

GOULASH GARAGE SALES & GOD

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Bernadette McCarver Snyder

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Dedication

For all the wise and wonderful women who have touched my life gently—my mother, my sister, my teachers, my relatives, my friends. They have shown me how to look at the world and see apple pandowdy instead of crab apples. They have shown me that, no matter what comes around the corner, you can enjoy life if you welcome it with a laugh and a prayer.

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Introduction

Are you near the end of your rope and fresh out of cope? Is your life like a sweater with little fuzzies all over it? When you try to make it better by pulling a loose thread, does the whole thing start to unravel? I know how you feel.

As you thumb through this book, you will read all about my fuzzies and loose threads. You will also notice that this book wanders—just like my mind. Words written at the end of a rope do not always fall in sequence. These are just wanderings that I have dashed down through the years.

The famous author Edith Wharton once wrote something that I remember but may be quoting loosely. Her idea was that a woman's nature is like a great house full of rooms. There's the hall, through which everyone passes, going in and out, and the drawing room, where one receives formal visits, and the sitting room, where members of the family gather, coming and going through the years. But beyond that, far beyond, there are other rooms, the handles of whose doors perhaps are seldom turned.

As you and I “turn the handles” in this book, I hope you will enjoy and maybe identify with the goulash of life that can be mixed-up but delicious, the fun of finding treasures in garages or wherever you least expect them, and of course, the warm, welcoming grace of God everywhere.

Please note: Some of the meanderings in this book may have appeared earlier in books now out of print. If you find one you've read before, I hope you will enjoy it the second time around.



A Touch of Magic

When I was a little kid, there was a “magic place” in my grandma’s backyard. It was just a little shady spot between the foundation of the house and a large overhanging flowery bush—just big enough for a small person to crawl into and be hidden from the outside world. I used to go there—sometimes alone, sometimes with a playmate—and in that “secret garden” I could travel to exotic places, to lands of adventure and discovery, intrigue and excitement. And I didn’t take any money or advance scheduling. All it took was imagination.

When I grew up and got lost in the world of work and worry, I almost forgot the magic of withdrawing to a quiet place to dream, to plan, to drink in the beauty of the moment, to pray, and to just “be.” But then my son came along.

Although he was busily into everything and usually kept me chasing after him, there would be times when I would look out my kitchen window and see him in the backyard—in his little log-cabin playhouse, arms crossed on the windowsill, just staring off into space. Other times, I would see him, all alone, lying flat on his back in the grass, gazing at the clouds, totally oblivious to all around him. And I knew he was journeying into imagination, as I had done so many years before. I knew he had found the magic.



Dear Lord, I've tried to hang on to the "secret garden" my son helped me recapture. When I get caught in the quicksand, I remind myself to reach out for that flowered branch that can pull me into a journey of dreams or back to the safety of quiet prayer and meditation and peace. I am so grateful, Lord, that you gave me this magic gift of imagination. How sad that some of today's children—and adults—are always hurrying to pre-scheduled games, club meetings, and activities, or sitting in front of a TV screen, watching the results of the imagination of someone *else*. Help us, Lord. Don't let us lose the magic.

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The Closet Caper

I'm so excited. I just learned that my son's closet has been declared a historic landmark!

Oh, I don't mean his current closet—the one with all the baseball cards and the tennis shoes that smell prehistoric and the nice ties he's never worn and the good suit he outgrew two years ago and the cage for the gerbil that died three years ago. No, that closet could only be declared fit for a city landfill.

The historic closet is in an apartment building where we lived when I was first married. That was our first home, and it was full of challenges. The living room was long and skinny, and I spent a year rearranging the furniture, sure that I would find a way to make it look fatter and friendlier. I never did.

But the biggest conversation piece was always the hall closet. That closet was bigger than the kitchen and about half as big as our bedroom—and it had two doors, which made it the only room in the apartment that had cross-ventilation!

The second year we lived there, our son was born, and it only seemed logical to turn such a “choice” location into his nursery.

We painted it and decorated it and moved in a chest of drawers and a crib and a fluffy white music-box lamb that played a lullaby. All our friends were either amused or aghast. We were the only ones with a kid in a closet.

But he lived happily there until we saved enough money to move into a small house where he could have a real room of his own.

Through the years, I would occasionally drive by to take a nostalgic look at our former home, but it began to deteriorate. One day, I drove past and saw that it was empty with the windows boarded up and all the beautiful flower beds long gone. It was like running into an old friend who has fallen upon hard times.

I grieved a bit and would remember the happy times we spent there when I looked through the old photo album.

And then, today there was this big article in the newspaper with a photo of the building as I remembered it, announcing that this “historic landmark” is to be rehabbed and reborn.

I don’t know why they called it “historic” unless someone told them about our nursery closet, but I’m happy to know that soon some new families will come along and enjoy its old-world charm and its cross-ventilated closet.

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Dear Lord, thank you for all the joyful times in that old building. We had so little money in those days—but so much fun and so much hope for the future. Please help all the couples just starting out today, Lord—especially the ones who might think you have to start with a big beautiful new house, two new cars, and enough money for fancy vacations. And remind me again, Lord, to appreciate all the small blessings in my life and remember that I don’t need lots of things to make a closet full of memories.



Here's Mud in Your Pie—and Your Ear and Your Toes and...

Pies are big in our house, just like Mom used to make—peach, apple, cherry, and *mud*. Yes, the most popular pies at our house were mud. My son had a love-at-first-sight relationship with mud. He saw it, he jumped into it, he bonded with it. And then I made the mistake of showing him how to make mud pies.

Actually, I probably didn't have to show him. He would have learned on his own. He and mud stuck together as tightly as a department-store price label on a sale item you planned to give as a gift. And pies were not his only specialty. There was bucket o' mud, mug o' mud, face o' mud.

Instead of a backyard sandbox, we had a mud hole. I hated sand, so one day when the yard was soft after a rain, I pounded in four sturdy planks to make a box. Then I told my son and his friends if they would leave the rest of the yard alone, they could dig in this dirt box all they wanted to. And they wanted to! They spent many happy hours there, creating mud monsters, mud mountains, and mud to clog Mother's washing machine.

Some houses have mud rooms. Ours had a mud garage. And we had a rule. Before my son entered the house, I would hose him

off and then make him step into the garage and out of his clothes. One day he forgot the hosing-off step and just dropped his clothes and ran into the house with face, hands, and feet still covered with mud, but the once-clothed parts now uncovered. This created quite a stir since that was the day I was serving tea and cookies to company. That day my son and I *did* serve up a surprise—a “mud pie moment” our visitors never forgot.



Dear Lord, thank you for mud and memories. Without mud, how could we have flowers, grassy lawns, or photo albums with pictures of a little boy whose sparkly eyes and happy, gap-toothed grin are shining through that muddy face? Help parents—and all of us—Lord, to be aware that the kind of dirt that washes out is not so bad for children.

It's the kind of dirt that gets pushed out all too freely today on TV, in movies, magazines, and videos. *That* dirt can cause permanent damage and soil an attitude and a life forever.

Help us, Lord, to recognize that kind of dirt before it gets “ground in” and accepted as a part of everyday life. Help us, Lord, to avoid mud pies of the mind and tolerate only *your* kind of mud—the kind that makes good gardens grow, the kind that is dug up by happy little boys and little girls in backyard mud puddles.



Tell Your Lilac to Go Play in Traffic!

This year, I discovered one of the secrets of the Green Thumb Club: Lilacs like traffic.

Horticulturists may disagree, but I have proof. It all began several years ago when I carefully planted a lilac bush in what I considered a perfect spot in my backyard. It grew into a large green plant—which was nice—but what I wanted were those lacy, sweet-smelling lilac flowers that perfume the springtime.

Friends kept telling me that it takes a long time for lilacs to bloom and to wait and be patient. I was patient for eight years.

When we moved to a new house, I almost went off and left the lilac in the lurch, but finally I dug it up and dragged it along. In its new backyard, it grew again into a bush with no flowers.

Two years later, a big evergreen out front died, and when we dug it out there was a nice big hole—ready to be filled. I didn't have another bush on hand, and the lilac was in the backyard where another hole wouldn't matter, so we transplanted it again.

It was a bad day for transplanting—hot and dry. My son and I started out digging carefully, trying not to break the roots—but the hotter it got, the faster we dug. Finally, we yanked out the roots, dumped them in the hole, and hoped for the best.

Obviously, I had been too polite to that lilac in the past because the next spring what had been a nice green bush all those years turned into a nice green bush with *two* blossoms!

When I saw the blooms, I ran into the house screaming and shouting about something wonderful happening. My husband thought we must have won a million-dollar lottery. He was just a *little* disappointed when I told him about the two lilac blooms.

But the best was yet to come. This spring, the lilac bush was absolutely covered with fragrant flowers, just as a lilac bush is supposed to be. And there could be only one explanation—lilacs like traffic.

All those years the lilac had been in a backyard. When I finally moved it to the front, right by the side of the garage where it could watch the traffic and inhale the gas fumes, it choked, gasped, and bloomed!

Dear Lord, that lilac reminds me of children. Sometimes we expect them to grow in the backyard of our life, with just an occasional pat on the head and a birthday hug. And many do just fine that way. But other children need a little extra. Like the lilac, they just can't seem to bloom where they were planted. They need a different kind of atmosphere, attention, or situation.

Sometimes a parent has to keep “moving them about,” tugging at their roots, putting them in a different school or activity, suggesting new projects or possibilities to help them find a bloom-able spot in life. The secret—as with most things—is patience, endurance, and paying attention. If one thing doesn't work, try another. Never give up. That's the way you treated me, isn't it, Lord? You've tugged at my roots a lot. I was a late bloomer, but you never gave up on me. Thank you, Lord, for paying attention.



Just a Taste

There is no accounting for some people's tastes! That's one of the basic facts I learned at my mother's knee. But I didn't know the same was true with animals until we got a dog who ate green apples and ice cubes.

That dog was always so close on the heels of my son and his friends that he thought he was "one of the boys," so naturally he ate what they ate. When I handed out green apples, he expected one, too. And when he saw the boys bite into theirs, he settled down to gnaw dutifully just like his buddies. In the summer, when I ran out of Popsicles, the boys had to settle for ice cubes, and the dog learned to beg for those, too. The worst was the first time I opened a can of chili after the dog had come to live at our house. The minute that aroma hit the air, the dog came to attention, looking longingly at the stove and giving me the poor-pitiful-little-hungry-me look. Up until that moment, I had had no reason to suspect that dog had Mexican ancestry.

When I sat down to eat the chili, his eyes followed every spoonful I lifted. Before long, we were both in a terrible emotional state! He was shaking and whimpering so much that I was afraid he was going to start a Mexican hat dance. Finally, I decided to put a spoonful of chili into his bowl, sure that the first fiery bite would discourage him. I was wrong. He loved the taste so much, he gave new meaning to the phrase, "Give it a licking."

A few days later, I opened a carton of raspberry yogurt. Suddenly, the dog's gourmet nose went into action again. Since yogurt does not exactly smell like chili, I thought his nose had misfired. To show him he had made a mistake, I put a spoonful of yogurt into his dish. He lapped up every drop.

Well, I suppose it was inevitable for us to get a dog who has strange tastes—like everybody else in the family. My son likes fried okra. When I serve that, my husband acts like we're trying to poison him if we even let the bowl of okra come near his end of the table. But my husband likes cornmeal mush and puts pepper on sweet potatoes. And I am the one who indulgently puts up with my husband, my son, and the dog. There is just no accounting for some people's tastes!



Dear Lord, you must have had a lot of fun making people—and animals—with such different tastes! Some casual acquaintances will rush in your front door and give you a big hug. Some lifelong friends act like a handshake is an invasion of privacy. Some people will go to church and sing out loud, sing out strong—whether they know how to sing or not. Others will never warble a note. And let's not even think about the differences people have when you start talking about art or politics or the best spaghetti recipe. Lord, thank you for putting so many strange tastes in your world. It just wouldn't have been as delicious without all the differences.