

Book Review



RADICAL JOY FOR HARD TIMES:

Finding Meaning and Making Beauty in Earth's Broken Places

TREBBE JOHNSON. NORTH ATLANTIC BOOKS (NORTHATLANTICBOOKS.COM), 2018.

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Reviewed by Thea Levkovitz

IN HER NEW BOOK, Trebbe Johnson (*THE WORLD IS A WAITING LOVER*) asks her readers and anyone who lives on this planet to create beauty in the very landscapes we usually find too painful to face.

This book arrives at a time of deep despair and global urgency, when any action we might take individually seems inadequate to tackle the scale of the climate and environmental crisis of our world. What are we to do about an insect Armageddon that means losing this critical food source for fish and birds and the pollinators for the planet, the looming extinction of more than one million species within decades,¹ or the Greenland ice sheet that is melting at an unprecedented rate?

RADICAL JOY is a book for the courageous or those longing for courage. It is not for those seeking the easy, inspiring path to environmental redemption. Instead, Johnson entreats us to go deliberately and precisely to the places we can scarcely endure—climate-scorched forests, hundred-year-hurricane-scoured towns, fields gouged by fracking operations or coastlines ravaged by tsunamis—and there, make something beautiful. The book is at the same time heart-

wrenching and beautiful, impossibly sad and strangely visionary. Although it does not illumine a straight path forward, at its foundation, *RADICAL JOY* is a book of reciprocity and possibility, not despair.

Yet it does not minimize our current global situation. Johnson walks us through the danger of ignoring our grief and gloom in the face of environmental loss. By bypassing our anguish, we risk “ecoparalysis” a term coined by the Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht to describe a state of extreme helplessness in the face of ecological assault. So what are we to do?

The author counsels that acceptance is the first step toward freedom. In that freedom, we find the “full spectrum of creative response.” In her chapter “Acceptance Does Not Mean Surrender,” Johnson tells the story of Susumu Sugawara, who turned his small insignificant fishing boat full throttle into the record-breaking tsunami that hit Japan in 2011. That he survived is a miracle but then he spent the following weeks helping other survivors. Using Sugawara’s act as a metaphor for responding to other frightening crises, Johnson writes, “Driving into the tsunami is both an acceptance of the circumstances that would inundate you and a refusal to submit to silence, apathy, and despair.”

The book is filled with tales like these—actions of individuals either thrust or stepping intentionally into seemingly hopeless situations. Through her honest and skillful storytelling, Johnson recounts the personal sagas of reluctant heroes who weather storms and everyday activists who tenaciously put one foot in front of the other. Their stories remind me of wisdom from the Sufi sage Hazrat Inayat Khan: “Some people look for

a beautiful place, others make a place beautiful.”

We thrive on the hero’s tales, but why make beauty? Johnson gives a hint in the title of her book: *RADICAL JOY*. It is a revolutionary act to purposively culture joy in the face of planetary collapse. The philosophers of ancient Greece postulated that we experience beauty when we see order in what initially appears chaotic. We love beauty because it makes us feel safer by reducing uncertainty. In it we find meaning, connection, and joy. We also seek beauty because we associate it with our most basic needs: food, shelter, and procreation. Our human desire for beauty exists not solely for pleasure but because it drives our very survival—a revelation equal to the demands of this time.

RADICAL JOY FOR HARD TIMES is a journey though brokenness void of expectation. It is a demanding journey but one I recommend wholeheartedly. If there is any chance that we can turn our destiny to a new course, it will be by taking the entire journey, not just the easy parts. Johnson challenges us to look directly into the heart of the brokenness we have created. She says, “To act without the enticement of hope does not mean your actions will have no tangible outcome. The splash does not anticipate the ripples it will generate but that is no argument for ignoring the pebble that waits to be thrown.” We make beauty for the potential of a future. It will take all of our courage.

Some years ago, I guided daylong kayak trips on the Duwamish River in Seattle, Washington—one of this country’s most toxic rivers. We wanted to convince elected officials to take action by giving them a riverside view

of the Superfund site. In this post-apocalyptic, *BLADE RUNNER* riverscape, I could hardly fathom the distance—both geographical and aesthetic—between this contaminated river and the pristine waters of Alaska where I first learned to kayak. I felt only what had become my habitual, numb activist determination masked by an enthusiastic cheerleader-like narrative to inspire our leaders with optimism. As I watched the osprey carry fish to the young in its nest, noted the Zen-like movements of Great Blue Herons picking critters from the mud, and schools of salmon returning to spawn, I felt my numbness give way to joy. I became a living experience of Johnson's proposition. Then this thought: given even a small chance, could the force of life be so unstoppable that it might heal the planet's brokenness? There it is—not hope, but possibility. ♦

¹ IPBES Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

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