

CREATING A MIDLIFE OF SURPRISE AND DELIGHT

a review by Patricia R. Webb

Jennifer McGaha. *The Joy Document: Creating a Midlife of Surprise and Delight*. Broadleaf Books, 2024.

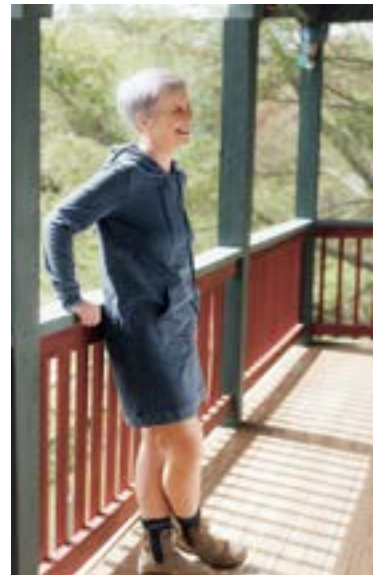
PATRICIA R. WEBB is an Associate Professor of Writing Studies at Arizona State University. She teaches undergraduate courses in writing, as well as the graduate seminars Composition Theory and Composition and Feminism. Her work has appeared in national and international journals, including *Computers and Composition*, *College English*, *Composition Forum*, *Peer Review*, *Works and Days*, *JELLiC*, and *O1E3Media*.

JENNIFER MCGAHA is the author of three works of creative nonfiction including *Flat Broke with Two Goats* (Sourcebooks, 2018) and *Bushwhacking: How to Get Lost in the Woods and Write Your Way Out* (Trinity University Press, 2023). Her writing has also appeared in many magazines and literary journals, including *Image*, *The Huffington Post*, *The New Pioneer*, *Lumina*, and *NCLR*.

As I began writing this review, I paused for a moment to look out my office window at the woodpecker who was working diligently at the bark of the tree in my yard. His bright red crown stood out against the brown of the bark. He probably didn't know that one of the neighborhood's stray cats frequently hangs out in that same tree. But for that afternoon, he was safe, pecking away at the bark.

This kind of pause – taking a moment to notice what lies in front of me and appreciating it for what it is – is the kind of action that Jennifer McGaha's writing has inspired me to do. After reading *The Joy Document: Creating a Midlife of Surprise and Delight*, I have found myself embracing McGaha's assertion that "it is possible to intentionally cultivate a life full of gratitude for the here and now, a life awash with joy and optimism and even humor" (14). Through her creative essays, she explores both the light and dark of life, showing how to create joy out of both of them.

McGaha's writing invites readers to look at oneself and the world around in different ways, showing us how "one thing becomes another when examined in a slightly different light, the way the many layers of being unfold right in front of you" (27). Through powerful storytelling, McGaha captures her process of looking for joy throughout one year of her life. Re-examinations of herself and the world around her populate these pages and invite readers like me to mindfully pay atten-



COURTESY OF ELLIE NAVARRO

tion to the world around them. At the heart of her insightful reflections is an assertion that adopting an attitude of gratitude toward the big and small wonders we encounter every day can create joy in our lives.

"What is the essence of you?" asks McGaha (89). Although she concedes that this is an impossible question to answer with any certainty, she carefully explores it throughout her essays. What becomes evident in reading her work is that McGaha is, at heart, a storyteller. Stories matter to her, they do important work for her. She used to think that writing was "frivolous" but she now believes that writing – and the wondering it leads us through – is a sacred act of "searching for the whispers between the words – the holy parts" (18). Refusing to label herself or her work, she joyfully explores her reactions to the world and others as a way of understanding herself.

In one thread that runs throughout her work, McGaha

shows the joy that can be found in re-seeing the relationship we have with ourselves and our bodies. She particularly focuses on exploring her attitude toward her aging body and self. McGaha reflects on the way her aging body "requires more attention" as each morning "I wake stiff and sore, aware of every one of my fifty-five years." She acknowledges that no matter what we do, our bodies will age. But as she works her way more slowly through her morning, she writes, "I would hands down choose now, these quiet moments in the kitchen with the morning light seeping in" because she values "all the ways I discover the world anew each morning. I am here. I am here. I am still here" (134). She takes us on a journey of the "slippery slope of reseeing" that allows us to find joy in all parts of us – even in the challenges of our aging bodies.

In another thread is the use of music as a lens to re-see the world around her. From simple things like realizing that her goats are more Led Zeppelin fans than Bob Dylan fans to more complex questioning of her teenage life choices through the lens of '80s music, McGaha uses music to help her re-think the world around her. In one essay, she describes an exchange she had with two employees at Trader Joe's as they asked her about her thoughts on the mus-ak soundtrack of "Love Shack" by the B-52s. Thinking through this discussion leads McGaha to wonder about her own generation and what it held – in some cases, still holds – sacred. This cross-generational conversation about music helps her

re-see her generation and her own life choices in a different light. And in another essay, Tom Petty's "Free Fallin'" adds the soundtrack to her reconsideration of what it means to let go. She reflects on the risks that she asks her writing students to take on a regular basis and amazes at the students who are willing to free-fall into the writing. She tells them that "that's the way you do it. . . . Even when you can't see the ground, you just do it. You jump. That's how you sing. That's how you write. That's how you live. That's how you learn to fly" (101).

Food and the relationships she develops through it are another lens that McGaha uses throughout her work to re-see life in order to find the joy in the things that surround her. From making a trifle for her brother's retirement party to the conversation she has with a stranger about how to cook a poblano pepper to the unexpected gift of a "backpack burrito" on a hiking trail, she shows how our engagements around food mirror the relationship within our

lives. McGaha illustrates that if you look at it right – if you look for the joy in it – food can be magical and having pie for breakfast can be a radical act.

As I read her book, I was drawn to the "happy" moments of joy she shared. Yet even in an explicit search for joy, McGaha does not deny the hard stuff that life presents us. Instead, she shows that seeking joy is an important response to the hard stuff – like living with the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, like living through the investigation of the attack on the US Capitol, and like living with the divisiveness in the country. As with many things that happen in her life, she turns to language and poetry to help her through her feelings of hopelessness. Poets, she insists, ask better questions than medical professionals: "Instead of asking people whether they feel depressed, the poets would ask them: How often do you see glimmers of hope in this otherwise hopeless world? What color are they?" (94). She insists that we need joy precisely because of



COURTESY OF JENNIFER MCGAHA

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE Jennifer McGaha finding joy in her everyday life

the hard moments, and through her writing, she illustrates how to find those moments of meaning, those times of joy even within the challenges we all face.

McGaha ends her book with “Guiding Questions: Creating Your Own Joy Document,” in which she provides us with thoughtful questions that help readers think more deeply about their own relationship to joy. For instance, she asks, “What are some stories you have told yourself about your life that might not be fully true? How might revising those stories change you?” and “If you considered your body a sacred space, how might that change how you move in the world?” (196). These questions return us to a central theme of her essays – how our own vision of ourselves and the world and the stories we tell about them need to be re-visioned regularly, if we are to create more joy in our lives.

After spending a year examining joy in its myriad forms, McGaha realizes that there are really two kinds of joy – the joy that sometimes finds us and the joy we ourselves create out of ordinary and/or thorny moments. In *The Joy Document*, she invites us to pause and reflect – to notice the woodpecker in the tree outside our window and to see the joy in everyday moments in ways that help us “to live in greater harmony with the land and with one another” (15). ■