



Glenn Livingston, Ph.D. and Howie Jacobson, Ph.D. on Portion Control

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Dr. Glenn: What I really wanted to talk to you today was learn a little bit more about what you've found with your clients with regards to what works and what doesn't for portion control and maybe I can share what I found myself and we could exchange some thoughts about that.

Howie: Sure.

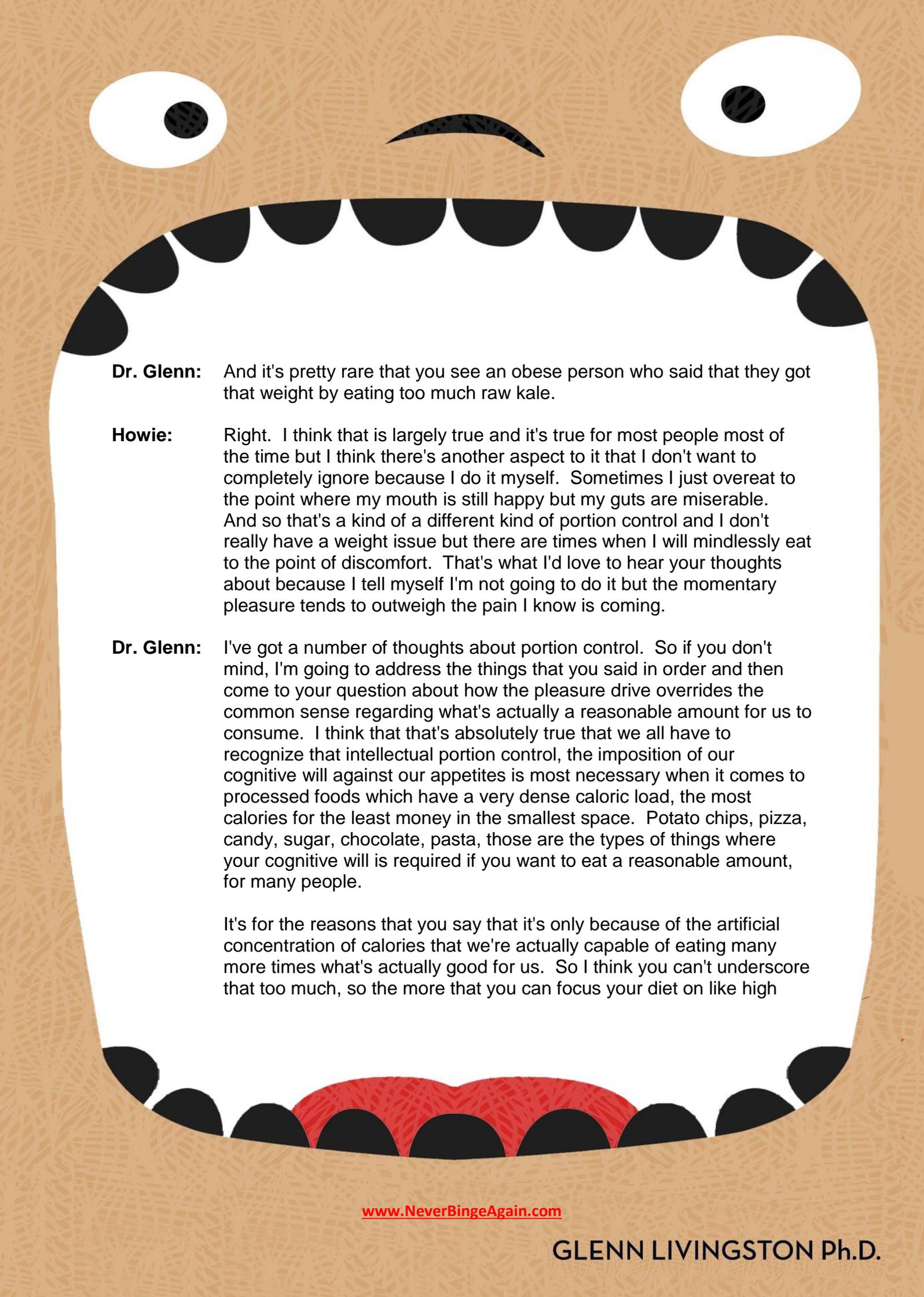
Dr. Glenn: What have you found?

Howie: Portion control is a big problem when you're eating foods that require portion control. So, in kind of a global sense, if you're eating junk food, if you're eating nutritionally barren food with lots of calories in a small package, so your stretch receptors don't get triggered, then portion control becomes extremely important. You're still hungry, your stomach is still empty but you've got 400 calories of chicken or donut in there and you want to keep eating. So at that point you need to say, "Okay, I'm going to stop."

Portion control is much less important when you're eating sweet potatoes and carrots and kale because you literally couldn't fill your stomach with enough calories to matter.

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GLENN LIVINGSTON Ph.D.



Dr. Glenn: And it's pretty rare that you see an obese person who said that they got that weight by eating too much raw kale.

Howie: Right. I think that is largely true and it's true for most people most of the time but I think there's another aspect to it that I don't want to completely ignore because I do it myself. Sometimes I just overeat to the point where my mouth is still happy but my guts are miserable. And so that's a kind of a different kind of portion control and I don't really have a weight issue but there are times when I will mindlessly eat to the point of discomfort. That's what I'd love to hear your thoughts about because I tell myself I'm not going to do it but the momentary pleasure tends to outweigh the pain I know is coming.

Dr. Glenn: I've got a number of thoughts about portion control. So if you don't mind, I'm going to address the things that you said in order and then come to your question about how the pleasure drive overrides the common sense regarding what's actually a reasonable amount for us to consume. I think that that's absolutely true that we all have to recognize that intellectual portion control, the imposition of our cognitive will against our appetites is most necessary when it comes to processed foods which have a very dense caloric load, the most calories for the least money in the smallest space. Potato chips, pizza, candy, sugar, chocolate, pasta, those are the types of things where your cognitive will is required if you want to eat a reasonable amount, for many people.

It's for the reasons that you say that it's only because of the artificial concentration of calories that we're actually capable of eating many more times what's actually good for us. So I think you can't underscore that too much, so the more that you can focus your diet on like high



nutritionally dense, high water plant-based foods, the less of a need you're going to have for portion control.

The second thing I'd want to say about it is that I find that often, in the class that I'm coaching, they ran into a portion control issue because they start off by learning the Never Binge Again process and they didn't know that they had this power to not have Cliff Bars anymore for example, like you decided not to steal Cliff Bars from homeless people or whatever you decided you were going to do for Cliff Bars, they didn't know that they had that power. And all of a sudden, you've taken something from the pig's realm, something that's in like a mystery to them and you've put it back into their hands and they got a little power drunk.

And what I find very frequently happens is after people figure out they can't have a Cliff Bar, they write this whole plan of very restrictive rules. Sometimes it's just three or four or more restrictive rules will say, "Well, I'm not going to have more than 1500 calories a day ever again for the rest of my life," or, "I am never going to have sugar, flour, alcohol, cheese, bread, blah, blah, blah." It's like a long list of things and all of a sudden they've done all this elimination but they haven't really thought about what purpose those items were serving in their diet and what they really need to replace them with.

So they are like holding their breath trying to suppress this biological urge which was admittedly, horrendously redirected towards all of those items, all those processed foods but nevertheless they haven't satisfied that biological urge, kind of like if they smoked or stopped having cigarettes, they have to start breathing air. Well, if you stop eating all this processed food, you need to put in healthy, clean food to replace it or else it's kind of like trying to hold your breath forever.



Sooner or later, your biological urges take over and force you to be less discriminating.

You can't hold your breath forever. The prerequisite for making Never Binge Again work with regards to portion control is really in showing that your healthy biological needs are being met in a healthful, satisfying and complete manner, otherwise your body will eventually look to override that. It's a survival mechanism. So that's the second thing I want to say by portion control. Howie, it sounded like you wanted to say something, I don't mean to stop you.

Howie: Parents often worry that when they change their kid's diet, their kids will starve. And you tell them, no, your child may threaten that they'll never going to eat again if they can't have what they want but when they're hungry they will eat.

Dr. Glenn: Right.

Howie: Let's make biology our ally.

Dr. Glenn: Exactly. And so on a practical basis I tell people that -- I don't do this with the very first restrictive rule because there's enough, a lot for people to learn and get the hang of in the Never Binge Again process and so I just tell them to choose the one single most difficult trigger food that they have and by and large that works wonders. By and large in one session I can get people off of their most significant trigger food and it makes a dramatic difference in their life. But from there on end I told them that every time they had any kind of restriction, they also want to add something to compensate in terms of healthy fulfillment.



And what that looks like is well, okay so you're no longer already going to be having starch during the week for some reason or you're no longer going to be having pasta during the week. Well, are you going to eat more fruit during the week? Are you going to have more vegetable juice? Or something that's substantial, has the calories and energy that they require to run their day but is much better for them than what they were choosing instead.

And without thinking that through, I find that what I'm able to do with Never Binge Again is maximize the use of cognitive will but eventually the cognitive will breaks down because biology trumps cognition.

Howie: And one thing that I like about that approach is that it acknowledges that -- you know, we call it the pig and we have a lot of animosity towards it at certain points in the Never Binge Again process but it's not just a mistake, right? It's not just this pleasure drive gone awry. There's actually a positive purpose to all of those drives.

Dr. Glenn: It's an authentic need, it's a survival need.

Howie: Yeah, and the need for sugar, the need for the sweet tooth, if we didn't have it, we wouldn't be here. And so that you can reconfigure and say that this drive is simply, it's been directed towards and attracted to unhealthy options but let's honor the drive itself. So the sweet tooth is the desire for fruit. The carb drive, the donut drive is the desire for sufficient calories. For carbohydrates, tongue enzymes have carbohydrate detectors on them, so that we're built a certain way and there's nothing wrong with us, like we're not fighting ourselves. At some level when we normalize our food choices, we don't have to be at war.



Dr. Glenn: Exactly, but it's important to recognize that the cravings do originate from a survival drive because then people feel saner when they realize, "Well that's why I feel like I can't survive without my chocolate. That's why I feel like I'm literally going to die if I don't have a cigarette." It's that strong of a wiring internally that you're responding to, your body become attached to those substances, which is easy to break, it's very easy to break that but it doesn't feel like that at the moment. It feels like it's a matter of life and death.

What actually works I find is this is how I find it in my own diet as well, the specific portion controls that people implement that seem to work really well have to do with inserting a pause before you go back for more and not necessarily, "I can only have 8 ounces of chicken," or, "I can only have 3 ounces of ice cream," or a very specific limited amount everyday, because our biological needs vary on a great basis everyday.

So what they need to do is have a rule that requires them to be more mindful, I find. And then they come back and they say, "Well, that really works well and I'm eating a lot less and I feel a lot saner because I know that if I really, really need to have more," for example like with the woman who says, "Well, I'm just going to get up from the table, walk through the bathroom, think about it for 60 seconds and come back and if I want another plate, I'm going to get another plate," and that works perfectly for her. And so those are the kinds of things that I find work really well. There are few people and usually these people were trained in a 12-step program. They got used to weighing and measuring everything and they feel like 4 ounces of chicken and 4 ounces of brown rice and 4 ounces of vegetable is a meal and they're just much more comfortable when they do all that and I say, "Fine, more power to you." But most people I find are not able to do that.



It's a mindful approach but it's a rules-based mindful approach because if you remember I talk about rules versus guidelines, it wouldn't be enough in my scheme of the world to say, "Oh I'm just going to eat mindfully and therefore I'll be able to control my portions." But if you say, "I will never go back for seconds again without a 60-second pause, getting up from the table to think about it," then that's the kind of thing that 10 neutral observers could agree upon and doesn't leave the pig the wiggle room it wants.

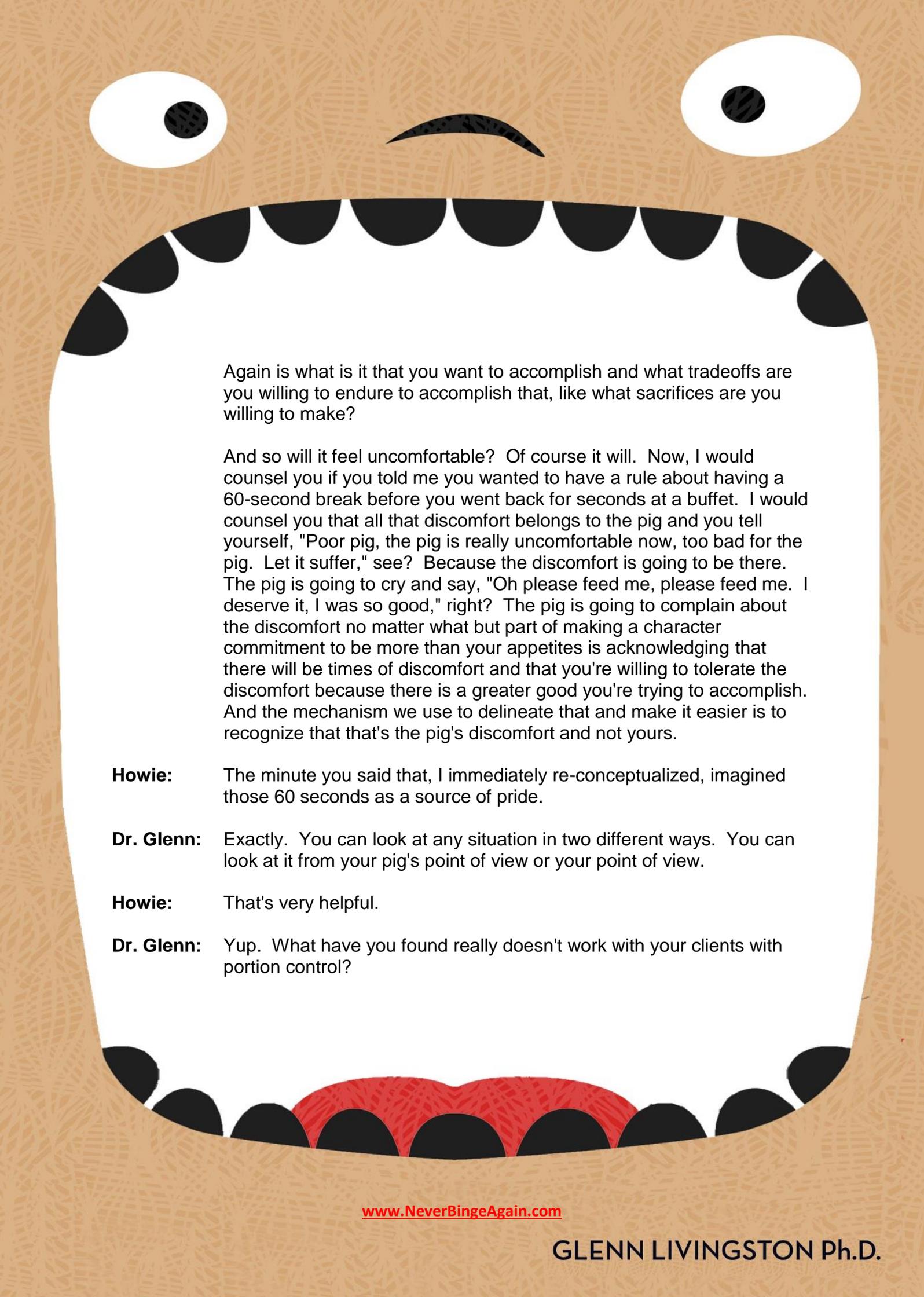
Howie:

So let me ask you about that because I have tried to implement some of those things and they're frankly like a drag, like I'll sit there and go, okay, I'm at the buffet and I finished my one plate and I'm like, "Well, you know, I didn't really fill up the plate that much. And I know I could sit here for 60 seconds but it's going to be a very uncomfortable 60 seconds. Let me just go back and get just some more of the chickpeas salad." And then you know, on the way it's like, "Oh look, there's a little piece of cake that fell off. No one is going to miss that," and, "Oh look, they brought out a new thing of sushi that I haven't even seen the first time."

I can feel the discomfort at spending the 60 seconds. It's almost like worst than saying absolutely no.

Dr. Glenn:

Well, everybody has to make an individual choice and if you have a lot of trouble with buffet restaurants, then you don't ever want to go back for seconds, there is no reason in the world you can't make a rule that says, "I never go back for seconds at a buffet," if you feel more confident with that. And it's also perfectly legitimate if you want to allow yourself a couple of days a month or something like that to go to a buffet and eat all you want to, that's okay. But the point of Never Binge



Again is what is it that you want to accomplish and what tradeoffs are you willing to endure to accomplish that, like what sacrifices are you willing to make?

And so will it feel uncomfortable? Of course it will. Now, I would counsel you if you told me you wanted to have a rule about having a 60-second break before you went back for seconds at a buffet. I would counsel you that all that discomfort belongs to the pig and you tell yourself, "Poor pig, the pig is really uncomfortable now, too bad for the pig. Let it suffer," see? Because the discomfort is going to be there. The pig is going to cry and say, "Oh please feed me, please feed me. I deserve it, I was so good," right? The pig is going to complain about the discomfort no matter what but part of making a character commitment to be more than your appetites is acknowledging that there will be times of discomfort and that you're willing to tolerate the discomfort because there is a greater good you're trying to accomplish. And the mechanism we use to delineate that and make it easier is to recognize that that's the pig's discomfort and not yours.

Howie: The minute you said that, I immediately re-conceptualized, imagined those 60 seconds as a source of pride.

Dr. Glenn: Exactly. You can look at any situation in two different ways. You can look at it from your pig's point of view or your point of view.

Howie: That's very helpful.

Dr. Glenn: Yup. What have you found really doesn't work with your clients with portion control?



Howie: What really doesn't work is the counting. There's mathematical reasons for that. Like if you're trying to eat let's say 1800 calories a day is your average caloric need and you're trying to figure out what is 1800 calories, there's so much variation in food. Even two apples from the same tree could be really different in their entire nutrient profile, not just calorically. But if you try to figure out like is this apple 95 calories or 115 calories? And if you made that mistake in the same direction everyday, that would be like 7 pounds a year just from misjudging an apple a day.

Dr. Glenn: Interesting.

Howie: Have you ever eaten an apple that was like slightly sweeter than another apple?

Dr. Glenn: Yeah.

Howie: Our taste buds can tell. We have these exquisite calorie sensors, but it's all gut feel, it's not counting. And so if you try to count, over the course of the year, counting is like when you talk about like flying from New York to London, you're off the entire way, you're never pointed straight but because you have feedback and you can recalibrate, you land on the runway, you don't land in Mallorca or the North Pole.

Dr. Glenn: I just wrote about that analogy today actually.

Howie: Oh, sweet. If you're counting, then you're not listening to the feedback. We make mistakes in counting. They're usually not random noise, they're usually in a direction, right? So we either undercount or over count and either way, we're overriding what works in every other



biological system on the planet except us, which is satiety in all its ways, nutrient receptors, stretch receptors, fiber receptors.

Dr. Glenn: But Howie, doesn't industry mess with those receptors? Like for example -- I think I remember reading some place that high fructose corn syrup was engineered so that people wouldn't know when they've had too many calories.

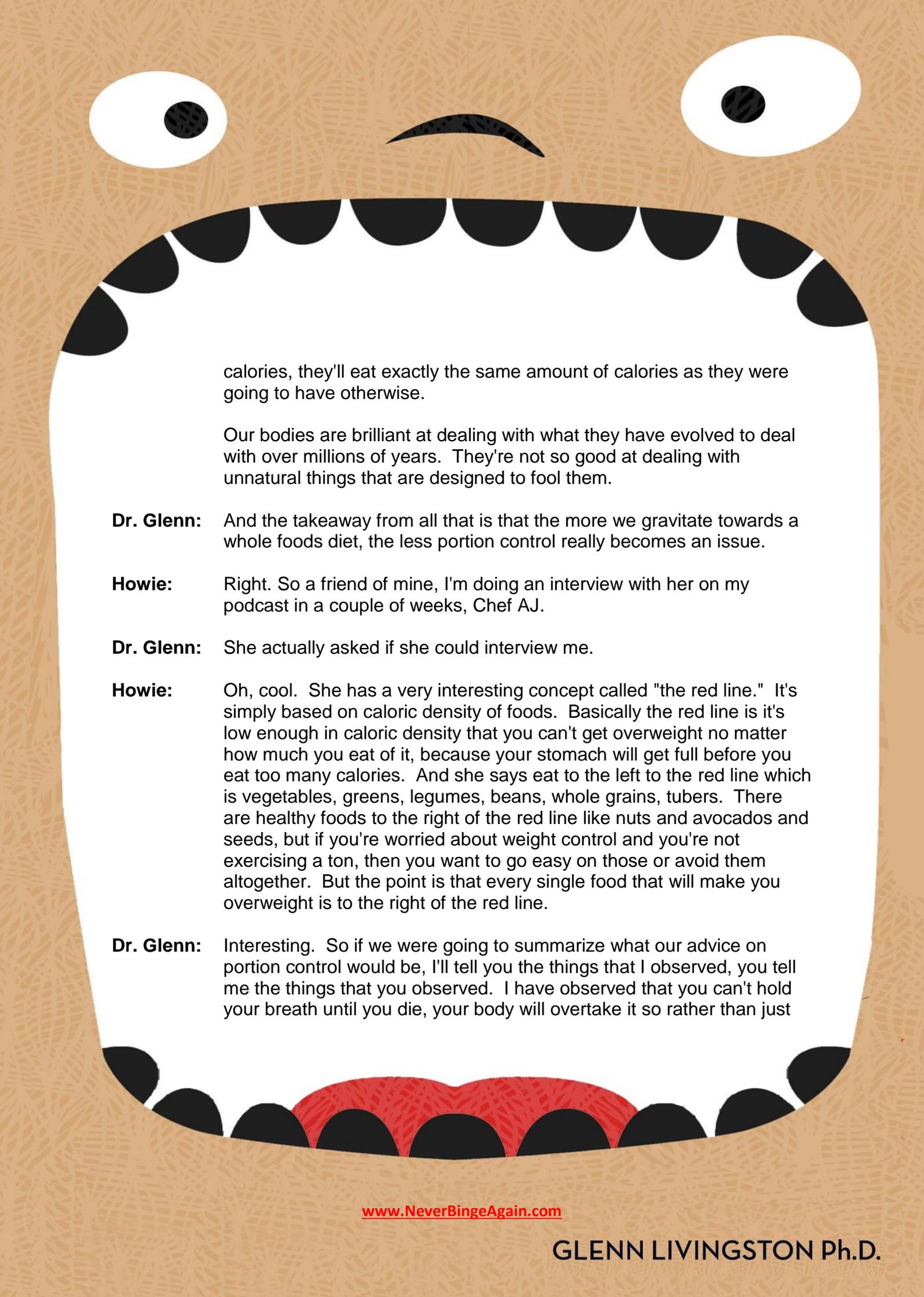
Howie: Right. There's a lot of things that mess with our receptors. One of them is we don't register non-food as food. So if it's not something that we've evolved to eat, our body simply won't know how to process this in all sorts of ways. Another is liquid calories. So this is the way I heard it described by a researcher that imagine you are a paleo guy and food is kind of scarce and you have to be on the lookout for every opportunity and you go down to the stream and you drink, and you take a big drink. And then you see some hare or wildebeest run by. Do you want your body to go, "Oh, I'm so full, I had all that liquid. I don't want to chase the animal." You don't. You want liquid to not count.

Dr. Glenn: Interesting, because there really aren't sources of liquid calories in nature, except for milk maybe.

Howie: Right, which is only for infants.

Dr. Glenn: Right.

Howie: And it's much richer. So if you take fruit juice or soda, our bodies are trained to ignore those calories and there's a lot of studies that show that, that if you give people food, they will reduce the amount of calories they eat by a percentage of extra. You give them food calories, they'll eat fewer additional calories. But if you give them liquid



calories, they'll eat exactly the same amount of calories as they were going to have otherwise.

Our bodies are brilliant at dealing with what they have evolved to deal with over millions of years. They're not so good at dealing with unnatural things that are designed to fool them.

Dr. Glenn: And the takeaway from all that is that the more we gravitate towards a whole foods diet, the less portion control really becomes an issue.

Howie: Right. So a friend of mine, I'm doing an interview with her on my podcast in a couple of weeks, Chef AJ.

Dr. Glenn: She actually asked if she could interview me.

Howie: Oh, cool. She has a very interesting concept called "the red line." It's simply based on caloric density of foods. Basically the red line is it's low enough in caloric density that you can't get overweight no matter how much you eat of it, because your stomach will get full before you eat too many calories. And she says eat to the left to the red line which is vegetables, greens, legumes, beans, whole grains, tubers. There are healthy foods to the right of the red line like nuts and avocados and seeds, but if you're worried about weight control and you're not exercising a ton, then you want to go easy on those or avoid them altogether. But the point is that every single food that will make you overweight is to the right of the red line.

Dr. Glenn: Interesting. So if we were going to summarize what our advice on portion control would be, I'll tell you the things that I observed, you tell me the things that you observed. I have observed that you can't hold your breath until you die, your body will overtake it so rather than just



thinking about portion control, think about what you're going to feed your body so that those authentic biological urges are being taken care of. Now it's your turn, Howie.

Howie: What I learned from you is that if I'm in danger of pigging out, I should look at that literally and say that's the pig and I can set up a rule and I can play with it and test it out until I find the rule that works, so even that momentary pleasure can be re-conceptualized as a moment of pride at my agency over these blind urges.

Dr. Glenn: People don't pig out, pigs do, and so people have different feelings than pigs about every situation. You can look at it from both sides, okay? And another thing we said was that counting doesn't tend to work. There's so much statistical error in people's ability to estimate calories and nutrients without carrying around all the scientific equipment with them all the time, that they're overriding our body's inborn sensors for calories and nutrients. And so the more that you can rely on those inborn sensors for calories and nutrients and the less processed food that you have, the better you're going to do. Now it's your turn.

Howie: When we are used to a diet of processed foods, we naturally stop trusting ourselves because we're not trustworthy around those foods. And so it's a leap of faith to someone. You talk about leaps of faith a lot in terms of you can't predict what will happen. You can't predict how reliable your body will be when you return to a natural way of eating.

Dr. Glenn: If you've had a lifetime of filling your body with processed food, then you've gotten out of touch with all of those sensors and natural regulatory mechanisms.



Howie: Right. Look at every other creature in nature and have faith that you are not apart from that. You've got the same ancestry as every other successful being on the planet.

Dr. Glenn: There's really not that many anthropoid primates that are walking around saying, "Oh my God, I'm so full, I'm scared I'm going to have another coconut."

Howie: Right.

Dr. Glenn: I've found that people do better by inserting rules-based pauses at certain points in their meals if they have trouble with a particular food or in a particular environment like going out to dinner as opposed to strict weighing and measuring or calorie counting, so Howie and I agree on that. What else did we say?

Howie: We didn't say it but it just occurred to me now that the basis of the idea of a pause is mindfulness, is being here now, because I know that all of my overeating is me on the computer, is me on a book, is me on a conversation, is me upset with my own thoughts and that when I return to presence, I then have the ability to turn on and pay attention to the self-regulating mechanisms that are being drawn out by the shit in my head.

Dr. Glenn: Yeah. You know there is a tangent to what you're saying which I think is important, which is that most people when they report what happened during a binge will say that they went unconscious, almost like their pig wiped out their consciousness. And the pig definitely wants to do that. But if I then interview them about specifically what they ate during their binge and what the lady at the shopping counter looked like who sold it to them and how much it cost and what the



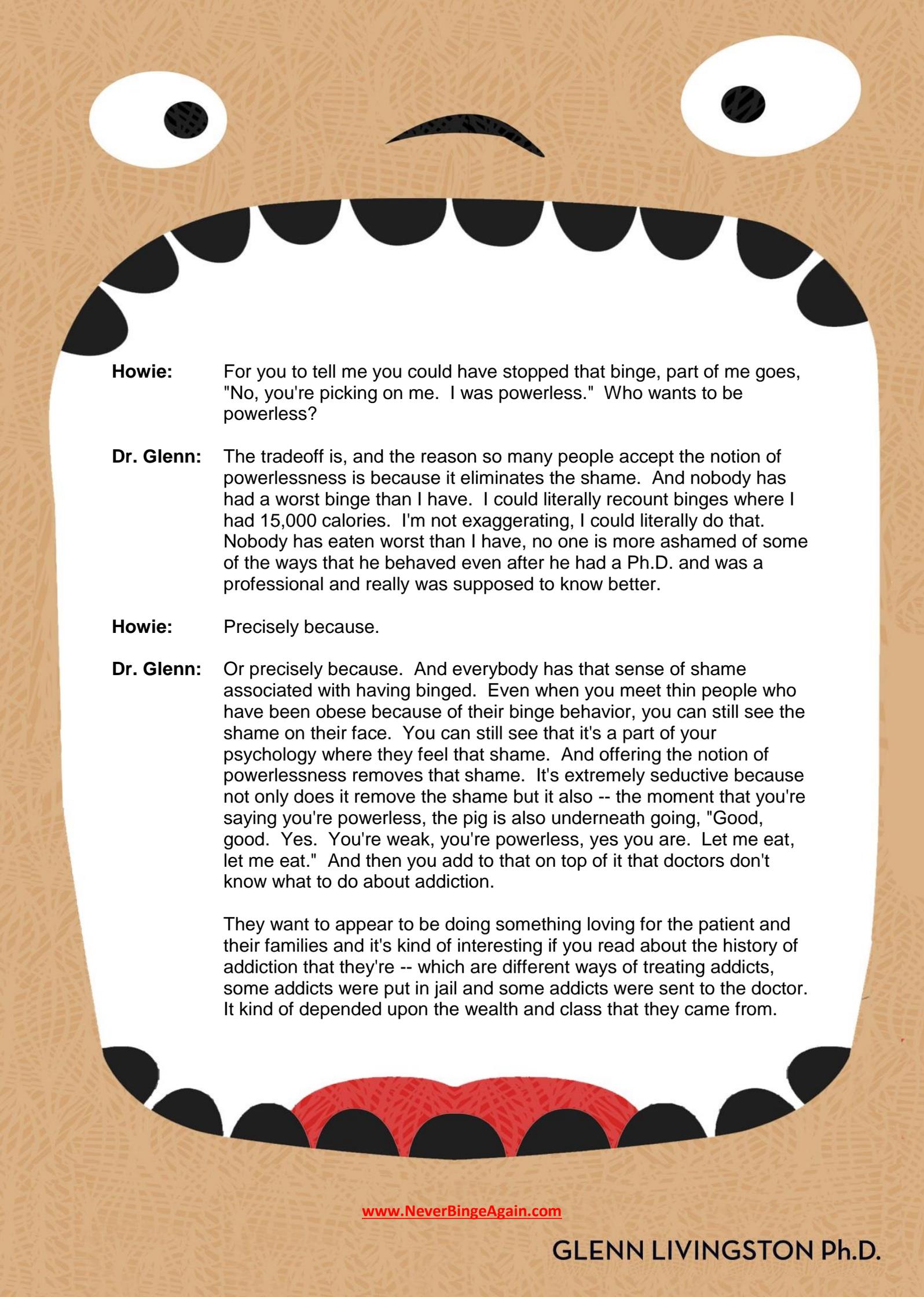
weather was like as they were pulling into the store and what they were listening to on the radio while they ate it in the car, and on and on and on. I interview them about the details, they can tell me most of it.

I think that that's an important exercise to go through. If you happen to be just recovering from a binge and are feeling frightened that you're out of control and that the pig has this magical ability to make you unconscious and just let your appetites take control, go back and walk through exactly what happened in the binge and you realize that you were there. The pig can't really wipe out your consciousness. It kind of got you to look through the side for a little bit but you still had this video recorder running in your head, observing everything that happened every step along the way. And what that tells you is that you also have the ability to stop it at any point that you wanted to and you do in the future.

And that should be a comforting exercise for people to go through if they are having the very common experience that they can't control their pig to remember that they really are the master of their own destiny.

Howie: I love that. That plays right in with Robert Whitaker about psychiatric drugs and I was asking him about the idea of stigma. One of the things that people who promote the chemical imbalance theory of mental illness says that it reduces stigma, that it's a real disease, it's not just in your head or it's not a moral weakness, and his response was, actually it seems to increase stigma because now people said, well, there's something wrong with their brain they can't even help themselves.

Dr. Glenn: Right.



Howie: For you to tell me you could have stopped that binge, part of me goes, "No, you're picking on me. I was powerless." Who wants to be powerless?

Dr. Glenn: The tradeoff is, and the reason so many people accept the notion of powerlessness is because it eliminates the shame. And nobody has had a worst binge than I have. I could literally recount binges where I had 15,000 calories. I'm not exaggerating, I could literally do that. Nobody has eaten worst than I have, no one is more ashamed of some of the ways that he behaved even after he had a Ph.D. and was a professional and really was supposed to know better.

Howie: Precisely because.

Dr. Glenn: Or precisely because. And everybody has that sense of shame associated with having binged. Even when you meet thin people who have been obese because of their binge behavior, you can still see the shame on their face. You can still see that it's a part of your psychology where they feel that shame. And offering the notion of powerlessness removes that shame. It's extremely seductive because not only does it remove the shame but it also -- the moment that you're saying you're powerless, the pig is also underneath going, "Good, good. Yes. You're weak, you're powerless, yes you are. Let me eat, let me eat." And then you add to that on top of it that doctors don't know what to do about addiction.

They want to appear to be doing something loving for the patient and their families and it's kind of interesting if you read about the history of addiction that they're -- which are different ways of treating addicts, some addicts were put in jail and some addicts were sent to the doctor. It kind of depended upon the wealth and class that they came from.



But the doctors really want to tell the family, "Oh your husband, your father, your mother, they are not just being self-indulgent, risking their health," and this is actually even worse for alcohol when they're risking their lives and family finances and everything. They're not doing that, they have a disease and they're powerless.

See, so it makes the addict feel better and it makes the family feel better, it makes the doctor feel like he did something worthwhile. The only problem with that all is it's not true. And so you pay a tremendous price for that immediate relief of guilt and the price that you pay is terror of your own body, fear of your own body and your own appetites and an increasing lack of mastery, lack of sense that you can actually control what you eat, achieve your fitness goals without now starting to surround yourself with all these other people who are responsible for you and kind of acting like an infant.

There's a very, very seductive notion involved in powerlessness and what I tell people is just take the hit. So you feel a little ashamed for a little while but shame is a motivator also and there's no reason to feel neurotically shamed, right? Like the whole purpose of shame is to draw your attention to a behavior and correct that and as soon as you know that you're correcting it, you can let it go. You don't have to obsess about it, you don't have to beat yourself over the head with a spatula, you can just let it go.

But take the hit, it's like ripping off a Band-Aid, it's scary, it's uncomfortable but it's over pretty quickly and then you have your life back, otherwise you could kind of fall into this crazy another world where up is down and black is white and you're trying to support this lie which is only really supporting your pig, so take the hit.



Howie: All right. We have the title of your next book.

Dr. Glenn: Yeah, I'm always kind of careful about talking about that because --

Howie: That's still like three copies.

Dr. Glenn: Yeah, right, that's not a really sexy thing, it's not.

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