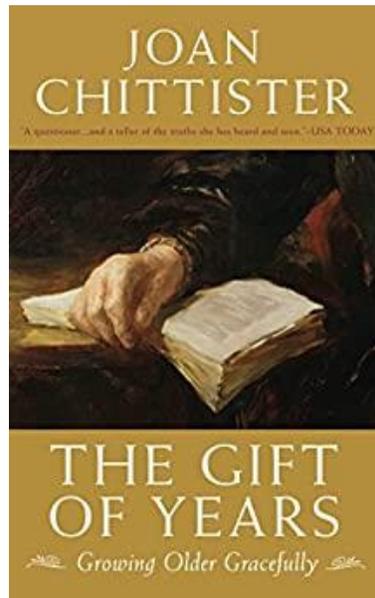


Discussion Questions

The Gift of Years



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Overview

QUESTION:

1. After each chapter consider an idea or insight raised by Sister Joan that caught your attention and that you would like to reflect on more. Explain.
2. Sister Joan ends each chapter with a burden and a blessing of that particular “gift of aging.” Read each of the burdens and blessings aloud two or three times. Then comment on how this particular “gift” was both a burden and a blessing in your life.

Introduction

QUESTION:

1. “There are, gerontologists tell us, three stages of ‘old’ in our society. There are the young old, sixty-five to seventy-four years old; the old old, seventy-five to eighty-four; and the oldest old, at eighty-five years and over”(ix). Which stage are you in now? What are two or three of the greatest challenges you are facing??

Regret

QUESTION:

1. Consider one idea or insight about regret that was raised by Sister Joan that caught your attention or that you would like to reflect upon more deeply. Explain.
2. Sister Joan tells us that “twinges of regret are a step-over point in life.” Can you name a “twinge of regret” in your own life that has become a step-over point? Explain.

Meaning

QUESTIONS:

1. Can you name a passion in your life, a reason you get up in the morning? Explain.
2. Think of a story, a quote, a poem that illustrates for you “a meaningful life.” Explain how it expands Sister Joan’s ideas on meaning for you. OR If you had to write an essay about someone with a “meaningful life”, who would you choose to write about and what would you say?

Fear

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you have a different perspective on fear after reading this chapter? Explain.
2. Sister Joan suggests that we must live consciously as we age—that is, age in a way that enriches the lives of others—describe three ways that you might do so.

Ageism

QUESTIONS:

1. Stereotypes of older people still abound. Have you encountered any? Discuss the circumstances and how you did or did not respond.
2. “Age does not forgive us our responsibility to give the world back to God a bit better than it was because we were here,” Sister Joan insists. Do you believe that you have helped the world become a better place? Share why you think so.

Joy

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan says that one of the lessons to be learned in retirement is that “gratitude for stages, memories, people, accomplishments is itself life-giving.” Write a note of gratitude to a person who has influenced your life, or to yourself for a stage in your life that changed you, or a memory that is important to you or an accomplishment that you take pride in.
2. “We have the joy of immunity from propriety now,” according to Sister Joan. Practically speaking, how have you expressed this kind of joy in your own life?

Authority

QUESTIONS:

1. Shaman, tzaddik, sanyasi, bodhisattva – Sister Joan describes each on page 35. Have you known anyone who embodies the characteristics of one or more of these authoritative figures? If yes, discuss what you learned from him or her.
2. Quoting Socrates, Sister Joan states, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” What has this come to mean to you as you have aged?

Transformation

QUESTIONS:

1. Write “I am luminous with age” ten times on a piece of paper and then, complete each statement.

For example:

I am luminous with age: my nieces and nephews love to spend time

with me.

I am luminous with age: I enjoy periods of solitude.

2. Sister Joan says, “We are being transformed physically so we can be transformed beyond the physical.” Can you relate to this statement? Explain.

Newness

QUESTIONS:

1. In older age, “We can re-create ourselves in order to be creative in the world in a different way than the boundaries of our previous life allowed,” Sister Joan suggests. She gives many examples of what such “re-creation” might include on pages 47 and 48. How have YOU attempted to “re-create” yourself in your later years? Give several examples. Which have been most satisfying? Why?
2. “Who are we, after all this time, all this making of a life?” Sister Joan asks. How would you answer this question about yourself?

Accomplishment

QUESTIONS:

1. “Diminishment is no longer the principle characteristic of aging,” writes Sister Joan. Give three to five examples of people who embody this.
2. Sister Joan talks about the responsibility older persons have to mentor generations that come after them. Write a short narrative about someone you have mentored. How has doing this enhanced your life?

Possibility

QUESTIONS:

1. This chapter opens with a quotation by the poet Emily Dickinson: “We turn not older with years, but newer every day.” She also wrote this: “I dwell in possibility.” Say this to yourself, reflectively, three times. Then write a short letter to yourself stating why you believe this at this time in your life.
2. Sister Joan writes that older age offers people the possibility of “. . . even begin[ning] to think differently now.” Has this been true for you? Name some issues around which you have begun to do this.

Adjustment

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you agree or disagree with Sister Joan when she states, “. . . there are few discernible differences between being sixty-four and sixty-seven, between sixty-nine and seventy-four? Discuss your position.
2. What have you found most difficult to cope with as you have aged? Who or what has sustained you in this situation?

Fulfillment

QUESTIONS:

1. In this chapter, Sister Joan presents the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, anger, envy, lust, gluttony, sloth and covetousness. At this point in your life, which is the sin you are most doing battle with? Please name and share why.
2. “Age is . . . the call to spiritual growth, because age finally brings us to the point where there is nowhere else to go but inside for comfort,

inside for wealth, inside for the things that really count,” according to Sister Joan. What does this mean to you?

Mystery

QUESTIONS:

1. The essence of mystery includes astonishment says Sister Joan; [it] “...shakes us into conscious awareness of things long seen, but long unseen as well.” The poet Mary Oliver surely agrees when she writes: “Let me keep my mind on what matters, which is my work, which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.” (Messenger in THIRST, 1) Recall two or three experiences that confirm what Sister Joan and/or Mary Oliver has written about astonishment.
2. For many, old age does not feel like liberation, according to Sister Joan. She claims, “We resist it mightily. We make our own prisons and live in them till we’re too numb to try to get away.” (74). Do you agree? If yes, why? Name some “prisons” that often victimize older people.

Relationships

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan states that relationships “. . . are a sign of the presence of a loving God in life” (82). Write a letter, email, or poem to someone who has been or who is this for you and share why. (The poem does not have to be original.)
2. Tell the story of an older person in your life who, having lost a spouse, loved one or dear friend, has been a role model for you in terms of how she or he coped with such a loss.

Tale-Telling

QUESTIONS:

1. On page 86 Sister Joan writes about older people: “But more important even than their knowledge is their ability, their call, to pass those stories on to the later generations. Without the passing on of the stories, the young ones are a group without character, without tradition, without the living memory of how and why they came together in the first place.” What is one family story you heard growing up that instilled in you a sense of character, tradition or history of your people?
2. What stories or traditions are you passing on to the next generation. Explain why you chose these.

Letting Go

QUESTIONS:

1. At this later time in life, according to Sister Joan, “The question now is, how and by what measures do we decide if our life has been a success?” Imagine you are in a conversation with Sister Joan. How would you answer her question?
2. When Sister Joan states, “It’s what’s inside of us, not what’s outside of us that counts,” she is talking about our interior life. What choices have you made over the years to cultivate your interior life?

Learning

QUESTIONS:

1. Are you engaged in passive aging or active aging? Or perhaps you have moved from one to the other. Discuss your journey.

2. Sister Joan writes, “The question then is not, is the older generation capable of learning anymore? Instead, the obvious question is only, what shall we learn now?” (99) List at least three to five things you would like to learn at this point in your life and explain why?

Religion

QUESTIONS:

1. Many people today will claim to be spiritual rather than religious. Suggest several reasons why you think this is so.
2. Do you agree with Sister Joan when she writes, “Finally, as we grow older, when we begin that last stage of life, it is clear that behaviors and failures are not the stuff of religion much anymore.” Discuss why or why not?

Freedom

QUESTION:

1. “But freedom in old age is the ability to be the best of the self I have developed during all those years,” says Sister Joan. Write a letter to yourself celebrating the best of the self you have become.

Success

QUESTIONS:

1. In this chapter Sister Joan begins several paragraphs on pages 115-116 with “Did we succeed. . .” Which of these can you say “Yes” or “No” to? Can you explain why?
2. Name a person you personally feel has been really successful. What

has she or he done/been that has led you to feel this way? Consider telling her or him some way.

Time

QUESTION:

1. Sister Joan says that the passing of time has “tested our assumptions, tried our talents, developed our relationships, softened our arrogance, opened our hearts to other possibilities, forced us to think newly.” Spend time with one of these concepts and describe how it has unfolded in your life.
2. This week, instead of just crossing out the days on a calendar as they pass, take time to jot a few diary notes about what happened to you each day. At the end of the week, find a way to celebrate the blessings of passing time.

Wisdom

QUESTIONS:

1. Who has been a wisdom figure in your life? What did she or he help you realize?
2. Pray these lines from Psalm 51 and sit with them for a few minutes: “Out of your glory send Wisdom to be with me and to work with me. Wisdom knows and understands all things and will guide and protect me in all I do.” Share a time in your life when you felt Wisdom was with you.

Sadness

QUESTION:

1. Sister Joan writes, “Only after the rules are broken – after we stop worrying about whether or not the passions of youth endanger salvation – are the lessons really learned.” And, the poet Mary Oliver writes in “Three Things to Remember”:

As long as you’re dancing, you can

Break the rules.

Sometimes breaking the rules is just

Extending the rules.

Sometimes there are no rules.

Which quote about “the rules” is most reflective of your life experience? Explain.

Dreams

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan suggests that, “In our dreams, in the way we ourselves see ourselves, we are forever becoming.” Share one or more ways you can say that you are still “forever becoming.”

Limitations

QUESTION:

1. According to Sister Joan, “Limitations. . . are boundaries not barriers” (139). Is this true for you or for someone older you know? Explain.

2. “Being limited gives us an opportunity to learn both humility and patience,” states Sister Joan. Recall a limitation you have experienced or are now dealing with. Discuss how it taught both humility and patience.”

Solitude

QUESTIONS:

1. “Solitude is chosen. It is the act of being alone in order to be with ourselves. We seek solitude for the sake of the soul,” Sister Joan writes. (p. 145) Is choosing solitude one of your regular or daily spiritual practices? If yes, discuss what value it has for you? If not, discuss the obstacles that prevent you from choosing solitude.

Productivity

QUESTION:

1. Sister Joan states that “Work is a necessary dimension of the spiritual life.” (p.150) Has this been true for you? If yes, explain several ways your work informed your spiritual life. If no, give a reason or two why not.

2. “. . . retirement does not free us from the responsibility to go on tending the world,” according to Sister Joan. (p.151) If you are retired, how have you continued to “tend the world?”

Memories

QUESTIONS:

1. “Without memory we could go blithely on in life without every really knowing what of that life was still unfinished, was still rumbling around inside of us, waiting for attention.” So says Sister Joan on page 155. Can you remember what is still unfinished, still rumbling around inside, still waiting for attention in your life? Write an anonymous column about one or more of these and share it with someone you trust.

Future

QUESTION:

1. Sister Joan quotes Louis Kronenberger on old age at the beginning of this chapter. He said, “Old age is an excellent time for outrage. My goal is to say or do at least one outrageous thing every week.” What do you think of this idea? Have you done anything outrageous recently? If not, why not? What is at least one outrageous thing you would like to do at this time in your life?

2. “Old age, like every other stage of life, is a learning time. It may be here, in fact, that we learn best what life is actually all about,” says Sister Joan. (p. 160) What are three of the most significant things you have learned as you have aged?

Agelessness

QUESTIONS:

1. “Intergenerational friendships between an older generation and a younger one are as important to the elder as they are to the child [or

young adult]” (165). Send a card to a young person in your life with whom you have become a friend. Tell her or him why your friendship is so important to you.

Immediacy

QUESTION:

1. Sister Joan writes that, “We become new inside when we urge ourselves to do new things” (170). What are one or two new things you have done since your last birthday? Did they help you become new inside? Explain.

Nostalgia

QUESTIONS:

1. As Sister Joan indicates on page 173, “Katherine Hepburn once said, ‘Either you are interesting at any age or you are not.’” What are three characteristics you have that make you interesting at this time in your life?

Spirituality

QUESTION:

1. Answer for yourself Sister Joan’s questions: What kind of person have I become? Am I more honest, more decent, more serene, more caring, more merciful—and if not, what must I do about it?

2. Sister Joan says that one of the blessings of aging is that it provides time for spiritual reflection, spiritual renewal. Is this true in your life? What is nourishing your spirituality as you age?

Loneliness

QUESTIONS:

1. “Age is the elegy of elegies,” Sister Joan states. (p. 185) Look up the definition of “elegy.” After doing so, discuss why you think she made the statement she did above.
2. What has been your experience of loneliness? Was Sister Joan’s solution on page 188 what helped you deal with loneliness? Discuss.

Forgiveness

QUESTION:

1. Sister Joan offers us many profound truths in this chapter on forgiveness. One may be this, found on page 192: “Forgiveness is more important to the one who forgives than it is to the one who is forgiven.” Reflect on this a few times. What is your response?
2. “Is there anyone we wouldn’t love,” the poet writes, “if we only knew their story.” (p.192) How has this question affected you? In your own words, through a poem, film, song, or work of art, try to answer.

Outreach

QUESTIONS:

1. On page 199 Sister Joan writes, “Generativity - the act of giving ourselves to the needs of the rest of the world – is the single most important function of old age.” Share three ways you are being generative as you age. What have these three ways taught you about aging?
2. In her Advent reflection for December 8, 2020, Michelle Franci-Donnay asks “How do you greet the unexpected? Do you run toward it

with joy or duck quickly around the corner?” How would you answer these questions given the topic of this chapter: “Outreach”?

The Present

QUESTION:

1. When speaking about the present, Sister Joan writes on page 202, “Age is meant for the revival of the spirit. Age is meant to allow us to play—with ideas, with projects, with friends, with life.” Share three or four ways you “play” at this stage of your life.
2. “Appreciation becomes acute as time goes by” (203). For what or for whom are you most grateful for now.

Appreciation

QUESTIONS:

1. “Appreciation becomes us, but too often comes late” (207). Do you agree or disagree with Sister Joan? Discuss why.

Faith

QUESTION:

1. Sister Joan writes on page 212, “We are not sure who God is, of course, but we are confidently sure of who or what God is not.” While you may not be sure of who God is, who IS God for you at this point in time? And, are you “. . . confidently sure of who or what God is not?” Explain.
2. Some people confuse the meaning of faith with beliefs. How would you differentiate between the two?

Legacy

QUESTIONS:

1. Write a brief will (legacy) to be read when you are gone. In it list all the things you are giving to your loved ones, your community, your friends; list your qualities and what you want to be remembered for and hope will live on in them.

For example:

To my friend, Jill, I leave my love of gardening...

To my community, I leave my deep love of beauty...

To the earth, I leave my spiritual practice of recycling...