

# **GARAVENTA CENTER**

## **High School Essay Contest**

### **Winning Essays Compilation 2024**

# **The Joy in Rediscovering Faith while Grieving**

**By Anya McGowan**

Every other Tuesday I stop whatever I'm doing and get ready to go. My parents and I drive from North Portland all the way to Southeast. My younger brother used to come with us, but recently stopped. His schedule got too busy. As we drive I usually either sing along to music that I force my parents to listen to or catch up on homework. By 6:30 we arrive. We mingle with the other families. The leaders always announce the teen sibling group first. I walk into the room, take my usual spot in the corner of the floor-level couch, and wait to begin. They ask us the same opening questions every time. My answer will never change. "Hi, my name is Anya. My older brother died from an overdose due to illicitly laced fentanyl."

From the earliest memories I have, Sunday mornings have included 10 am mass. This was one of many things that changed over COVID. My brother died in September 2021, right when things had finally started going back to "normal". My family hadn't gone to Sunday Mass for a while at that point. My relationship with God had been pretty rocky even before my brother died, but the moment I heard from the EMTs that there was nothing they could do, the already strained bridge between me and God crumbled. If He was to exist, how could He have taken such a beautiful person out of this world so easily?

I grappled with these types of questions and I couldn't see the point in repairing my relationship with God when such tragedy had struck.

I became so stuck in my grief and anger that I was unable to see the way God *was* working in my life. I closed myself off, both from God and the opportunities that would allow joy to enter my life. My brother was dead, how could I be happy? I questioned so much of my faith. Frequent attempts to console me with the words: "He's in a better place" or "This was God's plan" fell flat. I recognized the care behind the words, yet they were unable to console me. At this time I was also on my way to being confirmed, per my parents' request. During my Confirmation retreat, I spoke with a leader who didn't give me the usual one-sentence responses of consolation. Instead, we discussed the way I felt. This felt like the first time someone understood what I meant. He asked me to attempt to find the little ways God showed up while I grappled with my grief. So I tried.

There is no event I can pinpoint that allowed me to rebuild a relationship with God but I started to acknowledge the small moments of joy I felt throughout my days. I became closer with my friend Francine. Instead of telling me how to feel she asked questions. She listened and laughed with me while I recollected the many times my brother put a Justin Bieber cutout in my room. She was someone who I could break into songs with at a moment's notice before eventually bursting into laughter at the sound of our voices. I visited family in California, where I swam in my aunt's pool, hung out with my cousins, and realized it was okay to feel happy without an all-consuming guilt.

Starting in April, after I was Confirmed, so many moments reminded me of the way my life was not terrible; at times I even started to feel accustomed to grief rather than eaten alive by it. I was still unable to see God's role in this but when the first anniversary of my brother's death approached that shifted.

I dreaded the lead up to that anniversary. I was unable to comprehend the fact that it had so long. My parents invited people over that night, in order for us not to be alone. The people we invited were all connected to my Church. I wasn't happy about this development and swore to stay within my room. Yet, I found comfort being surrounded by people I was so familiar with on one of the hardest days of the year. My friends moved easily between what I felt; from laughter to tears, they were there. This community that I was a part of, the people I spent all my life growing up with, they showed up. They surrounded my family with food, hugs, laughter, and kindness. Even though it had been a year since the death, love still surrounded my entire family and I realized God had never really abandoned me. Because He was what brought all of these people into our lives, He took care of us by ensuring that we were surrounded by a community that loved and supported us.

It had felt impossible to come back from the hole I fell into. And yet, eventually I was able to accept the different ways God and the people I love brought small moments of happiness into my life. From beach trips with Francine to boba trips with my younger brother I have found appreciation for the smallest of things. It has been 866 days since

my brother died. 866 days ago the way I looked at life changed completely. 866 days ago I gave up on God, on finding happiness, on myself. But I came to realize that even with such tragedy, there were people who could still bring joy into my life. There was still someone looking after me. I know I am not stuck only in sadness. I have found the ability to laugh so fully that my body aches. And no matter how much I wish to have my brother back, I know wherever he is now, whether that be in a better place like all those people said or not, I know he checks in on me just as much as God does. And I know they both ensure that I am surrounded by love.

# **The Necessity of Celebration**

**By Hannah Ickes**

As a young girl, my favorite book was *The War that Saved My Life*. I was inspired by the main character's perseverance and search for beauty during a horrific war. I never thought I would relate to her war story. Appallingly I do. War is miserable. In spite of that, war makes you resilient and enlightened.

Simchat Torah, or "the joy of Torah" is considered the most delightful day of the Jewish year. On the night of October 7th, as I was studying abroad in Israel, I dreamed of dancing through the streets of Jerusalem. Instead, I woke up to a devastating call that changed my life.

I lethargically answered my phone, my eyes barely opening. "Where are you? There was a missile. Come to the lobby!" Lila, my good friend, quickly said. I blinked, fearing I was dreaming. I wasn't. I ran to the lobby, awaiting further explanation. Arriving downstairs, the overwhelming sound of people talking and crying pierced my ears.

I located Lila and dashed towards her, tightly hugging her and repeatedly thanking her for waking me up. Moments later, the rocket siren blared. The siren was harsh, reminding me of an American ambulance siren, but it was deeper, more dire. I had ninety seconds to get to the bomb shelter. I scurried to the stairwell, scrambling down four flights of stairs to a dark, bleak, and uncomfortably warm room. I sat down on the

concrete floor, over a hundred people joining me. After ten minutes, we solemnly walked back to the lobby.

Our program staff decided we needed to have a group meeting. Convincing fifty teenagers to silently listen is practically unheard of, but in that moment the silence was deafening. One of our teachers stood up and quietly began explaining the situation. He told us of the horrors taking place only sixty miles away. With a trembling voice, he proceeded to say that it was officially a “state of war.” Only weeks before, we were told that missile sirens were common in Israel, and often a mere precaution. I looked at my feet, my head spinning with anxiety as I realized the gravity of the situation. I didn’t have much time to think as the siren went off again. My legs shook as I trampled down the stairs. Deeply breathing, I sat down on the concrete. I texted my great aunt and cousins to confirm they were safe. I was glad to hear they were at home, but horrified when my cousin texted that she knew several of the missing people. Every person around me trembled in fear for their family and friends. As I surveyed the room, I noticed a few Orthodox men wrapping tefillin and rapidly muttering their daily prayers. I was astounded that even during a war, they refused to pause their traditions. I put my phone away, feeling embarrassed that I was selfishly using it while some of the people around me could not text their families as they observed Shabbat. I tightly closed my eyes, attempting to take deep, calming breaths. Instead, I breathed in the harsh stench of sweat and tears. I silently asked G-d for the missiles to stop, and for no more lives to be lost.

On our sixth trip to the bomb shelter that day, all I wanted was to hug my mom, but she was fast asleep on the other side of the world. Living 7000 miles away from her was difficult; during the onset of a war, it was unbearable. Fortunately, I was surrounded by close friends who were able to distract me. We were getting restless sitting on the shelter floor, and we heard singing nearby, so we decided to look for the source. Eventually we found ourselves in a spacious room that looked like an abandoned parking garage. A group of young adults from Denmark, that I recognized from dinner the night before, stood singing in a circle in the center of the room. Within minutes, almost all fifty of us joined their circle. We quietly listened to them sing Christian worship songs that we didn't recognize but were delighted to hear anyway. I was captivated by their heartwarming songs. When they finished singing, we all walked back to the lobby and for the first time that day, I smiled.

Their worshipping inspired us to pray and embrace the celebration of the Jewish holiday. All of the teenagers and adults on my program congregated in the Sukkah, a temporary dwelling built to celebrate the upcoming holiday of Sukkot (the fall harvest). We began to pray and sing in Hebrew. Within minutes, we were singing at the top of our lungs, dancing in a circle, and kissing the Torah, commemorating the completion of the annual Bible reading. Initially, I was timid, feeling guilty for celebrating when so many others could not, but I quickly understood the importance of choosing joy. For thirty minutes, we did not stop celebrating. We screamed song after song until we lost our



voices. We danced until our feet ached. We grinned with amusement and acknowledged our gratitude for one another. I beamed and laughed more than I had in days.

A few days later, my program was forced to send us back to America. It was devastating to leave my newfound family. Looking back, I remember the terrible and frightening moments, but more than that, I reminisce on the beauty of my religion and community. I think about the significance of celebration, especially during difficult times. Since I left Israel, the war has only worsened. Every day, I pray that G-d may grant Palestinians and Israelis joy and celebration within their lives.

Celebrating Simchat Torah for ourselves, and for those who could not on that day, was an unforgettable moment. Now that I am home, I have never felt so grateful to be alive and safe. I find myself rejoicing and searching for satisfaction in the mundane. I have learned that celebration is necessary, but it is a luxury.

## **Pugs and Hot Cocoa**

**By Carlyle Mohr**

It was Thanksgiving Day. My sister, Ingrid, and I sat in the backseat of the Toyota Highlander as my mom pulled out of the driveway. The three of us were on our way to Snohomish, Washington, with plans to make it there in time for a big family Thanksgiving dinner. We had almost made it out of the neighborhood when the crash happened. My mom stopped at the stop sign, looked both ways, and started into the intersection. Out of nowhere, the car appeared. I glanced out the window to my left to see a red pickup truck careening towards me at a speed I couldn't fathom, and before I could even let out a scream of warning, his car slammed into ours. *Bam.* The car shook. My head whipped forward into the seat in front of me, and I heard my mom scream as her head slammed into the wheel. My vision was shaky, and my hands trembled. I watched with tears in my eyes and said a quiet prayer as the man whipped out of the intersection, leaving his plate-less bumper behind. In an attempt to stop him, my mom jumped out of the car and stood in the middle of the road, screaming at him to come back. She screamed with such anger and disparity, looking genuinely terrified. I had never seen her like that before. Despite my mom's screams, the anonymous driver disappeared down the road, leaving us stranded in the intersection.

My whole world flipped upside down. One moment, I was an enthusiastic 11-year-old girl on her way to visit family on Thanksgiving. The next, the driver's side of our car had a pickup-truck-shaped dent in it, my head could not stop spinning, and my mom was crying, saying that her finger was broken and she thought she had a concussion. Ingrid was no help. She is older than me, yet she is more anxious and the first to cry in any uncomfortable situation. Clearly, she is not the most reliable or comforting person in a crisis, so she hung nervously to the side while I stood silently, frozen in place. Police sirens wailed, indicating that help was on the way. I sat down in the middle of the street, eyes glazed over. *What. Just. Happened?*

Once the police officers arrived to question us, I looked up to see the striking number of people who witnessed the event. At least six bystanders helped my mom talk to the police officers, sharing details they had noticed about the car and the man driving it. As my mom conversed with the officers, a man nearby walked over to me and kindly asked me if I wanted to pet his pug; he could tell that I needed something to lift my spirits. The answer was obvious (how could anyone say no to petting a pug?). I was snuggling the little pug when two more people walked over with their dogs. I giggled as the dogs crawled all over me, licking my hands and sitting in my lap. In addition to the dog walkers, residents of the nearby homes came out on their porches to check on us. As I sat on a curb with my mom and Ingrid, a friendly family walked down their steps, presenting three steaming mugs of hot cocoa. My hands warmed up, my nerves calmed

down, and I felt a comforting feeling of joy as I sipped the cocoa, sandwiched between my mom and sister on the curb. After catching her breath, my mom got back in the driver's seat, urging Ingrid and I to pile into the car so we could go back to the house. Slowly but surely, the dented Toyota brought us safely home.

For many years after that Thanksgiving, I would remember this day as a horrible one. The crash that altered my life as I knew it: months of helping look after my mom and myself as she recovered from her concussion, and my fear of cars that still lingers to this day. Since that Thanksgiving, I have often resented that careless man for what he did and wished that it never happened. I thought, *how can people give such little consideration for the lives of others? How could he hit us with his car, and simply drive away without a care in the world? Does he know how much his actions affected my family? How could he? Why did he?*

If I could choose a life without that crash, I would take it in a second. Easily. But that does not mean that I can't also look back on that day, years later, with some gratitude. Gratitude for those strangers who made more of a difference than they might have realized. I think that as humans, we tend to obsess over and focus on the things or people who hurt us the most. Amidst the chaos of the event and my anger towards that man, the actions of those thoughtful strangers sometimes went unnoticed and underappreciated in my memory. There are so many ways in which our lives can play out every day. There are endless possibilities for our lives that we will never encounter. This

means that a scenario existed in which nobody walked by or came out of their houses to help us. The fact that this particular scenario came to be —the one in which at least ten people gathered to comfort me and my family— makes me feel as if somebody was watching over us that day. I see God in the light that shines from a dark place. I see God in the multitude of people at the crash who lended a helping hand. When I see joy sprouting from a place of sadness, I know that God is with me. Looking back on that Thanksgiving, I now know that my family and I were in safe hands that day; He was with us. Selfless kindness such as that of the strangers is what helps Jesus' mission to be carried out today and keeps us all afloat. I may have been terrified, but I was certainly not alone; bystanders showed me compassion and I was comforted by the feeling that something *bigger* was with me and my family. Strangers showing kindness towards other strangers is a truly beautiful thing. Even the smallest and simplest good deeds, like a cup of hot cocoa or a pug to pet, are joyful reminders that there truly is so much goodness all around us, even where we least expect to find it.

# **What Is Joy To Me?**

**By Rhea Truong**

Joy has always been a foreign emotion to me. Such is thankfully not due to a lack of joyful moments in my life, but rather a sense of confusion around the concept of joy and other emotions. When my peers were asked to describe joy, I never came to comprehend the more tangible experiences they had. Once during show and tell, my classmate grasped this signed baseball he had probably begged his mother to let him show at school. He had been careful, showing the precious item to everyone and even took extra care not to brush his hands over the signature penned in permanent marker. We all hold such regard for the simplest of items because of the memories stored within.

After we all caught a glimpse of his prized baseball, the teacher asked my classmate to tell the story behind the ball. He spun his tale of being held in his father's arms just to have the small chance of catching that fateful throw. He even proudly showed off the dust the ball had from the baseball player's hand before he signed it. This was what joy looked like to my classmate: a dusty baseball with a name on it. Perhaps that is what I found so much difficulty in. I simply couldn't put value to the item the same way my classmate did. I allowed my mind to wander for the rest of show and tell, lost in my own compartmentalized and unimaginative world. Years later, I still lived in

the same monotone world. I still cannot describe joy the same way my peers can. Have I simply never experienced the same feeling?

Doubt parted like clouds in the sky one early spring day. I remember the way I lingered on the lesson my teacher had taught that day in Health class. We spoke of unhealthy boundaries and relationships. It sounded familiar. In my arms I carried a black leather-backed journal to show to my Health teacher. She was the one who suggested the idea, and by now everyone else in the class had left. My Health teacher sat at her desk. It was about time I at least tried to ask questions. How else would I ever understand those feelings about this one family member dotting every margin of the journal?

With my captivated audience, I opened my mouth and began to read: “I don’t know if this is truly that bad. Should I even write this at all? It’s not the first time I should have just stayed quiet...”

Every word I read aloud grew wobbly and uncertain. I told stories just like my classmate did for his signed ball all those years ago. The story featured jagged and unpracticed lines on a torn canvas. I told the story of uncertain words laced with venom dripping from the mouth of my family member. Each brushstroke was a reluctant weatherman forecasting their sorrows before being swept away by the tides of words left unsaid. I drowned in fearful frustration. What else is there to say? What else is there to explain? Without the joyful colors vibrantly spattered across the expanse of a story, the

story is simply dull and leaves no room for imagination. Without the rosy hues, I realized then and there that I really was who my family member made me feel I was: a spoiled, selfish, sensitive little child that never questioned the irregular control they stifled me with.

My lungs curled in on themselves, wrapping tighter and tighter to escape my heart that pounded in my chest. I didn't realize I had finished reading until the ringing in my ears gave way to the buzz of fluorescent lights above. I looked up from my journal. My health teacher was still sitting across from me, lost in thought. She stood up after a moment and walked around her desk to stand beside me. I was left alone to all my thoughts slithering up my spine.

Perhaps it isn't worth it. Perhaps I should have stayed quiet. If I spoke up like this again, how much trouble would I be in?

Am I truly what my family member says I am?—

The doubtful words stopped in their relentless flow. My teacher still stood beside me, assuring as she spoke.

“Can I hug you?”

There was safety in the way she spoke to me, reiterating that it was okay for me to speak my mind. With one small question, I broke apart just a little. This time, however, it



was for the better. With just a short hug, happy tears stung the corners of my eyes as they always have. It was a pain I didn't mind so much. A wordless affirmation like this made me feel as if things really would turn out alright, that I did deserve to be taken seriously.

I understand now that joy is rather subjective. For many, it could take the form of a physical object. After that day, I realized that I find joy in others and their experiences. Joy is both the silence between music notes and the buzzing electricity when a musician plays that first note. Joy is the place I find respite and a reason to keep seeking for that next spark. My joy is everything all at once.

# **A Celebration of Life**

**By Grace Weber**

I search through my closet for any sort of black dress. My ideal outfit as a 6th grader consists of oversized sweatshirts and colorful down-to-my-knee basketball shorts, so finding a dress is proving to be difficult, even more so when it's a specific color. My older sister, Abby, comes in already in a black outfit and goes to grab a pair of shoes from beside me. She sees me staring blankly at my assortment of clothes and smiles with a sad face.

“Let me help you pick one out, okay?” She asks and I nod. She steps in front of me and picks out a black dress covered with little white daisies. I put it on and she helps me zip it up. We both silently smile at each other for a minute, but the melancholy moment is interrupted by my mom yelling from the kitchen,

“Girls, hurry up! We can't be late today!” Abby and I hurry out of our room and into the car as we begin our drive. I doze off while the radio fills the silence in the car and begin to look through pictures on my phone, my favorite pastime. Memories flood my brain of eating pizza in my grandpa's care home while playing dominoes, getting the perfect christmas presents from him every year, going to the lake and my grandpa getting me orange juice just because I felt sick. The memory flood spills over as tears stream down my face. I look over to my younger brother, Max, and Abby in the seats next to me

and notice they're also looking into nothing, feeling nothing. My tears invisibly sink into the cloth so that I am the only one who can tell they are there. The nice thing about black dresses is you can't tell when they're wet.

The car ride is over much faster than I remember it being before. My grandpa wanted to have the funeral at his care home where he spent the last few years of his life. We park and get out of the car, heading up the flight of stairs we have all walked together many times. After my grandma had died, 5 years before, he moved out of his huge house that I spent all my holidays in as a child and into St. Mary's Care Home. We walk inside to the lobby where there are hundreds of people all there for the same thing: my grandpa. The two main things that my grandpa loved were people and talking. They go hand in hand, making him very popular. They all gathered here to mourn the end of his life. Countless people come up to my dad and give hugs and kisses mixed with tears. My mom stands by my dad's side, staying strong for him and us. My dad has always been the kind of guy that you don't see cry often. When he cries, it's almost more heartbreaking than the actual event. Not this time, but it still makes it twice as hard. There's so many faces passing by with, "I'm so sorry" and "How are you doing?" from people who I'm supposed to know, but I don't.

I see a small group of six people rush towards me, one ahead of the rest who pulls me in for a hug. Madelyn, my best friend for as long as I can remember, hugs my waist tight and the noises and voices that had been crowding my head all go silent. The room

blurs behind us and the tears well up again. After not nearly enough time, we separate and I step back, wiping my tears away. I exchange hugs with the rest of her family and then say that I have to use the bathroom. I walk to the bathroom in a rush, embarrassed of crying and ashamed to show how much this is affecting me. I have to show everyone that I'm okay. The unspoken-but-everyone-knows rule in middle school is that if you cry, you're weak. I try to get a hold of myself as I sit in the pale yellow stall and look at the chipping paint. My vision blurs even more from my uncontrollable sobs. A few minutes pass and I decide it's time to get up and go back out into the crowd so nobody worries where I am. As I'm staring at my reflection in the mirror, washing my hands as I tell myself to not cry, the door opens and Madelyn's mom walks in. She sees me and there is nothing I can do to hide my emotions. She walks over to me and hugs me tightly. Pulling her face away to talk but still holding me close she says, "I know this is hard for you. It's okay to be sad. We all love you through everything, Grace. Okay?" I am at a loss for words. How was she able to see straight through me? I nod appreciatively, feeling a weight lift off my shoulders. She kisses my cheek and steps past me into the stall. I take a second to myself, then I walk out of the bathroom and everything seems different. Instead of focusing on who can see me crying, I notice the people crying without fear. I don't see darkness, but I see hope. I look over and see my family and friends, some who didn't even know my grandpa but came to support us. I smile as I'm walking over to the group and realize that this is what life is about. Without sadness, there would never be pure joy.

I never understood why people called funerals “celebration of life” until this moment. I think back to Winnie the Pooh’s famous quote, “How lucky am I to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard,” and feel warmth spread inside me. The tears roll down my face for what feels like the millionth time today, but this time I don’t hide it. Madelyn walks back over to me, putting an arm around my back and says, “You okay?”

I pause for a moment and think of my answer, “No... but I will be.”

She smiles and walks over to her mom. At the same time, I see my dad crying openly with no shame as his friends tell a story about my grandpa. He starts laughing and smiling ear to ear, and says,

“I remember that, he always loved making us laugh!” I walk over to him and grab his hand. He looks down at me and squeezes my hand, I squeeze his back. We walk into the funeral together, each with tears in our eyes and smiles on our faces for everyone to see.