

If we are what we eat then I was a little jewel box

By Ruth Ostrow

WHEN I was a child, I used to eat things I believed would give me magical powers.

It started with regular chips my mum would make for dinner, then progressed to the loganberries on the tree in our backyard, and then to the little berries around the garden that were horribly bitter. But that was okay.

The suffering had to be endured in order that I would suddenly assume mystical abilities.

I was always looking for escapes from planet Earth.

One day my mother came into the lounge wearing a black dress.

It was shiny from top to toe, resplendent with black beads and sequins so that it glimmered and glistened.

It was the most beautiful dress I had ever seen. She wore it like a queen, a dark goddess arising from the deep.

I knew the dress had the special powers I craved to transport me to another dimension. I just had to get my hands on it. Then a miracle happened. My mother gave it to me for dress-ups.

I remember sitting around for hours trying to work out how to unleash its power.

It was far too big to wear. And then it came to me. Of course. I would eat the dress, bit by bit.

I told my daughter this the other day as tears of laughter were streaming down her face, but it is a true tale.

Every day, I would pick off a few beads, put them in my mouth and swallow them.

This was at the age of about five or six, when we were hardly off the breast, still believing that whatever we ingested became us, orally fixated, wanting to consume our parents and loved ones, to suck the marrow of life into our gaping maws.

Some beads were rather large and would graze my gullet, others slid down easily.

I'd meticulously pick them off and stow them in a small pill box. When I needed to do some extra time-travel or harness an extra dose of universal energy, I'd have to eat quite a lot of beads, which were covered in glittery lacquer.

If my poor mother found evidence of my secret habit she never let on.

I wonder now what traces of my behaviour would have been left behind as the toilet bowl gleamed with sequins.

It certainly wasn't a once-off event. In fact it took me a year or two to eat the whole dress.

Over that time, frightened that once the dress was eaten I wouldn't have any more powers, I remember experimenting with other magic pills: a sparkly ring from a vending machine; a stone from a necklace.

I was a veritable gastronomical jewel box, not to mention strange things I continued to eat off trees.

Which provoked an interesting discussion the other day about what we ingest.

I was having an argument with a friend about her cigarette habit.

She said she believed it was the "intention" with which we did things, not the thing itself, that caused the most damage.

A devout health fanatic, keeper of the body beautiful, she allows herself one ciggie a day, deeming it okay to ingest the occasional wicked thing in moderation, as long as her thoughts remain positive and clear.

"If we lapse into huge guilt or fear or self-loathing when we eat chocolate, have a drink or whatever we are taught is bad, these thoughts are more damaging to our wellbeing than anything toxic in the actual food-source," she said.

"American Indians honour tobacco as a sacred herb."

"I fully appreciate shamanic ritual, but it doesn't mean the chemicals, and the carcinogens in the smoke, don't give them cancer," I retorted, disapprovingly.

But I got thinking about the black dress and all the plastic and glass beads I ate over the years, which caused me no harm, not to mention those berries -- some of which I later discovered were actually quite poisonous.

All that time I remained healthy and never had a belly ache, let alone a near-death experience.

I thought about all the people I know who do eat and smoke bad things and seem to survive and even thrive.

Doctors will argue it's a game of Russian roulette and the next one may be the bullet, or that some people simply have good genes that will eventually catch up with them. But my girlfriend may also have a point about mind-over-matter.

There are people who can hypnotise themselves to walk over hot coals and not get their feet burned; there are performers who can swallow a sword.

One journalist I know ate his own shoe as part of a dare.

I watched him cut it up, swallow the shoe -- dirty sole, laces, and all -- and walk away quite unscathed.

Whilst I wouldn't take the smoking thing too far, or the shoe, I do believe that if we eat in moderation and keep our minds positive and happy about our occasional indulgences, things turn out trumps.

Certainly the sparkling teeth -- and pooh -- of my childhood testify to the adage:
a healthy mind in a healthy body.

www.ruthostrow.com

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