



To Weigh or Not To Weigh: That is the Question!

*Glenn Livingston, Ph.D.
and Howie Jacobson, Ph.D. on
Using or Not Using the Scale*

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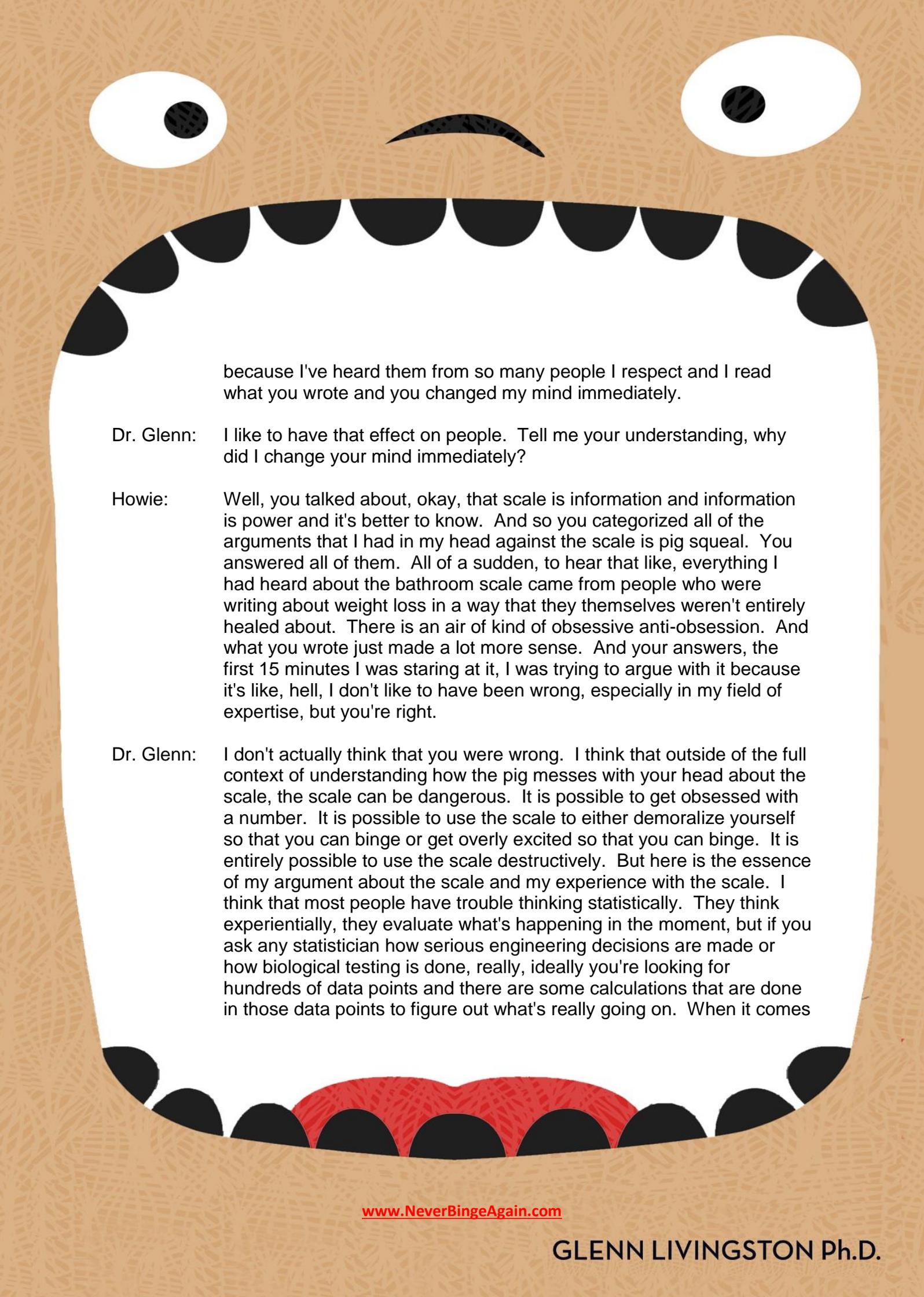
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Dr. Glenn: Hey, this is the very good Glenn Livingston and I'm here with Howie Jacobson from Plant Yourself. How are you, Howie?

Howie: I'm also very good, I think.

Dr. Glenn: Good. I hear that about you. Today, we wanted to talk about a very confusing topic, which I actually don't think is so confusing, but it's something that people were very confused about, that their pigs get them very confused about. And that topic is the scale, and should you use it, how often should you use it, how do you keep your pig under control when you do use it. Howie, is there anything you want to say as a way of an introduction or should I just jump into it?

Howie: Well, I'll say that until you sent me the email with the draft of what you're thinking was about the bathroom scale, I was of the other opinion, that the scale is not a useful tool, it's something that we can over focus on and get obsessed about and reduce everything to a single number. And I had all those thoughts very clearly in my head



because I've heard them from so many people I respect and I read what you wrote and you changed my mind immediately.

Dr. Glenn: I like to have that effect on people. Tell me your understanding, why did I change your mind immediately?

Howie: Well, you talked about, okay, that scale is information and information is power and it's better to know. And so you categorized all of the arguments that I had in my head against the scale is pig squeal. You answered all of them. All of a sudden, to hear that like, everything I had heard about the bathroom scale came from people who were writing about weight loss in a way that they themselves weren't entirely healed about. There is an air of kind of obsessive anti-obsession. And what you wrote just made a lot more sense. And your answers, the first 15 minutes I was staring at it, I was trying to argue with it because it's like, hell, I don't like to have been wrong, especially in my field of expertise, but you're right.

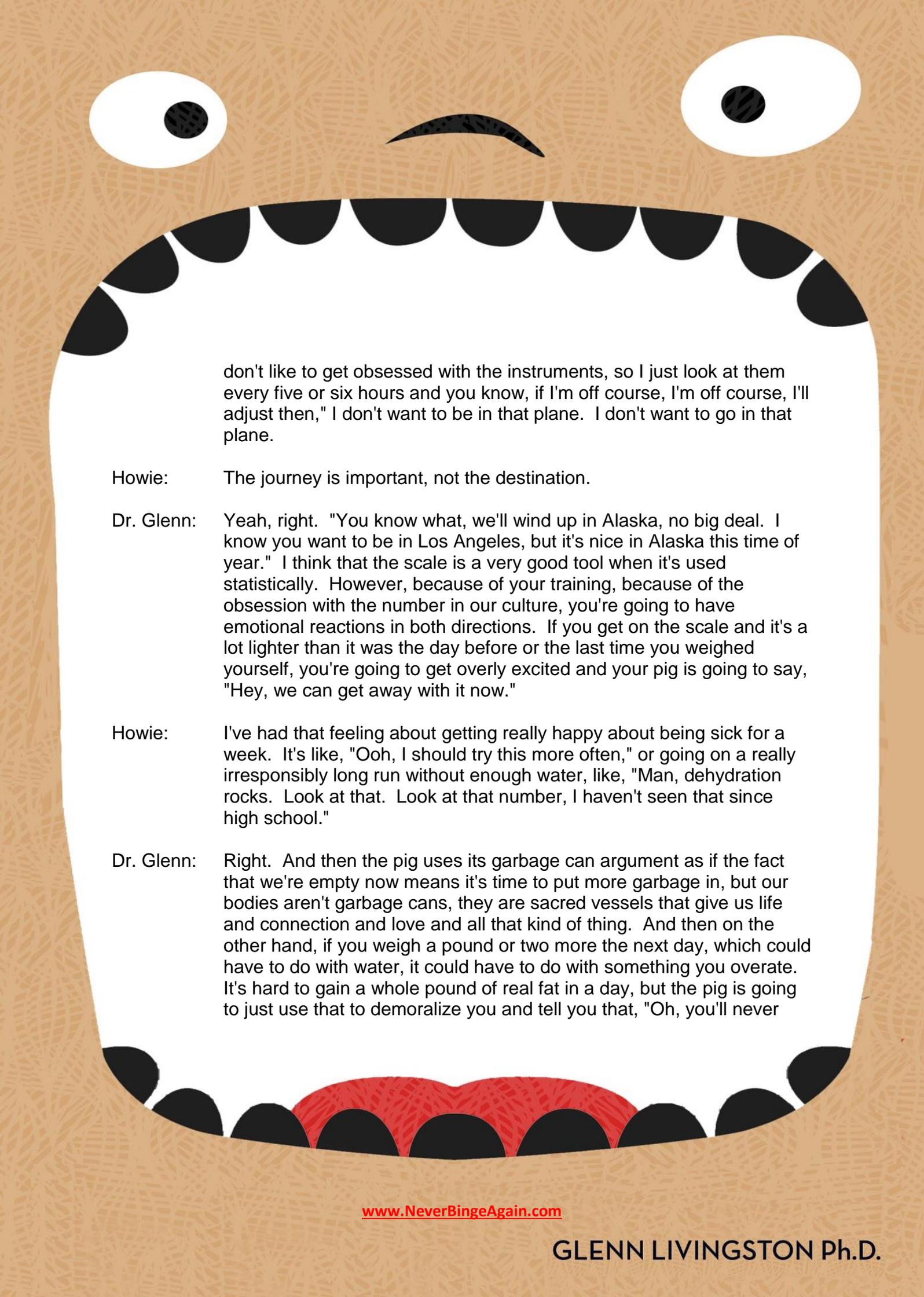
Dr. Glenn: I don't actually think that you were wrong. I think that outside of the full context of understanding how the pig messes with your head about the scale, the scale can be dangerous. It is possible to get obsessed with a number. It is possible to use the scale to either demoralize yourself so that you can binge or get overly excited so that you can binge. It is entirely possible to use the scale destructively. But here is the essence of my argument about the scale and my experience with the scale. I think that most people have trouble thinking statistically. They think experientially, they evaluate what's happening in the moment, but if you ask any statistician how serious engineering decisions are made or how biological testing is done, really, ideally you're looking for hundreds of data points and there are some calculations that are done in those data points to figure out what's really going on. When it comes



to the scale, there's a lot of noise in the data for any one given measurement. So, if you weigh yourself, are you weighing yourself at the exact same time of the day? How much did you pee and poo before you went? Did you get it all out? Did you have any salt last night? Did you have your period? How much fiber are you retaining? What time did you last eat? Did you last eat yesterday early morning or yesterday late night? Or maybe you skipped eating yesterday.

There are all sorts of things that influence short-term, essentially erroneous or not important variations in the number and the scale. But if you were to weigh yourself regularly -- and for me and most of my clients, it's everyday. And not only weigh yourself regularly, but take a few notes about what you had to eat the day before and any other conditions and just keep a little chart and then do a little calculation to figure out what the moving average was, like, over the course of the last 10 days, what's the average? And then tomorrow, if you drop out the first day in those 10 days and you add tomorrow is the last day, what's the average then? And you just keep on moving that number up and up and up like the technical analyst do for trading stocks. When they want to eliminate the crazy ups and downs and really just look at what the trend is, that's what I find is really valuable.

And I think of the scale kind of like, you might think of the instruments on an airplane. The pilots and the copilots and the people on the ground, they're constantly taking readings on the airplane. And the reason that the airplane can get from New York to Los Angeles is because it makes constant little adjustments, constant minor adjustments as it's going along because it's actually off-course 99 percent of the time. Stephen Covey first pointed that out. And if it weren't for those constant, regular, very frequent adjustments, it would never hit the goal. And I would never want my airplane pilot to say, "I



don't like to get obsessed with the instruments, so I just look at them every five or six hours and you know, if I'm off course, I'm off course, I'll adjust then," I don't want to be in that plane. I don't want to go in that plane.

Howie: The journey is important, not the destination.

Dr. Glenn: Yeah, right. "You know what, we'll wind up in Alaska, no big deal. I know you want to be in Los Angeles, but it's nice in Alaska this time of year." I think that the scale is a very good tool when it's used statistically. However, because of your training, because of the obsession with the number in our culture, you're going to have emotional reactions in both directions. If you get on the scale and it's a lot lighter than it was the day before or the last time you weighed yourself, you're going to get overly excited and your pig is going to say, "Hey, we can get away with it now."

Howie: I've had that feeling about getting really happy about being sick for a week. It's like, "Ooh, I should try this more often," or going on a really irresponsibly long run without enough water, like, "Man, dehydration rocks. Look at that. Look at that number, I haven't seen that since high school."

Dr. Glenn: Right. And then the pig uses its garbage can argument as if the fact that we're empty now means it's time to put more garbage in, but our bodies aren't garbage cans, they are sacred vessels that give us life and connection and love and all that kind of thing. And then on the other hand, if you weigh a pound or two more the next day, which could have to do with water, it could have to do with something you overate. It's hard to gain a whole pound of real fat in a day, but the pig is going to just use that to demoralize you and tell you that, "Oh, you'll never

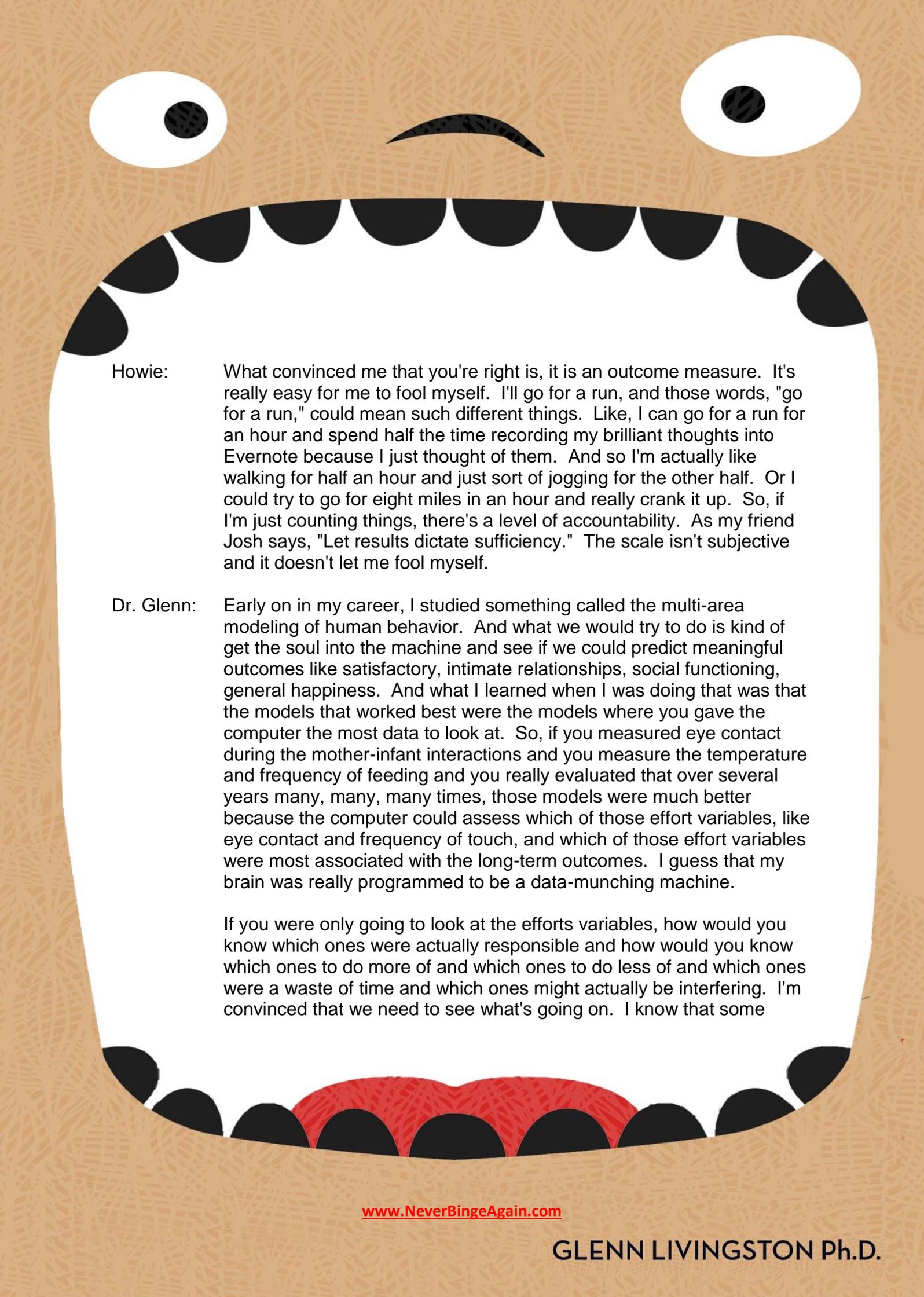


going to get thin. You might as well just give up and be a happy, fat person."

You know, the solution is to be like the airplane pilot and say, "I'm going to weigh myself as regularly as I can. I'm going to take a couple of notes so I can make observations. I'm going to calculate a moving average" -- and I could even put a spreadsheet up with this to show people how to do that and overtime look at the trends and make adjustments based upon your notes and the trends. That's in my view the healthiest way to deal with the instrument that we have, which is the scale, or a body fat analysis, hydrostatic body fat analysis or something like that. Any quantified self-measurement that you'll take, you need to look at it statistically overtime and watch very carefully for how your pig wants to prevent you from doing that. So, that's my opinion.

Howie: So, one of the arguments that I brought with me, was that we shouldn't be focusing on our weight, which is what the scale measures, because that's an outcome. We don't have any real control over the outcome. All we have is control over what we do. So, we should focus on our actions. So for example, three salads a day and 10-minute walks, like, we should count that and just let the number take care of itself.

Dr. Glenn: Well, there are some people for whom that might work, but why would you want to black out the information? It's healthy to focus on the effort and let go to a certain extent of the exact outcome. However, if you don't know where you're headed, then you'll probably wind up some place else and why wouldn't you want to check in to see where you were. I don't really get that. I don't really get that line of thinking.



Howie:

What convinced me that you're right is, it is an outcome measure. It's really easy for me to fool myself. I'll go for a run, and those words, "go for a run," could mean such different things. Like, I can go for a run for an hour and spend half the time recording my brilliant thoughts into Evernote because I just thought of them. And so I'm actually like walking for half an hour and just sort of jogging for the other half. Or I could try to go for eight miles in an hour and really crank it up. So, if I'm just counting things, there's a level of accountability. As my friend Josh says, "Let results dictate sufficiency." The scale isn't subjective and it doesn't let me fool myself.

Dr. Glenn:

Early on in my career, I studied something called the multi-area modeling of human behavior. And what we would try to do is kind of get the soul into the machine and see if we could predict meaningful outcomes like satisfactory, intimate relationships, social functioning, general happiness. And what I learned when I was doing that was that the models that worked best were the models where you gave the computer the most data to look at. So, if you measured eye contact during the mother-infant interactions and you measure the temperature and frequency of feeding and you really evaluated that over several years many, many, many times, those models were much better because the computer could assess which of those effort variables, like eye contact and frequency of touch, and which of those effort variables were most associated with the long-term outcomes. I guess that my brain was really programmed to be a data-munching machine.

If you were only going to look at the efforts variables, how would you know which ones were actually responsible and how would you know which ones to do more of and which ones to do less of and which ones were a waste of time and which ones might actually be interfering. I'm convinced that we need to see what's going on. I know that some



people will listen to this and say, "Well, I got on the scale and I got all upset and now I'm all obsessed with the scale." I want to encourage them to listen to the whole thing. And I'll put up a blog post that really explains my philosophy on this in detail.

Howie: To me, the assumption is if someone is looking at the scale, then they care about how much they weigh. If you truly don't care about your weight, then the scale is maybe not a useful feedback mechanism. But for most people who are overweight, who want to get healthy, the scale is useful. I think the danger is, as you said, the people can become emotionally entangled in the results as opposed to using them as data to direct behavior in the future. The other problem is that we live in a society in which things are so reductionist, that all we care about is weight.

Dr. Glenn: Yeah.

Howie: Okay, let me cut off my right arm, hey, look at that.

Dr. Glenn: I lost 10 pounds. That's basically it. I would encourage everyone to leave comments about how your pig specifically squeals about the scale and what you've been doing about it. I would really be interested in that below this audio and below the blog post.

Howie: Can I offer one datum?

Dr. Glenn: Sure.

Howie: Which is, I have a coaching client, a health coaching client who has one of these internet scales that he just steps on it in the morning and it posts and tabulates so he can just get a running total or whatever



statistics he wants on his phone, and we determined like where he is now and where he wants to be at a certain date in the future, a few months in the future. And we took a look at whether that was realistic. And then for homework, he wrote down what he wanted to weigh every Friday. And so now, he's using the scale against that. This morning, we had a conversation and he had lost about half of the weight that he'd wanted to lose this week.

And so I said, "Well, what happened?" He said, "Well, last night, Chinese, like white udon noodles cooked in a lot of oil." Okay. So at that point, the coaching conversation became really, really easy. I was like, "Well, would you like to change your goal? Would you like to change the timeframe by which you're going to reach your goal or would you like to change your behavior?" It was so simple and he just thought there's no pressure, there's no shame and he goes like, "Yeah, Chinese got to go."

Dr. Glenn: Yeah. And we can improve what we measure. It becomes really clear, yeah.

Howie: Yeah, so thanks.

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