

Deborah J. Cohan Ph.D.
Social Lights

CAREGIVING

Illuminating the Complexities of Caregiving

Lighting the way to healing and hope for caregivers.

Posted March 19, 2026 | Reviewed by Jessica Schrader



THE BASICS

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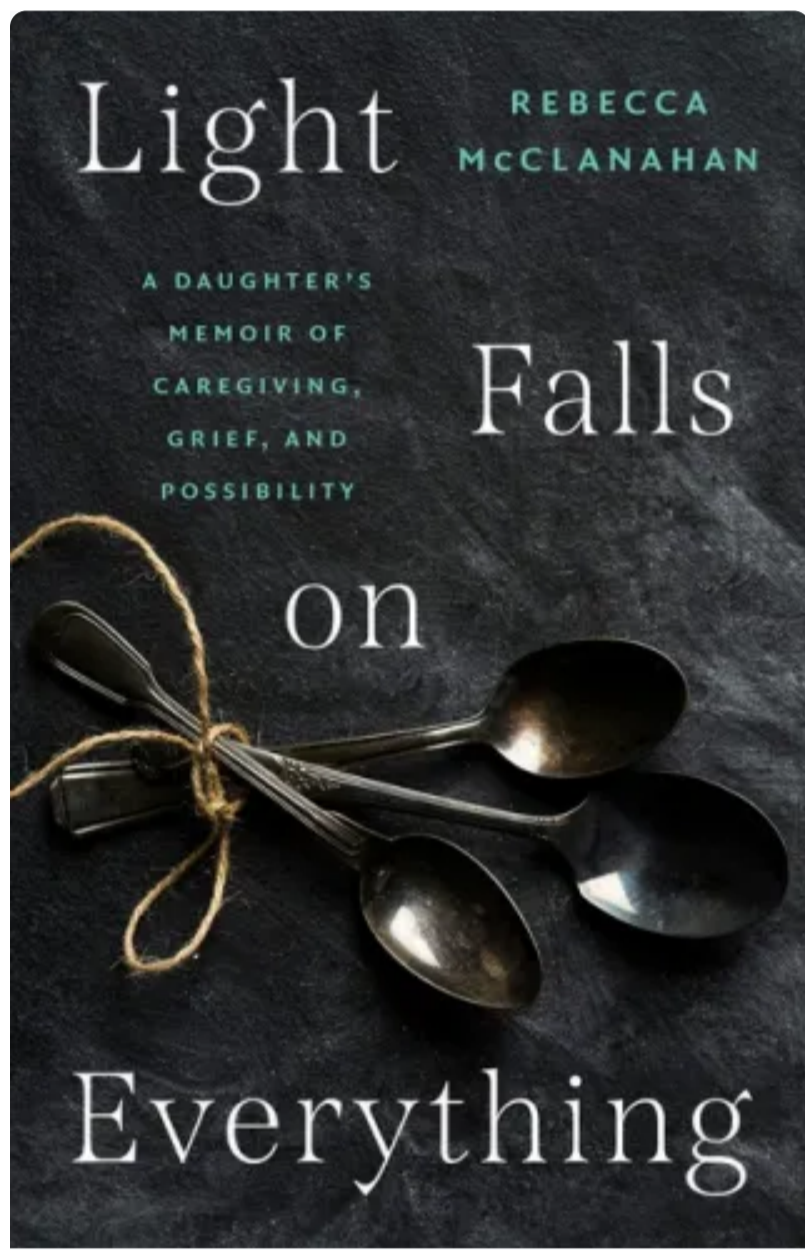
KEY POINTS

- **Rebecca McClanahan's book offers a refreshing perspective on caregiving's complexities.**
- **Her caregiving story examines unique family dynamics with depth and empathy.**
- **Integrating literature, McClanahan helps readers navigate grief and meaning.**

As someone who has published and taught about caregiving and its abundant accompanying challenges for adult children, I'm often asked how I managed to do it, how I came to think about family as a result of it, and how I balanced the whole of my life alongside it. I find myself drawn to others' stories of caregiving especially when, like in a Venn diagram, there are dimensions that intersect and those that radically diverge, pushing me to think in new ways about age-old questions and dilemmas.

At a time when bookshelves are packed with books about families, relationships, dementia, and grief, you might think, who needs yet one more book about all of this depressing stuff? But here's the thing: we can always benefit from a new take on a common issue. That's why some of the most powerful and compelling works of literature, film, poetry, music, and art offer us a fresh riff on that which seems familiar, whether it's love, marriage, sexuality, divorce, birth, illness, or death. It's in the new ways of telling that we acquire new ways of knowing, new ways of being and moving about in the world.

We all have a lot to gain when the best writers of our time generously share the particular truths of their innermost lives, all the while highlighting how their personal pain is linked to larger social patterns. This is where the treasured writer, Rebecca McClanahan, comes in. In her new book, *Light Falls on Everything: A Daughter's Memoir of Caregiving, Grief, and Possibility* (University of North Carolina Press, 2026), McClanahan weaves a story about caregiving for her parents that truly stands out, not just for its hauntingly beautiful writing, but for how it addresses caregiving issues from unique vantage points.



Source: Rebecca McClanahan, used with permission

Things that differentiate this book include the fact that McClanahan writes about taking care of both her parents at once; her story is one that is expanded to a larger marital story of her parents but also her husband, Donald, and his intimate and thoroughly indispensable role in both caring for her parents and encouraging her to care for herself. McClanahan is further buoyed by siblings and their partners, something entirely unfamiliar to me as an only child involved in caregiving. But readers like me are reminded that both scenarios come with its advantages and disadvantages, as the presence of more people doesn't automatically ensure ease; family dynamics are challenging regardless.

We come to understand the author was relied upon more not just because of the geographical proximity to her parents but also because

of the fact that she and Donald never had children of their own. As a woman who chose to not have children, I can relate to this, as people regard our time as more elastic and expansive regardless of how many other responsibilities and commitments we may have. McClanahan does well in calling this out and encouraging readers to rethink their own assumptions and expectations of what caregiving means writ large.

Life is a journey to re-parent ourselves, and McClanahan shows us up close how she was both mothering her own mother and re-mothering herself into a new future. There are moments when I can imagine the mother of a very ill or dying child slipping into the child's bed, holding vigil, and saying things akin to what McClanahan shares here, for example: "I place my hands against the side of the bed and lift myself onto it, feeling the mattress give beneath me. I turn onto my side and edge toward her, fitting my head into the space above her bony shoulder. There, that's better. One of my hands is grasping the edge of the bed for support, the other hand now resting atop hers. She does not stir. Her mouth remains open, her exhalations warm against my neck. I want to stay here forever. Once I move, the world will shift and nothing will ever be the same..."

A very relatable aspect of the book is the fact that we're able to get inside McClanahan's worried mind and heart to understand the hypervigilance that's a centerpiece of what it means to be a "first responder," as McClanahan refers to Donald and herself, constantly being on call to spring into action for her parents' next crisis. "She's watched me, many times, take the car key and fob out of the top drawer, and lately I've worried the possibilities. Donald says that my fears are exaggerated. He's probably right. I mean, what are the odds that Mother could remember where the key is, maneuver her walker outside to the parking space, click the correct button on the fob to unlock the trunk, lift the walker into the trunk, slam the heavy lid, click the button that opens the driver's door, slide the front seat forward, put the key into the ignition, back out of the narrow space, and screech out into the street, heading for Indiana."

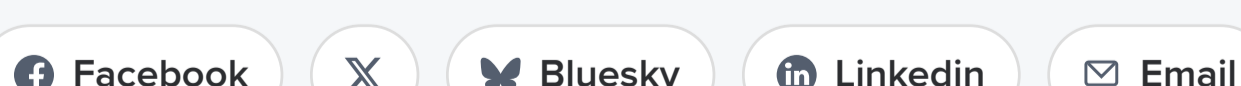
While McClanahan leads us through this mental labyrinth of habitual movement and relentless worry, she artfully widens the camera lens and invites readers to consider the even larger constellation of what life is all about in the midst of caregiving. As caregivers, our lives are suspended in some ways, and it's like we're holding our breath, waiting to exhale. With that can come exhaustion but also a real sense of urgency in terms of how we're living out our own days. McClanahan told me: "...in their best moments, the loved ones entrusted to our care have much to teach us about our own futures as recipients of care: how to set aside pride and stubbornness in order to accept help; how to move forward into a fragile, uncertain future; how to slow down and dwell within the silence; how to find courage in the midst of despair; and, finally, how to approach death with, if not acceptance, at least with a measure of grace."

Dutiful and devoted, McClanahan shows us the ways that she restores dignity and meaning for and with her parents at the end of their lives. One primary way she succeeds in doing this is by highlighting how she helped them and herself find joy in the mundane, such as Saturday date nights at her house for dinner.

McClanahan earns the trust of readers when she reveals two things that showcase her honest encounter with anticipatory grief. In struggling to deal with both her parents' cognitive decline, she acknowledges how, at first, she did things to reassert reality, until her husband gently nudged her to "just go with it," which wound up being a stance of greater compassion for them and herself. McClanahan also acknowledges the gut-wrenching feeling that's all too familiar to adult children on the precipice of losing a parent: "There is still so much I need to learn from her, so many chances I missed along the way."

The gift of this book is that McClanahan herself doesn't miss a chance to help readers learn along the way. Full of references to poetry and literature, McClanahan looks to these as lighthouses that help show her a way forward both in terms of navigating the dark sea of grief and making meaning of her experiences.

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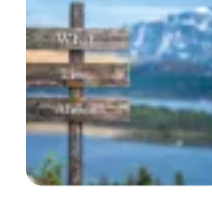
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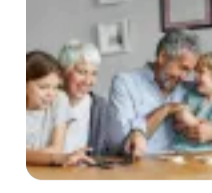
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About the Author

Deborah J. Cohan, Ph.D., is a professor of sociology at the University of South Carolina-Beaufort where she teaches and writes about the intersections of the self and society.

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