



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5106

First Broadcast November 11, 2007

WELCOME

Lillian Daniel: Welcome to *30 Good Minutes!* We're glad you've joined us for Part 2 in our three-part series on the spirituality of struggle and hope. I'm Lillian Daniel.

Daniel Pawlus: And I'm Daniel Pawlus. Today we welcome back best-selling author and internationally known lecturer, Sr. Joan Chittister, one of America's prophetic religious voices. We also welcome back our studio audience and you at home.

Lillian Daniel: Sr. Joan is a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania, and Executive Director of BenetVision, a resource center for contemporary spirituality. Today, in Part 2 of this series, we'll explore the connection between personal struggle and faith.

Daniel Pawlus: We've based this series on Sr. Joan's award-winning book, "Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope." It's one of her most personal books, and its central story is one of her own. We know Sr. Joan as a writer of non-fiction books, but her dream was always to be a fiction writer. It was a dream that almost happened—or so it seemed it would. Let's listen as she tells the story.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Joan Chittister: I'm about 25 or 26 when the next great moment in life happens for me. I had finished my bachelors degree in English. I was a secondary English teacher. It was clear, if for no other reason than state professional requirements, that I would be sent for a masters degree. Now, in those days, you didn't determine yourself. Your superiors decided where they needed you, what you were capable of doing, and where you would go. So some how or other, and I don't remember the details, all I know is that the prioress told me that I should be looking around for a good program in literature and writing. And I discovered it in Iowa. They had and MFA, a Master of Fine Arts, in creative writing. I never knew such a thing existed. Suddenly my whole world changed. They had said, the prioress and her council, yes to this. Why not have a sister with a degree in creative writing? I had applied, been accepted. We literally had one or two days left before the matriculation fee would not be returned in case you withdrew. And the telephone call came to withdraw, simply to withdraw. There was no explanation given. I say in the book and it's as sincere and truthful as I can be, I didn't know then why it was withdrawn and I don't know now. All I know is I remember when they diagnosed the polio, I used to say, clearly the room went orange and began to spin. That day, that evening, it was early evening when the

phone call came, I was standing by the convent telephone in the middle of the hall and I thought that the building moved.

Instead of going to school that summer, we had at that time a youth camp on the property and I was sent as third cook to camp. I couldn't cook. Believe me, I can cook now! I couldn't cook at that time. Being sent to cook was enough to cause total derangement. I didn't know what to do. We had a hundred children a week. There are a lot of people who would love to get sent to a children's camp during the summertime. I know that this event does not fall into the realm of global crises, but I don't think most people's personal problems fall into that realm. What the issue was is irrelevant. What is relevant is that it turned my world, my hopes, my self-definition, my dream, my whole sense of future upside down. I thought my world had ended.

When I say to myself, "Now, Joan, did that scar you?" Yes. "How?" It probably played right into the polio thing again: fear. Would there never be happiness? Would there never be wholeness? I think that maybe if I look back with some spiritual maturity I might be able to say, thank God I didn't wind up writing short stories and novels. I've given my life to another kind of writing. Now I don't write fiction, I write fact. I miss the story-teller part of me. I'm scarred but was not broken. I'm scarred but not depressed. And I'm scarred but not disappointed. The scar says just what it said during the polio: there are other ways, there are other calls, there are different voices. It's not so much what you do, but how you're doing what you do. Nobody lives life in a straight line. Nobody. There's a turn in the road here. It doesn't mean life is over. It says the road has a change and what way are you going to make that change, with what attitude, with what faith in the will of God? So, there was a scar but there was not death. There was a new kind of life in it.

INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: And now, let's welcome Sr. Joan Chittister.

MESSAGE

Joan Chittister: Thanks, Lillian.

"Hope," the Greek poet, Pindar, writes, "is the pillar that holds up the world and the world needs pillars so often." The great interruptions of life—the great struggles—can leave us completely disoriented. What was is no more and what is to come, if anything, is unclear. All the things we depended on to keep us safe, to show us the way, to give us a reason for going on, have disappeared. We find ourselves on a wet, grey slope of sliding clay, being towed under, being swallowed up and taken down, no towline to save us. Who has not known this helpless, sinking feeling? Who has not known the God of Absence? Who has not felt abandoned by God? Sometime, somewhere.

The ancients called it the dark night of the soul, this process of shedding everything in life but God. It is the moment of personal crucifixion in which we finally say out loud what we most fear: that there is no God, at least not here, not now. Then Jesus' wail, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" becomes a personal cry of our own. We doubt the God of losses. We doubt the notion of any God at all. We certainly doubt that God has anything real to do with us.

Sitting on the banks of the creek that summer, Psalms in hand, that summer of my appointment as third cook at a children's rather than to the creative writing program at Iowa State University, I struggled long and hard between the value of what I wanted and the value of what I now had. God had become a question mark, not a certainty. My body went on living but my soul had died in a darkness so thick I could not even begin to see through it.

But the mystics had also taught that this dark night is a necessary moment in the development of the soul. Sure of the absence of God, we actually become aware of the presence of God. It is the paradox of faith. It is the paradox of faith. By losing everything, we come to the realization that everything is far less than we think it is and far more than we ever dreamed it would ever be. In the end, everything is what cannot be taken away, what cannot be lost, what will not fail us in our hope.

Darkness is the winter of the soul, the time when it seems that nothing is growing. But winter, we also know, is the fallow time of the year. Winter is the time when the earth renews itself. And so it is with struggle. Unbeknownst to us then, perhaps struggle is the call and the signal that we are about to renew ourselves. Whether we want to or not. Struggle is what forces us to attend to the greater things in life, to begin again when life is at its barest for us, to take the seeds of the past and give them new growth.

We fear darkness and we avoid it. It threatens our confidence. It jeopardizes our sense of self-sufficiency. We lose control in darkness. We become pawns in the hands of the great unknown. And then, just then, we begin to believe in God in a whole new way. Darkness is the call to faith and the kind of faith we demonstrate under pressure is what, in the end, really counts.

I saw a kind of faith once that defied all the psychology I'd ever been taught, all the theological definitions I'd ever learned. It seeped into my own faith-life like mist, illuminated my own dark places thereafter, and it clung to my soul like ether. She was writhing on the floor in her bedroom by the time I got there. Her elbows were tight against her ribs, her fists were clenched and hard, she was rolling back and forth on the floor, from side to side, and moaning. She was a very gentle woman. She was a kind of Dresden doll. She'd been a first grade teacher all her life. She had reared generation after generation just by the lilt of her smile. And years later they were still coming back to adore her. But she was also manic-depressive, bi-polar. She had been in and out of hospitals all her life, on one medication or another for years.

The pain, the gloom, the despair, the depression, all became part of the routine of her life. But for all the regularity of it, I had never seen it this bad before. I got down on my knees beside her and I took her by the shoulders. "Come on, Theresie," I said. "It's time to go to the doctor again."

The wail came from the very deepest center of her. "No!" she insisted. "No! Don't make me do that. I can't do that. I hate that!"

I began to rock her a little in my arms. "Theresie," I crooned, "the doctor is worried about you. He wants you in the hospital."

I felt her stiffened. "I know he's worried," she sobbed. "He won't believe me. He thinks I want to

commit suicide! I've tried to explain to him but he won't listen." She shuddered. I could feel the deep breath. "Joan, tell him. You tell him! I would never do that. I have too much faith in God to do that!"

I couldn't see her face for the tears on my own. She was a very holy woman and I knew she was telling the truth. She really did have too much faith in God to do that. She knew she was not being punished, she was not being abandoned, she was not being tested, she was not being scourged. She knew she was sick and she knew that God was with her in the midst of the darkness of that kind of sickness.

The God who turns red lights green is not the God Therese worshiped. The God who gives points for good behavior is not the God she knew. Her God was the loving Creator in whose energy and life "we live and move and have our being, however and whatever our being is at any given moment."

It is faith in this God that raises us from the tombs of oppression and sadness and want and fear and pain to begin again doing our part to make the world a laughing, loving place.

What are we called to believe and in whom? We are surely called to believe that God who is everywhere is with us. And we are called to believe that this God is Energy and Love and Light in darkness. Not the Grand Inquisitor. Not the great Circus Master. Not the Indifferent Professor who does distant research on our lives. God is the One who made for us a good world and walks with us to hold us up as we go through it. Sometimes, in the face of the God of life, the most faithful thing we can do is simply to keep on living. Ah, yes, hope is the pillar that holds up the world.

CONVERSATION

Daniel Pawlus: If you'd like a free printed or audio copy of the message you just heard from Sr. Joan Chittister, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or download the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Sr. Joan. Sr. Joan, welcome back.

Joan Chittister: Thanks, Dan.

Daniel Pawlus: It's a powerful, powerful message. I want us to talk about the dark night of the soul. But before we do, would you please share with us what it's like to live in community as a Benedictine nun for all these years? I think we're curious about that experience, about how you work with the other sisters. How you are able to do so many things that you do.

Joan Chittister: You get a better understanding, I think, of religious life and certainly of Benedictine religious life if you realize that the function of Benedictine community life is to model the universal acceptance of the stranger. You're living with strangers all your life, in the very same country where people say I wouldn't live on a block with those people, in the very same world where people say I don't understand them at all and I really have no intention of trying to find out. We love to talk in this culture now about our "comfort zone," coming out of our "comfort zone." The Benedictine community is a community that makes a comfort zone out

of all the discomfort zones in the world.

Lillian Daniel: Sister Joan, you're well known for all the books that you've written and going all around the world speaking, but what is your daily life like when you're at home? Who do you live with? How many people are there?

Joan Chittister: Well, there are 123 sisters in the total community and we like to talk about our major monastery out on Eastlake Road and our in-town monastery. The in-town monastery started in 1856 and all of us were concentrated at that time. Now a number of almost 35 sisters, I think, live or work in the inner city. So we have, in other words, a major group at the monastery. 70 or 80 sisters. And then we have sisters living in smaller groups in the center of inner city Erie, all relating to the people in various levels and capacities. But all of us live the same rule, the same basic schedule together. So we live in communities. Sometimes this very large one and sometimes smaller ones.

Like any family, I live with three other sisters. But on the other hand, right across the driveway, we have another five or six sisters living in the second building. Two more here. Two more there. Three more there. And we're a clan. We have a capacity for clinging to one another that somehow or other that is our community. The sisters who live in-town spend a lot of time at the major monastery outside of town. So the very first thing you do, whatever your schedule demands, is morning prayer. There is your morning work. For many of us who work together, and whose schedules allow in any given arena, will have noon prayer. We work again in the afternoon. We go home, wherever home is, for vespers in the evening. We eat together. The family meal is a big thing for us. It's the extension of the Eucharist that begins in chapel. It is that moment when we serve one another.

Now we're living this schedule in a fast-food society. We're living it in a society where individualism, not community, is more the order of the day. I live with a sister who is well known in the ecological movement in this country, was one of the beginners of the Earth force movement. That sister is in meetings all over this country trying to move us, make us greener and greener and to train children. But you ought to see her structure her life. If something is going on in the evening in the community, she'll go to work, come back to that, come back for supper, go back to work, go on to a meeting, get on a plane, go to Harrisburg, come back. The second sister I live with is a woman's advocate in our soup kitchen. This is a sister who starts in August preparing for Christmas. She now has over 2,000 families providing 2,000 bags of gifts for children who would never see a gift. She runs her legs off in that city begging and she hasn't missed a kid or a family yet. If she comes within six feet of you, if she walks in here right now, I promise you, you'll be giving gifts for Christmas!

Daniel Pawlus: I know we want to hear more about this, but I want to take a little bit of time that we have left to talk briefly about the dark night of the soul. Were you at all surprised to read Mother Teresa's recent extended struggle?

Joan Chittister: I have to be very honest with you. I read about it in the paper. You may know more than I do. I haven't seen it.

Lillian Daniel: It was revealed that she had such a dark night of the soul that was so much more than anyone realized. She felt the absence of God so profoundly. I think many people wondered, is it helpful to know that about somebody like Mother Teresa?

Daniel Pawlus: Is this something that necessarily devoutly religious experience on a deeper level? Does it visit us all? It's an extended question. We're not going to have a lot of time for it.

Joan Chittister: Well, quickly, I think it's a universal process of the spiritual life. At the second level, there's no doubt in my mind that religious who are so intense about their work as ministry and their prayer life as fundamental and essential, may be more conscious of it. I'm not surprised to hear that it happened. I always say I pack every Tuesday and I unpack every Wednesday. Aren't we all struggling to see what the direction is? If anything, that episode in Mother Teresa's life is the notion that God companions us. Don't deny her that. Don't want a "plastic statue." Why? Because it won't do you any good.

Daniel Pawlus: We're going to continue this discussion on the next program. Thank you again.

CLOSING REMARKS

Daniel Pawlus: Our time is almost gone, but I want to remind you that Part 3 of this three-part series with Sr. Joan Chittister is coming up next time on *30 Good Minutes*. I hope you'll join us again. I'm Daniel Pawlus.

Lillian Daniel: And I'm Lillian Daniel. If you'd like a free printed transcript or audio copy of today's program, stay tuned for our phone number and address. I also encourage you to visit our website at 30goodminutes.org for more information about this program and a wonderful collection of other messages, reflections, and stories to deepen your faith. Now, from all of us at *30 Good Minutes*, have a wonderful week and may hope fill your heart in the days ahead.