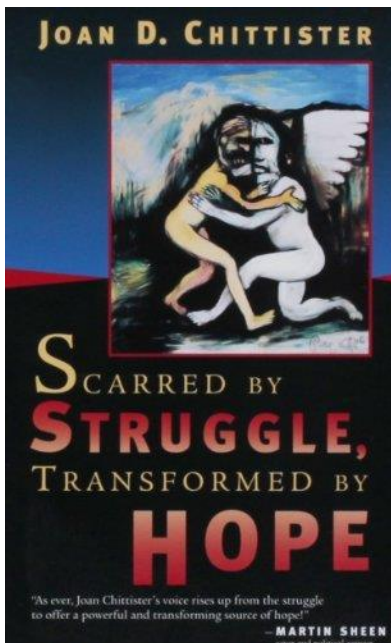


Discussion Questions

Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope



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Preface: Struggle, the Seedbed of Hope

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes, “And yet we sense that the way we deal with struggle has something to do with the very measure of the self, with the whole issue of what it is to be a spiritual person.” What do you understand Sister Joan to mean by this statement?
2. How do YOU cultivate hope in the midst of pain?
3. What sentence in this preface most caught your attention? Why?

Chapter 1: A Paradigm of Struggle

QUESTIONS:

1. In this chapter Sister Joan shares an event that crushed her dreams of a writing career. Share a major struggle in your life that crushed a dream of yours.
2. Choose a work of art, piece of music, significant film or favorite poem or prayer that has helped/does help you endure and survive something you may be struggling with at any given time. Explain how it does this for you.
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapter 2: The Loss of Certainty: A Suffering of the Soul

QUESTIONS:

1. This book was published in 2003. Then Sister Joan wrote on page 9, “The world is pregnant with uncertainty.” Do you think these words still characterize our world today? Discuss why or why not.
2. Have you ever been seduced by “the illusion of benign

unchangeability”? Discuss the circumstances and explain why.

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapter 3: Struggle: The Process and the Challenge

QUESTIONS:

1. Read the second paragraph on page 14 several times. Are you a person who in the past or, yet still, believes everything that has or does happen to you is part of God’s plan for your life? Why did you or do you believe this? If you no longer believe this, why not?
2. Is there a wisdom story from your own family that you have recalled from time to time when immersed in a struggle? Please share it and how it has strengthened or encouraged you during those difficult periods in your life.
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapter 4: The Struggle of Change

QUESTIONS:

1. The poet Adrienne Rich wrote in *Your Native Land, Your Life*, “I refuse to become a seeker for cures.

Everything that has ever
helped me has come through what already
lay stored in me. Old things, diffuse, unnamed, lie strong
across my heart.

This is from where
my strength comes, even when I miss my strength
even when it turns on me
like a violent master.”

From where does your strength come as you face your struggles?

2. Sister Joan exposes the harm the traditional model of change has caused in the Western world. Have you ever felt you had to embody this model? What were the circumstances? What was the outcome for you, emotionally, psychologically, and/or spiritually?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapter 5: The Gift of Conversion

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes that, “the first gift of struggle is the call to conversion – the call to. Think differently about who God is and about who I am as an individual.” When did you begin to think differently about God and consequently, yourself?
2. How has this chapter broadened and deepened your understanding of conversion?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapter 6: The Struggle of Isolation

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever counseled someone whose spiritual response to a particular struggle was as simplistic as Sister Joan describes it on page 31? What did you say or do? What was the outcome for you and for the person struggling?
2. Sister Joan concludes this chapter by saying “It is the grace of discovering that our lives are more than any one event and that we, not fate, are really what will determine what the rest of our lives will be like.” Have you experienced this grace? Please share.
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapters 7: The Gift of Independence

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan offers several examples of a person who exemplified the following quote: “The great choice with which struggle confronts us, then, is not whether to accept it – struggle comes unbidden. It doesn’t matter whether we accept it. The choice is whether to crumble under it or to brave it.” Can you add any others to this list?

2. “. . . detachment – holy indifference – is the foundation of spiritual discernment” (page 35). Examine this website on Ignatian Discernment.

<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits/>

What are three valuable teachings you have learned from this?

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why

Chapter 8: The Struggle of Darkness

QUESTIONS:

1. Under what circumstances in your life, our nation and/or our world could you say that “God had become a question mark, not a certainty” (39)?

2. “There is only one way out of struggle and that is by going into its darkness waiting for the light and being open to new growth”(40). Has this been your experience?

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapters 9: The Gift of Faith

QUESTIONS:

1. Fr. Greg Boyle writes in his book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, that “The desire of God’s heart is immeasurably larger than our imaginations can conjure. This longing of God’s to give us peace and assurance and a sense of well-being only awaits our willingness to cooperate with God’s limitless magnanimity” (28). Does your faith allow you to believe this? Discuss why or why not.
2. It has been suggested that this book liberates its readers by inviting them to choose which God to believe in. (see page 44) Can you name and describe which God you believe in at this point in your life?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapters 10: The Struggle with Fear

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan names several kinds of fear we struggle with on page 47: fear of criticism; fear of ridicule; fear of being different; fear of authority. Can you name at least three other types of fear many people struggle with? Which is your greatest fear? Why?
2. At this point in US history, choose at least two or three fears most ordinary citizens have. Most politicians. Most very wealthy people have. Why do you think this?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapter 11: The Gift of Courage

QUESTIONS:

1. In this chapter Sister Joan provides multiple descriptions of courage. Choose the three that you think you have shown at different times in your life, explaining the circumstances.
2. Tell a story of a “profile in courage” based on someone you know or admire. What lesson or lessons can be learned from this person?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapter 12: The Struggle with Powerlessness

QUESTIONS:

1. “When we lose the fight for justice with authorities who for all we can tell prefer power to people, we lose trust in any institution,” according to Sister Joan. (54) Give an example of authorities you think “prefer power to people” and share why you think this.
2. Share an experience you have had of powerlessness. What did this experience teach you?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapter 13: The Gift of Surrender

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you agree with Sister Joan that “Part of the pain of any great struggle . . . is the reluctance to admit that we have been bested.” (57) Share why or why not.
2. Sister Joan challenges her readers by suggesting that they have a “. . . spiritual obligation to accept reality. . .” (59) Have you ever thought of this? What might you say to Sister Joan if you could speak to her in

person about this statement?

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapter 14: The Struggle of Vulnerability

QUESTIONS:

1. “To go on going on, in the face of repeated failures, despite being clearly damaged, in full view of a world that sees us to have been wounded, is to discover what it really means to be human,” (63) says Sister Joan. How would you describe what it means to be human?
2. What is your response to this sentence: “It’s not really difficult to determine how comfortable people are with their own limitations. It can be measured by the way they treat the limitations of others” (64).
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your attention? Why?

Chapter 15: The Gift of Limitations

QUESTIONS:

1. What life experience best taught you to accept your limitations?
2. Find a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye, Mary Oliver, Hafiz, Denise Levertov, Rumi, or any other poet of your choice that speaks to “the gift of limitations.”
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Why?

Chapter 16: The Struggle of Exhaustion

QUESTIONS:

1. What most exhausts you at this point in your life?
2. Sister Joan states that the secret to winning all the struggles we must face is to learn to let them go in order to discover the blessings hidden

within them (71). Have you been able to do this? If yes, what blessing did you discover by doing so? If you have not been able to do this, what obstacle is keeping you unable to let go?

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Why?

Chapter 17: The Gift of Endurance

QUESTIONS:

1. “Endurance is about having heart enough to keep on trying to do the possible, even if it is unattainable,” states Sister Joan (75). Have you ever done this yourself or do you know anyone who has? Please share an example.

2. What, if anything, does the poem below by Denise Levertov, say to you about endurance? It is titled “Patience.”

What patience a landscape has, like an old horse,
head down in its field.

Grey days,

air and fine rain cling, become one, hovering till at last,

languidly, rain relinquishes that embrace, consents

to fall. What patience a hill, a plain,

a band of woodland holding still, have, and the slow falling

of grey rain . . . Is it blind faith? Is it

merely a way to deeply rest? Is the horse

only resigned, or has it

some desirable knowledge, an enclosed meadow

quite other than its sodden field,

which patience is the key to? Has it already,

within itself, entered that sunwarmed shelter?

3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Why?

Chapter 18: The Struggle of Scarring

QUESTIONS:

1. “Real struggle hurts. It marks us in ways we don’t even always realize when it happens. Years can pass before we begin to comprehend the marks and scars trouble hews out of the flesh of our lives. It leaves us wounded and chastened and different for the rest of our days,” (80) according to Sister Joan. What in particular about this sentence rings truest for you? Explain.
2. On page 80 Sister Joan discusses the enemies within us, sometimes referred to as our demons; often they are of our own making and persist as “demanding,” “damaging”, and/or “destructive” realities in our lives. She then mentions several: anger, gluttony, jealousy, etc. What do you think makes some people conscious of these enemies within us, these demons, and others not so conscious? What role does becoming conscious of them , or not, play as people struggle with these “enemies”?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Why?

Chapter 19: The Gift of Transformation

QUESTIONS:

1. “Struggle changes us; it grows us up” (83). Identify a struggle in your life that helped you grow up. Explain how.
2. Sister Joan shares her own transformation when she writes, “I began to understand that I wasn’t called to write fiction; I was called to speak the pain of reality” (86). Which one of Sister Joan’s many books, this one and/or another, made “the pain of reality” clearest to you?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Why?

Chapter 20: Wrestling with God

QUESTIONS:

1. “Only when we deal with depression do we begin to be able to measure the quality of hope that is in us to carry us through all the dark spots of our lives” (88). If you can, reflect on a personal experience of depression and share how you dealt with it.
2. At the bottom of page 88, Sister Joan states who God is NOT. If you agree with her, who IS God for you? Further, she places responsibility for our lives in our own hands. Why, then, do you think people often blame God for their struggles and suffering?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Why?

Chapter 21: The Process of Struggle

QUESTIONS:

1. Can you recall a story from your life, or from history, the news cycle, a book, movie, TV show, opera, etc. that illustrates ONE of the first four challenges and gifts in the process of struggle:
 - The first challenge is change and the gift it calls us to is conversion of heart;
 - The second challenge is isolation and the gift it calls us to is independence;
 - The third challenge is darkness and the gift it calls us to is faith;
 - The fourth challenge is fear and the gift it calls us to is courage.
2. Sister Joan identified four more elements and four more gifts of struggle in this chapter. Which, if any of these, offered you new insights? Which challenged or comforted you the most?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Why?

Chapter 22: The Process of Hope

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes, “Conversion is the first step to a mature faith” (98). What does this mean to you?
2. Reflect several times on the first paragraph under the heading “Transformation” on page 102. At this time in your life, can you identify with any point in particular found in this paragraph. Explain.
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Why?

Chapter 23: The Gift of Hope

QUESTIONS:

1. “The proofs of eternal rebirth are everywhere” (105). List five examples you’ve seen in your own life, in the country, or in our world that affirms this.
2. Draw or paint a picture or design a symbol that illustrates this quote: “Hope says, remember where you have been before and know that God is waiting for you someplace else now, to go on again to something new.” (107)
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Why?

Chapter 24: Hope: The Resurrection of the Spirit

QUESTIONS:

1. Listen to Albinoni’s “Adagio.” Then discuss how it impacted you in terms of “. . . the hope that beauty could be reborn in the midst of a living hell.”
2. Sister Joan writes that “Hope is not a matter of waiting for things outside us to get better. It is about getting better inside about what is

going on inside” (110). What does this sentence mean to you?
3. What sentence in this chapter most caught your eye? Why?