women are constantly feeling they have to diminish themselves to be OK. That it's not nice to brag, or to have too much. That it's not nice to be happy."

By looking deep into herself and asking what really made her happy, she learned her own value. She

learned to question herself, and to question society's expectations of women.

The message, she says, is to "stop being so full of yourself. But then what happens to you is that you never allow yourself to have what you have. You're so busy ripping yourself apart, kinda like self-mutilation..."

She stops, looks at her watch, gasps. "Yeah! Right! I'm gonna have to go!"

She grabs her black leather backpack and her green-checked notebook, races toward the door.

She's going full-tilt but she's centered, speeding yet full with herself.