



“H is for Hungry”

From the message series *HALT: Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired*

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Transcription

The fridge door opens. You look inside. You're hungry, but you're not sure for what. You still haven't found what you're looking for. Is it that half-eaten apple? Eh. You can put ketchup on a lot of things, but you don't know what to put it on. Will your hunger be nourished or will your hunger be frustrated? One thing you know, although maybe you're just starting to scratch the surface of it, of what it means. You know this: you are hungry.

Hungry, angry, lonely, tired. HALT. I didn't make it up. It's a great tool for discernment, though. It's about learning to stop in the midst of the busyness of our lives.

These four states – hungry, angry, lonely, tired – they are powerful states of being; and when I say powerful, they are powerful drives, powerful instincts, powerful hungers, feelings, sensations. Powerful enough to create – to create connection, to create love, to create meaning. Powerful enough to destroy anything in their path if not acknowledged.

I am not overstating it when I say not just individuals but countries go to war over hungry, angry, lonely, tired. Break down almost any human conflict and you will see “hungry, angry, lonely, tired” at some point scratching that surface. The first and the final terms – hungry, tired – we tend to think of as physical sensations. Angry and lonely, the middle two terms, we tend to conceive as emotional states, states of heart.

But here's the truth, and this is why these four belong together - hungry, angry, lonely, tired – they form each other. They inform each other. They can deform each other. I know some people who the minute they get lonely start eating. I know some folks who, instead of allowing themselves to feel anger, they immediately get tired. They start to yawn. They curl up in a little ball and want to go to sleep.

The next time you're angry I'd encourage you to check in, to halt with the anger and notice what's going on around the eyes, noticing the scrunching, noticing the tension. Checking in when you're lonely, checking in with the physical sensations when you're really lonely. What does it feel like in that space around the heart? What does sadness feel like in the body? That's why it's beneficial, as the acronym says, to learn to halt in

all of these states and to see what's there, to check in. Not just move on without recognition, move on without a time to pause, to halt, to stop.

I've got a lot of favorite teachers, but probably my favorite of all the favorite teachers is Tara Brach. She's a meditation teacher and a psychologist, and she encourages us as we go through our lives – our very, very busy lives – to take what she calls a sacred pause. Not just a pause but a *sacred* pause. I think one of the things that makes a sacred pause a sacred pause is the capacity to halt when we find ourselves in one of these powerful hungry, angry, lonely, tired states of being.

There's a song from I think it's the late '80s, maybe early '90s. I do not recommend it. It's deeply offensive. It's horribly homophobic. It's by Ice Cube. It's called "Check Yourself." There's one thing in that song that he got right. The rest of it is really offensive. It's dreadfully offensive. It's a terrible song. I mean, I'm not joking about this. It's a hateful song.

There's one line in there that sticks out, though. "Check yourself before you wreck yourself." If any of you remember that, if any of you are up on your gangsta rap. "Check yourself before you wreck yourself." That's HALT. That's pause.

For those of us who first became familiar with HALT, we may have heard about it through working a program of recovery. And at base all programs of recovery are not just about ending an unhealthy relationship with a substance or with food or in relationships. At heart it's really about the ability to maintain in our lives a deeper kind of sobriety, which is sometimes called being on solid spiritual ground. Sometimes it's called "emotional sobriety." Sometimes it goes by the word "equanimity," or even more popularly, "serenity."

For those of us who work a recovery program, and whether you know you're addicted or are not acknowledging your addiction or are in recovery from your addiction or wherever you are along that continuum, here's the thing. To not pay attention to hungry, angry, lonely, tired; to go numb or unconscious, to be driven by instinct or by our drives without first recognizing that we are making or taking action causes many harmful states, unkind states, unmindful actions to follow in its wake. When we're driven just onward without first recognizing – I mean, we all know the difference in our lives between reacting and responding. Reacting. This is how you can tell you're reacting a lot, is if you have the next thought very often, "Why the hell did I do that?"

To respond means that we can halt. We can pause for a moment, take a sacred pause and become aware of what we're experiencing while we're experiencing, especially these four states of being, and then choose a wise, kind, thoughtful response. It may be, by the way, no action whatsoever is required. Or it may be a lot of energy and a lot of action is required. The point is to really check in with what's going on within us when we're hungry, angry, lonely, tired and then see what is the next right thing to do.

That takes us back to our friend, the open fridge. You are standing there, and y'all know what I'm talking about, right? You've gone looking for something, but even if there's a Snickers in there, it's not really going to satisfy you. I mean, advertising is wrong sometimes, believe it or not, guys. *[Laughter]* I say that as the son of an advertiser, so it's a self-critique.

Back to that open fridge. We're standing there, and we're not feeling that our craving can be satisfied. Because what we may be experiencing? That moment really isn't about hunger in the purely objective sense of wanting to eat something, but it's all about desire. It's all about getting in touch with our desire in that moment. That's what HALT can help us do.

Now sometimes I recognize this. Sometimes it's simple for me. I go to the fridge. I know exactly what I want. I am hungry. I need to be fed. I grab the apple or I grab the Cheetos or I grab whatever it is. It depends upon the day, how healthy I'm feeling, how healthy what we have in the house is, but often eating is not just about food.

The first experience any of us have of desire is this. *[Cries like a baby]* "Waaaaaaah!" I know, that didn't sound like a baby at all. *[Laughter]* It's the first thing we know before we even know ourselves. With desire we know that we are hungry, and with hungry we know that we desire. I mean, spiritually we talk about the breath coming first, and that is true. But hunger is the first place that we really get desire, the first place where we as human beings really get to feel desire. It's the first place for many of us where we get to know, even before we can name it, what it means to be frustrated or what it means to be fulfilled in our lives. It's with the experience of being hungry.

I've been doing over the last six years. The seventh summer coming up I'll be doing SpiritFlix during the summer, me and other preachers preaching on movies that have deep spiritual messages. I have to say, one of my favorite movies still for this, one of my favorite Pixar movies – it's right there with *WALL-E*, maybe – is *Ratatouille*, that story of the little cooking rat. I preached on this in the summer of 2007 when it came out.

I'm remembering the character, the dour, stressed-out, joyless character with a great name, the food critic Anton Ego. *[Laughter]* Never has a character been more aptly named than Anton Ego. His job is, yes, to discern good food from bad. But even more, you can tell what he loves doing is destroying chefs' dreams with the stroke of his pen, with his typewriter.

Well, in the crescendo scene, in the scene where it all comes to a head, where Anton Ego is tasting the food of Remy the Rat, who has made him ratatouille, which he first dismisses as a peasant's dish. Anton Ego, the jaded, cynical food critic, digs in.

You can see his eyes grow wide when he takes his first taste. His mind's eye hurtles him backward through time all the way to when he was a kid and his bike breaks or he's the victim of bullying – you can't quite tell what it is, but a deep disappointment, a deep frustration of his desire, as we all have a desire to be happy. And he comes in kind of

hangdog. His mother serves him a simple dish of ratatouille, and he takes a bite and the old, jaded Anton Ego in his mind becomes a kid again because he remembers in that moment when he was fed food of love.

That was not just about nurturing and nourishing his body, but it was an expression of care. It was an expression of love. This is sometimes what can happen to us when we are fed in an authentic and deep way.

When we get in touch with what our hunger means for us, memories might come up. Maybe you grew up in a family in which there were big, huge, jovial dinners and people gathered around the table and they told stories and they talked. And yes, the food was there and the food was probably delicious because that's why the family wanted to come to the table for all those hours in the first place, but it was about the connection.

Or maybe you grew up in a family or maybe you're in a family right now in which food barely even registers when you're in movement, just in transit from one thing to another. Life is so busy. You're just moving on with the next thing. It's like barely stopping at a fueling station.

Or maybe food was a threat. It was punishment or guilt. I mean, how they used to say it when I was a kid – my parents fortunately never said this to me but I know that was the cliché at the time – and at 9:30, they told me, because I'm not a parent now. In this locution Africa has replaced China, but if you know the old one, "You don't know how lucky you are to have those lima beans, broccoli," whatever it is you couldn't stand. "You don't know how lucky you are to have that because all those children in China are starving! Now eat up!"

All these experiences shape our experience of what it is to have that primary sensation, that primary instinct and drive of desire, which is hunger. Now in a little while after the message, when the song is going on, they will put doughnuts out. I know for some of you in a way that is not a joke doughnuts are dangerous. They are unhealthy for you and you don't go anywhere near those doughnuts. I get that. I understand that. So whether it's doughnuts or something else, the next thing that you're going to eat today...

But for those of you who are going to go over there to those doughnuts, and especially if you are just basically, "Doughnuts are out. Pavlovian response, om nom nom." Stop for a second, you know? Don't pull a Homer Simpson. Stop and get in touch. Halt for a second. Lift up the doughnut. See what it looks like. Get in touch as you approach the doughnuts. What's going on?

Salivation, expectation, anticipation. Get in touch with what it's like to eat a small doughnut, because when we can do that, we can recognize and honor what it's like to be hungry, what it's like to desire something.

So, yes, even the doughnuts can be an opportunity for mindfulness practice. We don't have to go over there mindfully and just cram it down, but first recognize and honor

what it's like to be hungry. And in this way what we're doing is we're embodying one of our key core beliefs here at WellSprings.

When I was preparing this message series, I really got a sense of the wisdom of maybe unconsciously the way we're articulating this. It's called, "Thirst for fulfillment." We believe that a growing, honest, spiritual life fills our God-shaped holes and deepest yearnings. Unhealthy relationships, materialism and substance abuse lead us to despair and to loneliness. How do these basically good hungers and drives lead us to despair and loneliness? If we don't halt and we don't check in with our instincts and we don't check in with our hungers and we don't check in with our drives. To learn to halt is to ask ourselves in very basic ways, "What's going on? Am I treating myself and by extension other people with kindness, respect and decency?"

Now, I put a photo up on Facebook not too long ago. Some of you may have seen this picture. Spaghetti-Os Meatball 'A' to 'Z', and it spells out: "Learn to cook."

My wife likes to eat mini raviolis, is it? Mini raviolis, cold out of the can. *[Laughter]*

This upsets me. *[Laughter]*

Because I'm a foodie, so I love this. "Learn to cook!" *[Laughter]*

There's many things she forgives about me, trust me. *[Laughter]*

I do most of the cooking in our house, in case you haven't guessed. Here's the thing. For me, learning to cook was actually something I always anticipated I would know how to do when I grew up because my mom was a self-taught, really wonderful chef. And then she died suddenly and we had never created the time that we always said we were going to for me to learn from her how she would cook. I mean, so much of our lives are about that. We think we have time. We have time. We have time until one day we don't, and so I've learned to cook after my mom's death as really an expression of staying in touch with her memory. When I'm in the kitchen very consciously I am incarnating. I am embodying the wisdom, the presence, the love of her life. So for me learning to cook is a HALT practice. Even if you're a crappy cook, even if you cannot heat water much less soup, I would encourage you. Even if you get so much of your food done by someone else, prepared by someone else, just this week maybe try to make one meal for yourself.

Here's the thing. When we take the time to halt and make food for ourselves, we also recognize something else really important in our overly busy, overly scheduled lives. We're not just consumers of these products. Food just doesn't come naturally, born in cans or wrapped in plastic. Food comes to us from someone or something that has given its life or given its energy so that we can be fed, which is to say to halt often when we cook our own meal or even if we're just receiving the meal to learn to halt with our hunger is actually to open up the most profound way several times a day, maybe three times a day or one time a day or eight times a day or however often you eat. It is a

really easy opportunity to practice that most essential quality of the spiritual life, which is gratitude. This food came to us from somewhere. We can choose to receive it as a gift if we halt, if we take a sacred pause.

So, yes, I am a foodie and sometimes being a foodie is a wonderful thing. Sometimes it also means that I am driven unconsciously by my hunger, by my desires, by my desire to whip up something real cool. And so I decided this year – and yes, I am a Jewish-born Unitarian Universalist whose primary spiritual practice is Buddhist – I decided I would observe Lent. I talked about this a few weeks ago. I decided I would observe Lent by forgoing eating any animals whatsoever. Now, because I'm a Unitarian Universalist and who the hell is going to call me on an imperfect Lenten practice, I delayed, as I think I told some of you, the start! Because this past weekend I went away with some of my buddies for our annual man-cation. These are wonderful guys, but let's just say that it is not easy to be a vegetarian on man-cation, although we did go to the Moosewood Restaurant in Ithaca, famous vegetarian place. But the next night, it was all about the meatball heroes. It was all about the subs. So on Sunday morning in Ithaca, we went to a great deli. I got a meatball sub bigger than two of my heads. I finished half of it, drove back home, finished the other half, and that was it. I was done eating meat. So this week I had the first occasion to not prepare a meal for myself but to actually go out to eat, and I looked at that menu and it's almost like I had forgotten. I'm like, "Damn. I can't eat most of this stuff," and in this moment that's exactly why I was doing the practice even though I didn't realize it would turn out that way – because in that moment I halted. In that moment I stopped and had to think about what I was going to order. I had to pause. I had to still my hunger for a moment and ask myself, "How can I honor my spiritual aspirations and feed my hunger?"

Pausing was the only thing that would make that possible, and it did. A lot of the teachings about pause, about HALT come from a very ancient teaching that some of you may know. It's from the Hebrew scriptures, one simple sentence. Not that simple to do, but one simple, direct sentence. "Be still, and know that I am God." Pausing first, halting first is a way to be still and just recognize that we're hungry. Be still and notice that this food arrived for you from some place that you and your hands did not make it all yourself, even if you cooked it. Be still and grateful. When we don't halt, when we do a version of this – *[eating sounds, laughter]* – we're multi-taskers. I mean, this is embedded in our society, but if we're going to multitask even when we're eating – which, by the way, there are studies about this. People who multitask when they eat, eat about 50 percent more calories. Maybe sometimes we're so busy we forget to eat. We go the opposite direction, which is that we forget that we have bodies. When we multi-task we don't allow us the space, the time to halt, to pause and to get in touch with what it's simply like to be alive and to have these basic drives and to remember these words that I always think about from Kierkegaard, and these are in the 1800s. So if it was certainly true way back then it's absolutely true in this age and in this time. He says, "Purity of the heart in prayer," he says, "Purity of the heart is to will one thing." To do one thing while we're doing it is to learn to halt and to pause from our onward-driven, always hyperactive, always engaged way of living and to just stop for a moment and to

say, “If we’re going to do something, let’s just do one thing right and to actually notice that our lives are unfolding while we’re doing it.”

Because this is the other truth. When we don’t HALT when we’re hungry, when we don’t stop to notice we never touch and taste that deeper reality of that basic, important word: Enough. What’s enough for us? When do we feel ourselves getting full? When do we feel our hunger getting satiated? If we don’t halt we’ll never get in touch with what enough is.

If I could say there’s one primary spiritual addiction in America right now it’s that we have lost on the grand sense – individuals have it, I know – the grand sense of really judging for ourselves and with other people what’s enough. Not just taking in and taking in and taking in and taking in and hoarding. When we can do this and halt and pause we can open up powerful opportunities for connection and for life-giving spirituality.

Bruce Springsteen sings, “Everybody’s got a hungry heart.” Great song. He’s done it at about half the concerts I’ve seen of his, but it’s kind of like, “Well, no duh.” *[Laughter]* The point is what do we *do* with our hungry hearts? Do we use our hungry hearts and pay attention to the hunger in such a way that it leads us on a path of indulgence? Do we allow our hungry hearts to lead us on a path of connection? Do we allow our hungry hearts to destroy us through their avarice, through their greed? Do we allow our hungry hearts to connect to that place called Enough? Because the truth is with our hunger, before we knew anything about the words when we were very, very young, before we knew anything about the words abundance or scarcity we knew what abundance or scarcity was with our hunger and with our taste. Our hunger can be the primary means to connect us to other people who hunger in body, mind and soul and we can recognize that what keeps us most truly human is recognizing the connections between us, that as we hunger so do other people hunger.

If you came in through this direction down through the lower parking lot today you saw Babe the Big Blue Box out there. We have that reminder each week that literally in our communities, there are people who are objectively hungry.

Chester County Futures is our community partner. It’s really cool this past week I’m starting to get calls from their mentor application department about some of you. I’m giving you all ‘A’s because you all deserve it. *[Laughter]* Actually, no. I tell specifics about each person, but it’s a wonderful thing and a joyous thing to be able to praise members of this community for reaching out beyond ourselves to become a mentor.

Chester County Futures? You know how they first locate those students? All of their students are on the reduced or free lunch program throughout Chester County. The students of Chester County Futures are first identified because they are hungry and they know what hunger is. That may be the only full meal they will get in a day, is the meal they get from school. Probably the most well-known piece of kids’ literature – and by extension adult literature as well, too – right now is *The Hunger Games*. If you haven’t seen the movie or read the books I’m going to give part of it away, but it’s a

small thing. This is the signature act of kindness, of connection in *The Hunger Games*. It's this. It's a loaf of bread. Katniss Everdeen, the hero, the heroine, the center, the moral center of all the *Hunger Games* books is literally – she and her family – starving to death and another young person recognizes this and offers her bread. Not just food for the body, although it is, but it is an expression of kindness and compassion to save hunger and to save a life.

We cannot recognize other people's hungers unless we halt enough to first notice their lives. I've only taken the Eucharistic meal – the Communion – a few times in my life and one time it didn't really mean much to me. I've taken it in some high churches and it's like I feel like I almost have to sneak up to the altar. It's like I'm not worthy, but I took Communion once with some friends of mine and it was a very low-church tradition and the minister in this case – she didn't lord it over us. She invited us up to the table. She called it the common table that was open to everyone. She said, "All of you who hunger in body, in heart, in mind, in soul – all of you are welcome here." And I said, "Okay. This is a Universalist Communion that I can take to," and it was cool.

I actually felt what they were getting at. That's the broadest form of Communion, is that our common human hunger can feed our common human love. There's other traditions that have the same sense of communion. In the Buddhist tradition there is what's called the mantra, the chant, the Gate of Sweet Nectar, and it's all about finding the connections between spiritual hunger and physical hunger. And by the way, there is no authentic, mature, integrated spirituality that divides body versus soul. Bringing together our spiritual hungers with our physical hungers treats us exactly as we are and as we are intended to be, as whole human beings. I first heard this chant from Krishna Das. Teresa's going to share it with us.

Calling out to hungry hearts, everywhere through endless time
You who wander, you who thirst, I offer you this heart of mine
Calling out to hungry spirits
Everywhere through endless time
Calling out to hungry hearts
All the lost and left behind
Gather 'round and share this meal
Your joy and your sorrow, I make it mine.

"Calling out to hungry hearts, all the lost and the left behind. Gather 'round and share this meal. Your joy and your sorrow, I make it mine." This is soul food for our most deep and hungry hearts. The deepest thirst is for fulfillment. It is a form of non-dogmatic communion because our hunger at its most basic level is a hunger for something that already exists if only we would recognize it, which is our hunger to belong, our hunger to know that we are loved and to be loved. And yet how often we just blow past our hunger and do not recognize it as a means of knowing how connected we are. When we can pause and when we can halt when we are hungry we will allow in the hunger of our world, the thirst of our world. We will know our deepest desire, that we can all feed and be fed and that we can know the reality is that we can have enough. Can. We can

only have enough, though, if we know that we are already enough. May we halt today and recognize that truth. Amen, and may you live in blessing.

Let's pray together.

God of hunger and thirst, of drive and desire, may we allow ourselves to pause on that forming edge of our lives, to halt before just mindlessly throwing ourselves into the next minute or into the next meal and stake out the territory of present experience. Get in touch with our sensations, our thoughts, our feelings, our hungers and to know that at the base of each of these instincts is a holy and hidden invitation to live whole lives, to be disunited or fragmentary no more but to be one. To do one thing, to be one thing, to be whole – not perfect, but whole – human beings.

Amen.