

THE ART OF SELF-COMPASSION



HOW TO OFFER YOURSELF GENTLE ACCEPTANCE  
AND RECLAIM YOUR WORTH

JOY PROUTY

FOREWORD BY K.J. RAMSEY

“*The Art of Self-Compassion* is a tender and powerful guide that exposes shame as an impostor language. Through the surprisingly powerful practice of self-portraiture, Joy Prouty offers us an alternative dialect that feels like freedom and sounds like home. This book is a necessary companion for anyone ready to rewrite their inner narrative with compassion at its core.”

**EMILY P. FREEMAN**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *How to Walk into a Room*

“Joy Prouty knows the secret we’re afraid to admit: We’re all starving for permission to love ourselves exactly as we are—wonderfully flawed and achingly human. Offering the revolutionary idea that there’s no way to get this wrong, she transforms the simple act of self-portraiture into a portal for healing the harsh voices in our heads. If you’ve ever worried your hand would be slapped for reaching for beauty and joy, let this be your invitation to reach anyway.”

**MARY VAN GEFFEN**, author of *Parenting a Spicy One: A Compassionate Guide for Raising a Deep-Feeling and Wonderfully Strong-Willed Kid*

“Joy Prouty’s *The Art of Self-Compassion* is a soul-forming, luminous guide to healing the parts of ourselves we’ve long abandoned or feared. Through raw honesty, poetic insight, and humorous humility, Joy invites us to reclaim our stories, integrate our pain, and discover the quiet, revolutionary power of being gentle with ourselves.”

**SCOTT ERICKSON**, author of *Honest Advent* and *Say Yes*

“Joy Prouty’s piercing yet gentle insight into how we can observe our human experience through a camera lens is a needed antidote in a world of AI-generated images and regurgitated clichés. By reinterpreting the power of photography as a window to our souls rather than a mirror for our egos, Joy releases

us to unlearn our negativity bias and be moved by the beauty of our own lives. It's a pleasure to enter Joy's world, where her honest, natural poetry and moving images release us from the prison of self-criticism and open us to awe."

**JULIE BOGART**, author of *Raising Critical Thinkers*  
and founder of Brave Writer

"Amid a reality that often feels fragmented and surreal, we long for solace in what is real. In *The Art of Self-Compassion*, Joy Prouty is at her poetic, tender, visionary best, calling us to beauty and reminding us we're worthy. This book is a balm of sacred wholeness when we need it most."

**SHANNAN MARTIN**, author of *Start with Hello*  
and *The Ministry of Ordinary Places*

"Good photographers teach us to see the mystical in our world. Exceptional photographers teach us to see the mystical in ourselves. Through the pages of this book, Joy Prouty steps out from behind the camera to empower each of us with the gift of seeing—anytime, anywhere. The world will be a little softer because of it."

**SHANNON K. EVANS**, author of *The Mystics Would Like a Word* and *Rewilding Motherhood*

"*The Art of Self-Compassion* is a burning bush—tender, luminous, and fiercely true. With courage and grace, Joy Prouty invites us to see what we thought we could not: the beauty in our own becoming. These pages are not just about photography; they are an invitation to be undone by love and remade by grace."

**TARA M. OWENS**, CSD, CSDS, spiritual director, founder of Anam Cara Ministries, and author of *Embracing the Body: Finding God in Our Flesh and Bone*

# THE ART OF SELF-COMPASSION

## Books by Joy Prouty

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*Practicing Presence*

*The Art of Self-Compassion*

# THE ART OF SELF- COMPASSION

HOW TO OFFER YOURSELF GENTLE ACCEPTANCE  
AND RECLAIM YOUR WORTH

JOY PROUTY



**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Grand Rapids, Michigan  
BakerBooks.com

Printed in China

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Control Number: 2025002676  
ISBN 9781540904225 (cloth)  
ISBN 9781493450374 (ebook)

Cover and interior photos by Joy Prouty  
Endsheets and page 171 photos by Cere Demuth  
Cover design by Chris Kuhatschek  
Interior design by William Overbeeke

The author is represented by the literary agency of Punchline Agency, LLC, [www.punchlineagency.com](http://www.punchlineagency.com).

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

26 27 28 29 30 31 32      7 6 5 4 3 2 1



*For those who chase the light*

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The truth is always an abyss. One must—as in a swimming pool—dare to dive from the quivering springboard of trivial everyday experience and sink into the depths, in order to later rise again—laughing and fighting for breath—to the now doubly illuminated surface of things.

Franz Kafka

# FOREWORD

**T**he most beautiful people I have ever met are not the ones whose faces are perfectly symmetrical or free from wrinkles or acne or scars. The most beautiful people I have ever met are the ones who—just by being present—reveal the beauty you hadn't yet been able to see.

My friend Joy Prouty came to stay at my house for a few days last May, just as I was beginning to reemerge from a long and brutal season of life-threatening illness. The day Joy arrived, we sat for hours on my back deck in the bright Colorado sun, sipping sparkling waters and trading stories of what we each had survived in the previous year. To even be well enough to sit on my back deck for hours with a friend felt miraculous. But it also felt vulnerable to let a long-distance friend see how much my body had changed.

I was around fifty pounds heavier than the person Joy had previously known. High-dose steroids had kept me alive in the hospital and beyond, but they also rapidly heaped weight on my already curvy frame. At one point my face had swollen so much that my iPhone no longer recognized it as mine. By the time Joy visited, I was just starting to see my face as mine again. Sometimes I would see my reflection and the new jagged scars on my chest would still startle me.

As we caught up, Joy noticed the large shrub behind me in the corner of our yard, bursting with round white flowers. I told Joy that the viburnum had been in our yard before we moved there. Its name comes from the Latin for “wayfaring tree” because the plant spreads so easily through the birds who eat its fruit, carrying the seeds of its beauty from place to place. I had been watching its slow progression for months—from barren to budding, to small orbs of lime green, finally to that week’s blizzard of snowballed blooms.

When Joy asked if she could photograph me with the viburnum, I said yes. I stood amid the blooms, letting the sun’s golden light bathe my bare, scarred chest, letting my friend give me the chance to see myself in that moment as beautiful. Not the self I used to be nor the self I wished I could be again, but the self who was slowly recovering.

I later learned that viburnum not only symbolize new life and resilience but are seen as guardians against negativity. The images Joy and I made together that day have served as guardians of grace for me, reminding me to always look for the beauty in my own becoming.

Joy gave me the gift of seeing the sacred in what *is*.

The book you are about to read is a powerful invitation. Just as Joy invited me to stand in the light of the sun, she invites you to see the beauty of who you are and who you will become.

May the grace you encounter in this book give you courage to see your life as sacred, and may that sight become like seeds, spreading beauty everywhere you go.

**K.J. Ramsey**, licensed therapist and author  
of *The Book of Common Courage*

March 29, 2025



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# A LETTER TO THE READER

**T**his is a book about learning to love yourself using photography as a modality of healing.

Within these pages are stories gleaned from my years of work as a portrait artist documenting the whole spectrum of living for my clients—birth, death, and all the layers of transformation in between. It has been fascinating learning about human nature and the fears most of us carry when it comes to being seen; the camera can bring up a lot of tender, unexpected inner wounds.

Photographs are mirrors reflecting back to us everything we seek to hide, hope to embody, and pray we never forget.

My clients have been wise guides in my creative and spiritual expansion, and in observing them being brave, I felt courageous enough to begin using the camera as a therapeutic tool for preserving proof of my own healing journey. I photographed myself as I worked through facing my childhood trauma, as I deconstructed and reconstructed my faith, and as I reclaimed my original creative voice as inherently worthy and beloved.

Becoming a compassionately curious witness of my own life for the purpose of making art helped me to shift from a perspective of criticism and scarcity to one of acceptance and expanse.

The photographs I hope you create are not to be analyzed, obsessed over, or perfected to fit into any sort of category of “rightness,” and they are not for putting on a Christmas card as a shiny projection that you’ve got it all together. They are for becoming present to your own power and for bearing empathetic witness to your multilayered experience of feeling and healing.

At the end of each chapter in part 2, you will find contemplative questions as well as self-portrait prompts. If you have a phone with a camera, I imagine you are already documenting your life in pictures. The goal now is to bring more intention and self-reflection into the photos you are already taking.

The following is a framework I have most recently used for bringing more intention into the portrait experience. I encourage you to use it as a guide for crafting a presence practice that feels authentic, nourishing, and practical for you in your own life.

## CREATING IMAGES OF SELF-COMPASSION

1. **Embodiment.** Slow down, breathe, and turn toward yourself with gentleness. Instead of trying to make sense of things in your head, get into your actual senses.
2. **Validation.** Notice which emotions you feel. Name, validate, and embrace them without needing to understand or make sense of them. Let them be present and flow through you without judgment.

3. **Preservation.** Preserve proof of your choice to be present and connected. You showed up for yourself with intention rather than numbing or distracting—yes!
4. **Self-Reflection.** If you created a digital image, take a minute to breathe, and then observe it. Please don't believe any of the thoughts that may begin to flood your mind if they are negative—let them pass like clouds. Let this be an opportunity for tender curiosity. What offering of compassion can you give yourself in the moment?

Holding the tension of all our roles in life can feel at times like tightrope walking. When we don't have a point of focus, we can fall to the depths, taking everyone we love down with us.

By setting our focus on self-compassion and directing our attention toward all the love accessible from deep within ourselves—rather than seeking external validation from others—the portal to seeing life ripe with opportunities for art-making is revealed.

I hope this book becomes a companion. Know that I am right alongside you with my camera slung over my shoulder, good snacks in my backpack, and a little bit of wisdom in my pocket for us as we find our way through the valleys.

PART ONE

HOW  
SELF-PORTRAITS  
HELP US LEARN  
TO SEE



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## CHAPTER 1

# DISCOVERING A PERSPECTIVE OF EMPATHY

Compassion is not a virtue—it is a commitment. It’s not something we have or don’t have—it’s something we choose to practice.

Brené Brown

**T**he image regarded as the most influential photograph in history was captured by astronaut William Anders in 1968 during the Apollo 8 mission. It was the first color photograph of Earth captured from space that humanity had ever seen.

In a televised interview that took place after the mission’s return, Anders was asked how it felt to have captured the widely resonating image titled *Earthrise*. He pondered thoughtfully before sharing how his first instinct was that the space program really should have *sent a poet*.<sup>1</sup>

He was aware that no picture could possibly encompass how it felt to witness that moment in real time, yet he still scrambled to switch out his black-and-white film for a roll of color and at least attempt to preserve proof of his experience. I find it so fascinating that the intention of taking the camera on the Apollo 8 mission was to document a distant and unexplored foreign landscape, but it turned out the greatest impact was not in discovering something new but in gaining a fresh perspective on home.

The mind-blowing and compassion-inducing photograph has been credited with initiating the global environmental movement because it communicated without words how vulnerable and isolated Earth is—a beautiful blue marble floating in a dark abyss of ever-expanding unknowns. An article in *The New York Times* spoke about the impact of the image on our culture at the time, declaring that the “mission was viewed as briefly reviving the spirits of an America stunned by rising casualties in the Vietnam War, the assassinations of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, and tumultuous antiwar protests and racial disturbances.”<sup>2</sup>

It was a *photograph* that ushered in a unified and empathetic perspective during a time of great hopelessness and sorrow.

This humbling and artistic view of our collective landscape made humanity undeniably aware of our fragility as individuals but also our strength as an interconnected whole. NASA administrator and former senator Bill Nelson said this about Anders: “He traveled to the threshold of the Moon and helped all of us see something else: ourselves.”<sup>3</sup>

The journey of life does work this way, it seems—we think we are on one path and then, in an unexpected moment of clarity and presence, we realize our purpose is much greater and also simpler than we once perceived. Those moments of presence that we preserve in photographs are crucial; they serve as doors back into remembering our embodied awe.

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Those moments of presence that we preserve in photographs are crucial; they serve as doors back into remembering our embodied awe.

In an interview for *Forbes* in 2015, William Anders explained that he wasn't even supposed to have taken that photo—he was supposed to be saving the film to document specific moon craters only, as the number of rolls they could take into space was limited. He even shared about feeling guilty after photographing Earth because it wasn't part of their mission directive.<sup>4</sup>

I was surprised he mentioned feeling guilt, maybe because that is such a human response. I wasn't thinking about how this astronaut was just a person too, with all kinds of vulnerabilities. He had been up there to do a job and wondered if what he had spent the film on was, in fact, worthy of the cost.

I have often experienced that tender and exposed feeling of guilt after taking pictures of myself in moments of happiness. It is empowering in the moment to feel that level of awe, but then as time passes, negative self-talk can find its way in. There have been many times I've had to talk myself out of going back and deleting pictures after my anxiety has convinced me that taking photos of myself is embarrassing, just a self-absorbed waste of energy and camera roll storage space.

I learned about the *Earthrise* photograph on June 7, 2024, the day that astronaut William Anders died at the age of ninety. The iconic image he had taken was plastered across news outlets everywhere as

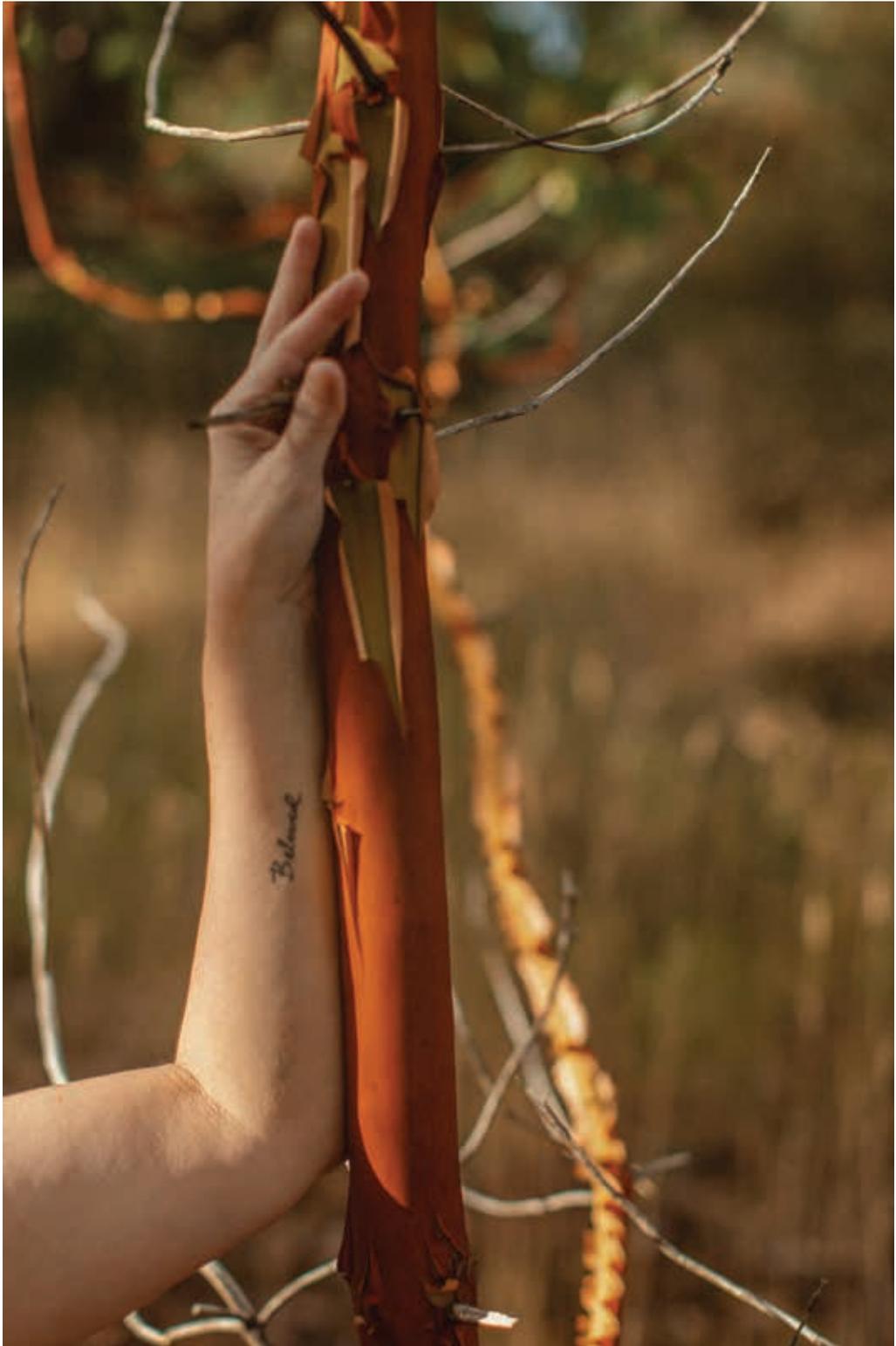
they reported that the vintage T-34 plane Anders had been solo piloting accidentally crashed into the Salish Sea.

Coincidentally, an island in the Salish Sea is where I live, alongside my husband and our seven children. Since that tragic accident, I've learned from the locals that "Bill" was passionate and curious about exploration until his very last moment, and that he would regularly fly loops over the islands. I think, just maybe, the magic that called Bill Anders to join the space program and ultimately took him to the moon was the same magic that called him to the Salish Sea.

I have barely scratched the surface in knowing the history of this area, but what I have observed from my limited perspective is that no one comes to live on an island by accident. People come seeking safety, healing, and to reignite the elusive childlike spirit of wonder.

There is a rhythm of slowness and intentionality that touches every aspect of life on the island. It is only accessible by ferryboat or small chartered plane. Once on the island, there is not a single traffic light—only stop signs, a few roundabouts, and an abundance of unhurried people biking, walking, and admiring the natural beauty. Resident orca pods swim close to shore, as well as sea lions and the occasional breaching humpback whale. The island is widely covered in forest with a soft, vibrant, mossy green floor. Lush ferns create labyrinths beneath the massive, red-barked madrona trees, their trunks curving and dancing, reaching upward to the light. The island offers an immersion into and a relationship with the original essence of our planet.

This area mesmerizes me because I encountered very little time in the wild of nature while growing up. In fact, I spent very little time inhabiting my body; as much as possible, I lived life inside of my head. Growing up within the confines of a strict conservative church, I had absorbed the belief that my personal strength of will was to be subdued, and that my



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thoughts, feelings, and curiosities about my body were sinful and wrong.

I spent most of my childhood and teen years trying to make myself small and compliant in order to make sure that I would not lose the safety of social belonging. Perhaps that is why no matter how many years of talk therapy I did, I could never embody the emotional healing I was seeking until I immersed myself into nature as a *lifestyle*. It was then I realized: I am no different from this landscape. I am not superior to it, but I am one with it—ever-changing like the trees, the flowers, and the ocean tides. By seeing myself as one with nature, I found acceptance for myself in places I had previously held shame.

Maybe after deconstructing all our untrue beliefs, the way we reconstruct hope is to become explorers within the abyss of our own darkness, like astronauts curiously marveling at outer space.

What might happen if we could view the stories that we've been telling ourselves, the pain that we've been experiencing, and our resentment, anger, and sadness with compassionate curiosity instead of with criticism? Seeking not to judge and condemn but to witness with devotional honor. What if we invested our time and energy not in trying to numb our complexities but in discovering more creative ways of viewing ourselves through a lens of wonder and awe?

Scientific research has proven that our bodies are made up of the very same elements as the galaxies, so who might we become if we artistically celebrated the expanse of our vibrant uniqueness rather than hiding beneath a facade of sameness?

Photography has shifted since humanity first experienced *Earthrise* in 1968. I wish I could say that a new, mind-bending photograph of the heavens would have the same impact on our planet today, but advances in technology have changed our capacity for amazement. Very few of us still use analog film. Now we all carry digital cameras in our pockets to record

memories. And with the rise of AI, there's the whole question of whether a photograph is even genuine, and we wonder how deeply the absence of authentic images will impact us.

We are caught in the dissonance between what is fake and what is real, not only in our photographs but also within our interior landscapes of identity.

As a professional photographer for over two decades, I have observed how the judgments we place upon our images in photographs closely reveal the deeper level of judgments we have for our true selves. The problem with this on a larger scale is that the unrealistic standards we attempt to hold ourselves to are the exact same unfair expectations we subconsciously place upon others.

The more focused we are on being perceived as flawless, the less capacity we have for empathy. By living unauthentically, we not only deprive ourselves of freedom but limit the freedom of true expression from those whose lives we touch.

I have used the practice of photographing myself to accompany my own emotional healing journey, and I have photographed others as a means of preserving proof of their identity expansion and spiritual growth. I believe that intentional art can be a portal to the image of God in us. We only must be willing to soften the harsh views we have of ourselves and open to receiving the loving awareness that we are each as baffling in beauty as the earth viewed from space.

Here's the thing . . . the world had seen the earth from space prior to the *Earthrise* image, but it had only been in black and white. It was the *color* of the image that brought expansive hope to humanity. The diverse and vibrant hues against the void of darkness was soul-shocking. So, on a personal level, what would it look like for us to zoom way out in our perception of self by releasing criticism, practicing healthy curiosity, and admiring the full spectrum of our colorful expanse with a posture of holy compassion?

The iconic photograph that Bill Anders captured while orbiting the moon changed the world because it forced people to confront the reality that none of us have, or ever will have, all the answers. Life is a mystery, and from a pulled-back perspective, all structures of religion fail to encompass the radiant magnitude of God. It is simply our inability to see *ourselves* as luminous that keeps us from attuning to the frequency of love.

*Earthrise* startled a sorrowful and disillusioned world into a posture of unexpected empathy—and that is exactly the kind of photographs I hope this book inspires you to create for the rarely seen and perhaps misunderstood parts deep inside of you.

Imagine me standing before you, swapping out your monochrome film for a fresh roll of color. What depths and details might be discovered through a more expansive and compassionate perspective? 🌸



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