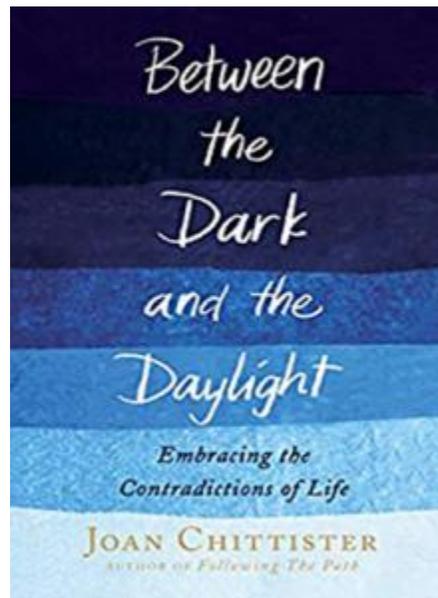


Discussion Questions

Between the Dark and the Daylight: The Contradictions of Life



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Introduction

QUESTIONS:

1. Look up one or more definitions of the word “paradox.” What are some synonyms for paradox? Share one instance where life taught you something about the meaning of paradox.
2. “There is a point in life when its paradoxes must be not only considered but laid to rest”(12). What does this sentence mean to you? Explain.
3. What specific sentence in the Introduction stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 1: The Light Found in the Darkness

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever found light in the darkness? Please share one example from your life. What did such “finding” teach you?
2. Sister Joan writes, “Only the experience of our own darkness gives us the light we need to be of help to others whose journey into the dark spots of life is only just beginning” (19). Write a brief story revealing how your own experience of darkness enabled you to help another.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 2: The Delusion of Frustration

QUESTIONS:

1. Name three to five things that regularly frustrate you. After prayerful reflection, try to identify why. Are each, as Sister Joan thinks, “. . . a cover-up for something [you] have yet to face in [yourself]”? (24).

2. Re-read the exchange between Macarius and Abba Zacharias on p.23. Then answer this question: Do you think you are a monk? Discuss why or why not?
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 3: The Place of Tsunamis in the Ocean of Life

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes on p. 30: “Our sands are shifting now and no amount of willing it were otherwise can possibly stop the process.” Where do you see “sands shifting” in the US and/or world today. Discuss your perspective.
2. Sister Joan quotes the historian Arnold Toynbee on p. 21. Do you agree or disagree with him? Share why.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 4: The Mirage of Security

QUESTIONS:

1. In the very first paragraph Sister Joan poses this question: “How is it possible to tell what is really security from insecurity?” How would you answer her question?
2. “Risk stretches us to discover the rest of ourselves—our creativity, our self-sufficiency, our courage,” maintains Sister Joan. Share a life experience that would prove this true for you. What is the single, most important awareness it gave you about yourself?

3. What specific sentence in this chapter stood out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 5: The Insecurity of Certainty

QUESTIONS:

1. Of what do you need to be certain at this point in your life? Explain why.
2. Where in your life can you or do you accept uncertainty? Discuss.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 6: The Fragility of Achievement

QUESTIONS:

1. “Power and status are movable feasts. Nobody holds either of them forever or for sure,” states Sister Joan. Has this been true in your life? If yes, share the circumstances.
2. According to Sister Joan, “. . . preparation for a change of status, any status, must begin even before the change occurs.” Discuss how you have navigated this at least one time in your life. What was most rewarding about the preparation? What was most stressful?
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stood out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 7: The Emptiness of Accumulation

QUESTIONS:

1. On page 49 Sister Joan lists six qualities of soul. Choose the two or three that have most contributed to your own “soulfull-ness,” and then

share how.

2. “It is only righteousness and character that bring a person lasting honor,” insists Sister Joan. Google three different meanings of “righteousness” and three of “character.” Choose the one meaning you think best describes each. Explain why and then write a brief note to a person you think is both righteous and has character. Thank them for inspiring you to become the same.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 8: The Power of Plenty

QUESTIONS:

1. “Very economically average people who allow things to define them can be just as drugged by the desire to possess, rather than driven by the need to become even more of a human being than they already are,” claims Sister Joan. Do you agree or disagree with her? Discuss why.
2. On page 52 find this quotation, “. . . the poverty of plenty . . . deprives us of the intoxication of small joys.” List ten “small joys” that regularly “intoxicate” you.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 9: The Role of Failure in Success

QUESTIONS:

1. “One thing for sure: No one escapes failure” (52). Share one minor failure in your life and one that, for you, was major. What did each teach you?

2. Sister Joan asserts that “It’s not easy to establish priorities in life.” Share the top five priorities in your life right now and something about each that reveals why.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 10: The Success of Success

QUESTIONS:

1. According to Sister Joan, “Life is about participating in the fine art of finding ourselves—our talents, our confidence, our sense of self, our purpose in life” (64). Why do you think she call this a “fine art”?
2. “Failure is a teacher” (62). What has failure taught you?
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 11: The Energy that Comes from Exhaustion

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan states, “Me, I choose exhaustion. I’m with the better-to-burn-out-than-to-rust-out crowd.” What crowd do you belong to? Elaborate.
2. “The most important choice in life, then, is to choose our stress carefully,” suggests Sister Joan. Do you think the majority of people have such a choice? Discuss why or why not. When have you made this choice?
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 12: The Productivity of Rest and Recreation

QUESTIONS:

1. “Good leadership does not ask more of the worker than the worker is capable of doing” (31). Has this been your experience, either as a leader and/or a worker? Explain.
2. On page 74 Sister Joan offers eight suggestions that could positively affect your life and your relationships. Choose two that you can implement in your life right now. Are there any other options you would add to this list?
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 13: The Temptation of Sinlessness

QUESTIONS:

1. “Anger and self-righteousness are the tools of the trade . . . And we turn God into a tyrant rather than a lover” (72). Can you give two or three examples of where you have witnessed this in yourself? In a church? In society?
2. What new insights or awarenesses have you gleaned from Sister Joan’s description of conscience at the top of page 78?
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence??

Chapter 14: The Struggle Between Guilt and Growth

QUESTIONS:

1. What “happy fault” can you recall, as does Sister Joan in this chapter, that helped you turn your life around? Write about it in prose or compose or share a poem, a song, that best expresses the wisdom it bequeathed to you.
2. What are one or two delusions you have had about yourself that, when faced, led you to deeper moral maturity?
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 15: The Creativity of Confusion

QUESTIONS:

1. Review the fourth paragraph on page 85 which begins, “When the structures of the past” Name two or three structures of the past, personal or otherwise, which freed you to begin to ask new questions and develop new answers to the old questions you may have had.
2. Daisaku Ikeda wrote, “You must not for one instant give up the effort to build new lives for yourselves.” Share one context in your life where you have honored this.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 16: The Sanity of Irrationality

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan quotes Anatole France on page 90. He said, “Until one has loved an animal a part of one’s soul remains unawakened.” Share a brief story about an animal you have loved and how loving this animal “awakened” you.
2. Choose two species of animals that you have been attracted to and/or had a relationship with. Then find out, using the Internet if helpful, what each represents symbolically. What does this tell you about yourself and about the role each animal plays/has played in your life?
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence??

Chapter 17: The Loss of the Masculine Emasculates the Feminine

QUESTIONS:

1. “In every generation women, unlike the temple, have emerged full of life and zest about it, bright and visionary, clear and confident. These women, churchmen, statesmen and insecure men declared, were to be put in their place, Sister Joan proclaims. If you have had this experience as a woman, share the circumstances. How did you respond? What did it change in you?
2. Sister Joan discusses a list of the “Ten Most Important Women in History.” Name the ten you would include on your list up to and through the current century.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 18: The Need for the Feminine in Masculinity

QUESTIONS:

1. On page 97, Sister Joan writes, “What we have been taught as essentially male and female behaviors are learned behaviors not innate characteristics.” Feminist theologian Sister Elizabeth Johnson would agree with Sister Joan. Johnson has proposed to this end, a multi-polar model of anthropology/being human which applies to every human person. She suggests that each of us is composed of very basic elements or “anthropological constants” that mutually influence one another. For example, bodiliness, personal and social relationships, one’s relationship to the earth, one’s economic, political and social location, etc.. Change any one of these and the person would be different. Hence, biology/gender is not preeminent but rather one among many “constants” that constitute what it means to be a human being. Therefore, the over emphasis on certain “assigned” male/female behaviors championed by Catholic doctrine and most Evangelical teaching as innate are simplistic. Biology is NOT destiny! Prayerfully reflect on Johnson’s position. Then state whether you agree or disagree with her and Sister Joan. Explain why.
2. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 19: The Liberation of Loss

QUESTIONS:

1. “However foolish it may be to leave it with nothing to go to, it was even more foolish for people to stay where they knew they did not belong” (102). Have you ever stayed where you knew you did not belong? For example, in a job, in a relationship, in a religion, in a

geographical or political location, etc..? Why did you stay? Or, why did you eventually move on? Share your story.

2. Sister Joan maintains, “And yet, there is a resurrection that comes with loss.” Has this ever been your experience? Please share.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 20: Loneliness: An Invitation to Discover New Resources

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan suggests that loneliness is an invitation to discover new resources. What are two or three “new resources” you discovered when dealing with loneliness?
2. “We are meant to have inner lives that are themselves rich and satisfying. It is a matter of learning how to become good company for ourselves . . . we are meant to be our own best friends,” writes Sister Joan. Are you “good company” for yourself? Have you become your own best friend? Give several examples that illustrate this.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 21: The Seeds of Love in Friendlessness

QUESTIONS:

1. Choose a poem, song or quotation about friendship. Write it down in an email, card, or text. Then send it to someone whose friendship you cherish.
2. Sister Joan suggests that, “we gain the insight to see ourselves through the friendships we make. They mirror us to ourselves.” Reflect on how a close friend has helped you to grow in self-

knowledge. Cite two strengths and two limitations that friend has helped you discover. What difference has this made in your life?

3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 22: The Loneliness of Love

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you agree or disagree with Sister Joan that the gifts genuine love alone can give are “. . . independence, confidence and the courage to be ourselves” ? Explain why or why not. Would you add any other such gifts to these three? Name them and tell why.
2. Based on your own life experience, what are the three most valuable lessons you have learned about authentic love?
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 23: The Fullness of Separateness

QUESTIONS:

1. “And without the experience of our own emptiness, we do not even know that we have allowed ourselves to become a nonperson” (124). Describe your experience of emptiness. What did it feel like? What circumstances occasioned it? Did you befriend this emptiness? Explain.
2. Sister Joan suggests at the bottom of p. 124 that at least once daily we should separate ourselves, our thoughts, from those around us. Are you able to find the time to do this at least once a day? How? When? Where?

3. What specific sentence in this chapter stood out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 24: The Call to Solitude in Crowds

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes about “. . . a pathology of noise. . . in contemporary society” on p. 126. Have you observed how this “pathology” has affected most young people today? What are some practical suggestions parents, teachers, mentors can offer young people to help them make friends with solitude and silence?
2. “There are those” Sister Joan maintains, “who fear the silence of solitude” and those for whom “. . . solitude is a resting place for the soul.” Which are you? Share some aspects of your relationship with and attitude toward solitude.
3. What specific sentence in this paragraph stood out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 25: The emptiness of crowds

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you agree or disagree with Sister Joan when she writes on p.129, “Not only do we not need to be around people all the time, but we actually like to be alone much of the time.” Explain why you agree or disagree.
2. What is your general attitude toward/experience of crowds? Do you think being an extrovert or an introvert has significant bearing on how you answer the question? Discuss.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 26: The Noise within the Silent Self

QUESTIONS:

1. Write down three different ways Sister Joan describes “internal noise” in this chapter. Then draw or paint, for yourself, what your current internal noise looks like. Reflect on it. What is it saying to you?
2. “The truth is that internal noise is not meant to burden us. It’s meant to enable us to go on with new energy, new honesty and new hope” (136). Has this been your experience? Explain.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 27: The Challenge of Hopelessness

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan teaches in the beginning of this chapter that early spiritual writers recommended that deep self-knowledge and internal awareness were the core of any genuine spiritual journey. Reflecting on the spiritual journey in general and your own in particular, list three to five experiences you would cite as essential if one is to grow spiritually via growth in self-knowledge. Briefly state the reason why for each one you suggest.
2. There are many descriptions of hopelessness in this chapter. How would you describe it? What advice would you give to someone who was feeling hopeless?
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 28: The Courage of Cowardness

QUESTIONS:

1. Choose one characteristic of life-denying courage and relate where you have seen its presence in the US or the larger world so far in this century. Do the same with life-giving courage. Then suggest one solution for mitigating the former and one to allow the latter to flourish.
2. Do you agree with Mark Twain that moral courage is rare? Explain why or why not?
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 29: The Certitude of Doubt

QUESTIONS:

1. Watch the film “Doubt” (2008) (even if you have seen it before) starring Meryl Streep as the principal of the Catholic elementary school and Phillip Seymour Hoffman as the pastor of the parish. At the end of the film reflect on this quote written by Sister Joan on p. 153: “Doubt is what shakes our arrogance and makes us look again at what we have never really looked at before.” Choose the one character in the film to which you think this quote most applies. Explain why.
2. According to Sister Joan, “. . . life is not meant to be about certainty. Life . . . is about possibility.” Moreover, the famous American poet, Emily Dickinson once wrote, “I dwell in possibility.” Which one of these quotations resonates most deeply with you? Share why.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 30: The Benevolence of the Unknown

QUESTIONS:

1. “Fear is the toxin of this generation.” Other than any Sister Joan has mentioned, identify two or three examples you believe best exemplify her statement.
2. Refer to the quote attributed to Antoine de Saint-Exupery found on page 159. How relevant is this to your life? Which part of the quote is most real for you? Explain.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stood out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 31: The Invitation of Finality

QUESTIONS:

1. “We are constantly becoming, no less at seventy-five years old than when we were four,” states Sister Joan. Share some examples from your life that prove this true.
2. Prayerfully reflect on the last sentence in this chapter. Then share what you think it means.
3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?

Chapter 32: The Pain of the Search for Spiritual Painlessness

QUESTIONS:

1. First, how do you understand who God is, might be, at this time in your life? Second, which of the following descriptions of God align most deeply with your own? Choose one or more and explain why.

-Professor Elizabeth Johnson: “God is the Incomprehensible Holy Mystery who is love beyond imagining.”

-Fr. Richard Rohr: “Christ is God, and Jesus is the Christ’s historical manifestation in time.”

-Rilke (poet) “When I paint your portrait God, nothing happens. But I can choose to feel you.”

-Rabia (poet) “Perhaps the name you call God is not really his, maybe it is just an alias.”

-Mira (poet) “If you cannot picture God in a way that strengthens you, you need to read more of my poems.”

2. Benedict of Nursia taught that “The ‘fear – awe—of God. . . must be always before our eyes.” When does such “awe” happen in your daily life?

3. What specific sentence in this chapter stuck out to you? Why did you choose this sentence?