

the living diet

A Christian Journey to Joyful Eating

Study Questions

(with two different study options)

**The Living Diet* discusses the topic of eating disorders. Eating disorders are a deadly psychological illness, and it is possible that some of the stories or discussions in this book could trigger a reader's need to seek medical and psychological help if that reader is living with an eating disorder. Please note that the questions in this study guide apply to the more general patterns of disordered eating that affect our society as a whole and are not offered for therapeutic purposes.

Study Option 1: Book Club Questions

This set of questions can be used to guide a Book Club conversation after everyone has read the book.

Martha argues that we have a collective eating disorder: the junk food, diet food, and fast food industries all work together to keep us locked in patterns of disappointment and struggle with our bodies. How do you see that our relationship with food is unhealthy? What is problematic about our attitudes toward weight loss and dieting? Why does "thin" not necessarily equal healthy?

1. Martha argues that our disordered eating is not a female problem, nor is it really about appearance. She shares some anecdotes that suggest that obsessive health consciousness and unhappiness in our bodies are problems that stretch across gender and generational divides. Do you agree?
2. Martha shares a story of feeding her insatiably hungry newborn. She argues that emotional eating is good and holy and is at the foundation of human life. Does this change how you understand emotional eating? What does emotional eating mean to you?
3. Martha argues that our "collective eating disorder," and therefore our problems with food, stem from the misguided belief that our food choices have only individual consequences and that our bodies are not connected to the world around us. In reality though, "*Eating is an act of relationship. It is a constant reminder that we need life from outside of ourselves so that we can have life.*" How does the act of eating change when we understand it as relational?
4. What connection does this book make between hunger and faith? What connection do you see?
5. "*How you eat communicates much about what you value, who you value, and indeed who you are.*" Do you see a connection between how you eat and what you value? Do you see a connection between how we eat and what we value?
6. "*We are taught that what we put into our bodies has no bearing on the people or the ecosystems around us.*" Do you agree that this is a problem? How is this connected to our problems with food?
7. How is the modern-day food culture a sort of religion?

8. The Christian faith teaches us gratitude, generosity, prayer, service, and relationship. As Martha notes, these are five practices that never make it into diet books. Can you imagine how these things could change our relationship with food and our bodies?
9. What is your favorite food? What stories or memories do you associate with that favorite food?
10. The word “diet” simply means “way of life” or “manner of living.” How is that different from how we normally hear that word used? Why do you think this book is called “The Living Diet”? What suggestions or ideas resonate most with you?
11. Martha ends with a story about cherry pie. Do you have a “cherry pie” story—food that you can’t help but to eat with joy?

Study Option 2: Chapter Study Questions

This set of questions can be used for a study series, discussing the content chapter by chapter.

Part 1: Disorder

Chapter 2: At War with Our Bodies

1. Martha describes an incredible number of magazine headlines screaming messages about body image and weight loss as typical of the messages we regularly see at, for example, the grocery store checkout. Does this long list of headlines resonate with your experience? Are these the kinds of messages you are used to seeing too? Why are these headlines the ones so often used to sell magazines? Are these the same sorts of headlines we see online?
2. Martha argues that the junk food, diet food, and fast food industries all work together to keep us locked in patterns of disappointment and struggle with our bodies. Do you see ways in which the food industry traps us in an unhealthy relationship with our bodies?
3. Is “you are the center of the universe” the message we hear most often across our cultural landscape? How do you see this related to our struggles with food, diet, and body image?
4. A long list of diet solutions is included on pages 11 and 12. What would you add to this list? Why are we so willing to latch on to these ideas when they are so rarely successful in the long term?
5. Martha argues that our disordered eating is not a female problem, nor is it really about appearance. She shares some anecdotes to argue that the obsessive health consciousness and unhappiness in our bodies are problems that stretch across gender and generational divides. Do you agree?
6. “At War with our Bodies”: Where and how do you see the message delivered to us that we are in a battle with our bodies? Do you agree that this “war with our bodies” is also a spiritual problem?
7. “*You are the center of the universe*” is a message that also has ramifications for how we treat the world around us—our environment, our fellow creatures, and our fellow human beings. How do you see the relationship between our own bodies and how we treat the world around us?

Chapter 4: Born Hungry

1. “Don’t eat out of boredom, sadness, grief, depression, worry, or stress”—it is common dieting advice to claim that we need to extract eating from being a response to emotions. *Only eat when hungry*. Are there emotional reasons you find yourself eating?
2. The Passover meal is a formational story for the Jewish and Christian faith traditions. Along with the practical reasons why a community might eat before a journey, they also eat “to know God is with them.” The Passover continues for Jewish people to be a remembrance of this story of God’s leading them, delivering and freeing them. Do you experience how meals can communicate these deeper truths?
3. What was God trying to teach the Israelites by feeding them with manna? Why were they not allowed to hoard it?
4. The practice of “first fruits” offers some of what we have received back to God and the life of the community *before* we provide for our own needs. Is this an unreasonable expectation? What might be the benefits of this kind of practice?

5. Martha shares a story of feeding her insatiably hungry newborn. She argues that emotional eating is good and holy and is at the foundation of human life. Does this change how you understand emotional eating? What does this story mean to you?
6. The manna and the wilderness and the feeding of a newborn both lay a foundation for right relationship. They teach us how we are loved so that we might in turn learn how to be loving and caring. Martha claims that this exchange leads to “right relationship” and that this, rather than independence, is the mark of maturity. What does “right relationship” mean to you?
7. If we are born hungry, and if from the beginning food teaches love, does that allow you to reimagine what emotional eating means?

Chapter 5: Feeding the Emptiness

1. Lionel Shriver claims “we all have eating disorders.” Similarly, Martha claims that we have a collective eating disorder. Where do you see evidence that these claims are true?
2. Whereas Lionel Shriver says that this “anguish” around eating is “of course about physical appearance,” Martha says something very different—that, at heart, our anguished eating isn’t about physical appearance at all. If our difficulty around eating isn’t about what we look like, what is it about?

Chapter 6: I Am Bread

1. Jesus’s equating of his life with bread (“I am the bread of life,” or “Take this bread, it is my body”) was a controversial claim for Jesus’s Jewish listeners because bread “signalled the presence of a loving God” and is connected to their foundational faith stories. Why is this important to know? Does it help you to hear the Christian imagery differently? Why might Jesus have gotten in trouble for these claims?
2. Bread, Martha argues, is a powerful symbol beyond just connecting to these biblical stories. What does bread communicate about our human experience?
3. Martha claims that it was hunger, or “their stomachs,” that led the first followers of Jesus to stay close to him. What does she mean? What is the connection between hunger and faith?

Chapter 8: You Are How You Eat

1. Martha shares stories about her family’s practices around food and table fellowship and what they taught her. What were your family’s practices around meals? How did those meals shape you and what did they communicate to you?
2. “*How you eat communicates much about what you value, who you value, and indeed who you are.*” Do you see a connection between how you eat and what you value? Do you see a connection between how *we* eat and what *we* value?
3. Jesus eats as a response to exclusion. Who is excluded in our world today?
4. Jesus eats as a response to scarcity. How do we relate to the message “there is not enough” today?
5. Jesus eats as a response to fear. What fears have the most power over us today?
6. Martha argues that our “collective eating disorder,” and therefore our problems with food, stem from the misguided belief that our food choices have only individual consequences and that our bodies are not connected to the world around us. In reality though, “*Eating is an act of relationship. It is a constant*”

reminder that we need life from outside of ourselves so that we can have life.” How does the act of eating change when we understand it as relational?

Part 2: The Diet

Chapter 9: Becoming Real

1. The church is often accused of “making people feel guilty.” Where do we see messages of guilt prevalent, or even promoted, outside of traditional religious circles?
2. How is modern-day food culture a sort of religion?
3. Why are dietary programs that offer “purification” or a “cleansing” or a “system restart” so appealing? Do you think that the semi-religious language around these programs is intentional? Why?
4. What does it mean to “become real”? Why might this be ultimately more important than being clean?
5. The word “diet” simply means “way of life” or “manner of living.” How is that different from how we normally hear that word used?

Chapter 10: Gratitude—A Eucharistic Life

1. What does Dr. Emoto’s water molecule experiment mean to you? Why might it be valuable to “see” the impact of our words on the world around us?
2. Martha argues that we “hold an unchallenged and casual attitude of wastefulness toward food.” Where do you see this as true?
3. What do you see as meaningful about the church’s practice of “ablutions”—of caring for every drop of wine and crumb of bread that has been blessed to our use? How might a similar attitude toward our food change our relationship with food?
4. The Living Diet is not a set of rules or recipes. It is a “gentle framework” that can be adopted according to the parts that best speak to you. Why do you think hard-and-fast dietary rules tend to be appealing, even if they don’t necessarily promote lasting change?
5. Do you offer words of gratitude before you eat? What form does that gratitude take?
6. Although it can make us feel uncomfortable, why might it be important to acknowledge the connection between the meat we eat and the animals whose lives were taken to make that meat possible?
7. Are there ways in which you could imagine being a “Caretaker of the Water”?
8. How might “daily practices of gratitude” reorient our relationship to the food we eat?

Chapter 11: I Don’t Know I’m Hungry

1. “*We see regular eating of good food as complicated.*” Do you agree? Why or why not? Why is it so complicated to know when we are hungry and to eat?
2. “*When you offer food, you don’t get to decide who will show up.*” Martha argues that the offering of food not only connects us to people who may surprise us, it should also teach us something about ourselves. Have you been involved in any feeding programs? What did doing so teach you?
3. Rowan Williams defines the Church as the ones “who have not had the nerve to walk away . . . ,” who are here “as hungry people.” What is meaningful about this definition of Church?

4. The poor quality of health in our Western eating habits is fundamentally grounded in the lie that our bodies are disconnected from the world around us. Where do you see this message proclaimed most prominently? How could being honest about our own hunger reconnect us?
5. Martha offers a variety of practices for connecting to our own hunger. Do you have any experience with the practices she names? What else might you add to her list?

Chapter 12: Food Is Personal

1. Martha interprets Adam and Eve's choice to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as the sin "of thinking that all of God's creation existed merely to provide for human need." Where do you see this misguided belief still at work?
2. What do you find meaningful about the image of Jesus as the Gardener?
3. "*We have forgotten how we are personally invested in the world around us.*" Is this true? What promotes this forgetfulness? Who benefits by our ignoring our connectedness to the world around us?
4. What are your experiences with buying local food? What is meaningful or life-giving about buying local?
5. Do you garden? Why or why not? What do you learn from gardening?
6. Do you cook? What are the barriers to home cooking? What helps you to build home cooking into your life?
7. Have you tried to abstain from eating meat? What was difficult about it? What did you like about it?

Chapter 13: Lord of the Feast

1. Do you agree that fear of food gets in the way of our ability to enjoy food? Why do you think that people fear food?
2. When do you feast? Have you participated in a feast recently? What was involved in that meal and what made it special?
3. The Biblical feast reveals the hope of our faith: that people of all races and backgrounds might be united in peace and in receiving God's good gifts together. Why is this imagery so powerful? What else does "the feast" mean as a spiritual symbol?
4. The way that Jesus feasted was controversial and upsetting. Why?
5. Martha suggests a variety of practices that we might bring to our feasts: no calorie counting, limited technology, a thoughtful guest list, and a willingness to connect our food with a bigger story. Do you practice any of these when you feast? What else might you add to the list?

Chapter 14: Fasting—Food as Compassion

1. Have you ever fasted for spiritual purposes? What was your experience like? What did you learn?
2. Martha notes that addiction and food intolerances create the need for certain individuals to fast from consuming particular things in order to be healthy. Are there things that you have to refrain from eating or drinking in order to be healthy? Is it difficult or isolating to have to do so?
3. In the Christian faith, we are invited to bring our suffering and our sacrifices into our participation in Jesus's life. How does this resonate with you?

4. Martha talks about the Christian phrase “nail it to the cross” holding surprising meaning for her in coping with a loss. Do you connect the “poetry and image” of the Christian faith to your own challenges and difficulties? Why or why not?

Chapter 15: Run for Life

1. What is your relationship to exercise and athletics?
2. What do you see as damaging or problematic about our associating exercise with weight loss? What is lost in this relationship?
3. Our sedentary lifestyles are damaging to us physically, but just as importantly, they are also linked to a decline in mental health. Do you notice a difference in your mood and emotional health when you are able to be physically active?
4. Martha suggests that walking/running/biking to get places instead of driving is a powerful way of building exercise into your routine. What are other ways that you have found of making physical activity part of your regular life? What are the barriers to doing so?
5. “*Pray about your physical activity as if it were a blessing and then discover how it starts to feel like one.*” Do you notice that the way you think or speak about something changes the way you start to feel about it? Do you consider exercise a blessing or a chore?

Chapter 16: Body Language

1. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, names are connected to who God has created us to be. Do you know what your name means? How is your name connected to who you are?
2. Where have you heard, or even used, the “f-word” (fat) in ways that are damaging to others?
3. Martha suggests a set of “Body Language” tips. These are designed to recalibrate how we speak about our weight and our bodies, recognizing that how we speak about ourselves can have a great impact on the people around us. What is good or what is challenging about these tips? What might you add to the list?

Chapter 17: What Do We Want? Everything!

1. Regular church attendance is now shown to lower rates of depression and increase the length of people’s lives. Is this surprising?
2. Martha argues that our relationship with food is fundamentally disordered because we act as if we are alone, and therefore we eat as if our choices bear on nobody but ourselves. Participation in a faith community is a key way of remembering how we are connected—to God and to one another. How do you react to this idea of connecting our eating to joining a church?
3. “*Give us today our daily bread.*” Why do you think Jesus included this as part of the prayer we know now as “The Lord’s Prayer”? What did it mean for him and his people? What might it mean for us?
4. Have you “church shopped”? What would you look for in choosing a church? What do you think of Martha’s suggestions for church shopping?
5. Worship is designed to teach us gratitude, generosity, prayer, service, and relationship. As Martha notes, these are five practices that never make it into diet books. Can you imagine how these things could change our relationship with food and our bodies?

Chapter 18: Clay Jars

1. How do you experience the religiosity of health and diet trends? Have you found yourself judging the eating decisions of others? Are there deeper reasons behind our judgment?
2. “*You are dust and to dust you shall return.*” Why is it difficult to talk about death? Can you see something liberating about naming our own mortality?
3. “*We have this treasure in clay jars.*” Our bodies are ultimately fragile and will one day fail us. Can you see how addressing our fear of our own fragility might also change our relationship with our bodies?

Chapter 19: A Theology of Cake

1. What is your favorite food? What stories or memories do you associate with that favorite food?
2. How do you think about your relationship with sugar? Our relationship with sugar? What problems are caused by the sweet stuff?
3. Do you agree with Martha that there is a problem with “missing out on the softer, sweeter side of life”?
4. How might it be helpful to see sugar as a powerful gift from God—one that is meant to bring joy, but can also be misused?
5. Martha ends with a story about cherry pie. Do you have a “cherry pie” story—food that you can’t help but to eat with joy?