



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5107

First Broadcast November 18, 2007

WELCOME

Lillian Daniel: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re glad you’ve joined us for Part 3 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 writer, lecturer and internationally known peacemaker, Sr. Joan Chittister. 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. We’ve based this series on Sr. Joan’s award-winning book, “Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope.” Today, in Part 3 of this series, we’ll explore the anatomy of hope in the face of struggle.

Daniel Pawlus: A few months ago we sat down with Sr. Joan at the monastery in Erie, Pennsylvania. One of the stories she shared was about her mother, an extraordinary woman whose love for Joan was unconditional. Let’s hear the story in Joan’s own words.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Joan Chittister: I was an only child who entered the monastery at the age of sixteen. She loved me so much. She said, “That’s what will make you happy, you go.” She never tried to stop me. My step-father died as a result of car crash on Christmas Eve coming home to have supper with me. One year later on Christmas Eve, my mother stopped breathing. I carried her to the hospital and the diagnosis was massive congestion of unknown origin. And it was downhill after that all the way. She was 56. We know now that it was classic 4 stage, long-term, early onset Alzheimers. She lived 28 years and every day of that 28 years...you lose them. She was alone and a widow, had the smallest social security check on the globe, and was sick. And I couldn’t take care of her. So this little community came along and said, “Joan, bring your mother home.” So she died in this house, about four years later, upstairs, so well taken care of and extremely happy.

One winter it became perfectly clear that mom was dying, so I started around-the-clock vigils, right? Now my mother hadn’t spoken for three years. So I’m waiting and waiting and waiting and listening to her breathing. And it’s dark in the halls. So I decided I had to get some sleep! So

my mother was in that semi-fetal position, you know, like this. So I got in bed in the side like this. So my head was at her feet and my knees were wrapped around her back and I was out cold. I just passed out. I mean, if she was going to die they were going to have to wake me to tell me! All of a sudden I got this phenomenal slap on the side of the thigh. "Honey? Honey?" I thought I was having a vision. I didn't know what had happened. I woke up. I said, "Mom? Mom!" She said, "Honey?" I said, "Yes, mom. What's wrong, mom? Are you okay? What's wrong, mom?" She said, "This is so nice, honey. We haven't done this for years." And then she stopped talking and she didn't die for another year and a half. It's my last...it's the most beautiful...I consider it my last moment with my mother.

INTRODUCTION

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

MESSAGE

Joan Chittister: Thanks, Lillian.

"Whatever the struggle," Diane Westlake writes, "we must continue the climb."

The summer I was told by the prioress of the community that I would not be allowed to pursue a degree in creative writing and was sent instead to be third cook at a children's camp, I walked the banks of the creek that ran through the camp morning after morning, fighting waves of depression, angry about where I was, and totally uninterested in anything going on around me. There was nothing there that gave me joy, nothing I wanted to do, nothing that could ease either the pain of the loss or the fear of a future that meant, obviously, simply more of the same. Life seemed for me to have ended in midair.

Indeed, struggle 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 struggle hews out of the flesh of our lives. It leaves us wounded and chastened and different for the rest of our days.

"After he died," we hear a woman say, "I was never the same again."

"When I didn't get the position," we hear a professional say, "it took the heart right out of me. I lost interest in everything."

"When we split up," we're told, "my life ended." Clearly, struggle brings us to crossover points in life after which we become new people, sometimes worse, often better, but always different.

Struggle shapes us and reforms us and shapes us again. It is the potter's kiln of life, the heat that creates the color and the quality of the glaze we call our years. But the heat of the potter's kiln also shrinks us down to size.

Struggle changes us; it grows us up. It takes the dew off the rose and the guilt off the silver. It turns the fantasies of life into reality. But struggle does more than that. Struggle cultivates in us the kind of depth that comes from knowing pain as well as pleasure. After that we develop a vision in life as well as expectations. We have insight now as well as experience. We acquire

understanding as well as endurance. We grow in compassion for others as well as we grow into character ourselves. Indeed, struggle not only transforms us, it makes us transforming as well.

Once we have truly struggled ourselves with something that stretches the elastic of the spirit, we are worthy to walk with others in their struggles, too. Then we're ready to listen. Then we're able to lead. When we know the meaning of what it is to struggle with something in life we have finally become totally human.

Wrestling with God is of the essence of life. In the process we learn things about the self and we come to understand some things about God as well. It becomes very clear after a while: God is not a puppeteer. God is not a magician. Our lives lie in our own hands and we will have to take charge of them before anything important about them can really come to resolution. Struggle is the process that drives us to find God within us and in the darkness that surrounds us.

The twelfth-century Persian poet Rumi put it this way: I saw Grief drinking a cup of sorrow and called out, "It tastes sweet, doesn't?"

"You've caught me," Grief answered, "And you've ruined my business. How can I sell sorrow when you know it's a blessing?"

There is beauty in the dark valleys of life. It's called hope. The spirituality of struggle gives birth to the spirituality of hope.

The fantasy writer Margaret Weis wrote, "Hope is the denial of reality." I completely disagree. Reality is the only thing we have that can possibly nourish hope. Hope is not based on the ability to fabricate a better future; it is grounded in the ability to remember with new understanding an equally difficult past, either our own or someone else's that became new life, more life than we could have ever thought it might. The fact is that our memories are the real seed bed of hope. They are the only things we have that prove to us that whatever it was we ever before thought would crush us to the grave, would trample our spirits into perpetual dust, would fell us in our tracks, had actually been survived. And if that is true, then whatever we are wrestling with now can also be surmounted.

Hope lies in the memory of God's previous goodness to us in a world that is both bountiful and harsh. The God who created this world loves it and loves us in it, but at the price of our own effort, at the cost of our own craving for more of the vision, more of the depth, more of the truth of this life.

Hope is not some kind of delusional optimism to be resorted to because we simply cannot face the hard facts that threaten to swamp our hearts. Hope rides on the decision either to believe that God stands on this dark road, too, waiting to walk with us toward new light again or to despair of the fact that God who is faithful, is eternally faithful, and will sustain us in our darkness one more time.

Hope and despair are not opposites. They are cut from the very same cloth, made from the very same material, shaped from the very same circumstances. Every life finds itself forced to choose

one from the other, one day at a time, one circumstance after at a time. The only difference between hope and despair is that despair shapes an attitude of mind. Hope creates a quality of soul.

Despair colors the way we look at things, makes us suspicious of the future, makes us negative about the present. When tragedy strikes, when trouble comes, when life disappoints us, we stand at the crossroads then between hope and despair, torn and hurting. Despair cements us in the present. Hope sends us dancing around dark corners trusting in a tomorrow we cannot see because of the multiple pasts of life made new which we also cannot forget.

When I say that I am in despair, I am really saying that I have given up on God. Despair says that I *am* God and if I can't do anything about this situation, then nothing and nobody can. But life is not one road. Life is many roads, the walking of which provides the raw material out of which we find hope in the midst of despair. Every dimension of the process of struggle is a call to draw from a well of new understandings about life, about God, about ourselves. It is in these understandings that hope dwells. It is that wisdom that carries us beyond the dark night of struggle to the dawn of new wisdom and new strength. God with us then, we have survived. God with us now, we will survive.

The spiritual task of life is to feed the hope that comes out of despair. Hope is not something to be found outside of us. It lies in the spiritual life we have cultivated within. The whole purpose of wrestling with God is to be transformed into the self we are meant to become, to step out of the confines of our certainties and allow our God to go on creating. In us. No doubt about it, it is hope that enables us to continue the climb, knowing that it may be only one more step to the summit.

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, thank you for sharing that very intimate part of your life with us. The consistent theme of our programs together, for me, has been how God has continually presented you with different struggles in your life: physical struggles, emotional struggles, spiritual struggles. Have you ever wondered what life would have been like without some of those obstacles that you've embraced and overcome?

Joan Chittister: No, because I've never met anybody who hasn't gone through the same things. I mean, I have learned along the way that struggle is the part of the new making of the self. It's that step-over point in your own life when you say, "Well, not this, but then this." I mean, it's so modeled. Look at the older people in your family. Ask your grandmother and your grandfather, your aunts and your uncles. When they start telling those wonderful old stories—that the kids roll their eyes at and say "La, la, la, la, la"—they're really telling you about their theology of hope. They're really giving you their memories. And, if you remember, the first time you heard the stories you said, "How did you do that? How did you walk ten miles to school?"

Lillian Daniel: Through the snow!

Joan Chittister: Don't forget the "through the snow" thing! Right. I have to be carried to the bus station! And yet, somehow or other, out of this they became this, out of that they learned this. Yes, they've all been there. In a sense this hasn't been easy; these programs haven't been easy for me. Why? Because I'm uncomfortable with that kind of a public exposition about suffering because I've had so much joy in my life. I wouldn't ever want anybody to think that my life was nothing but suffering. My life has been every kind of suffering, as has yours. And if it's anything—if our lives are anything, any kind of a witness to the people around us—it ought to be that, yes, like you, I have suffered. And don't be afraid.

Lillian Daniel: Let's go back to the stories of our elders. I was so struck by the power and the love of your Benedictine community that when your mother was ill, not only do you covenant to care for one another but that they brought your mother into the home to live with you. Is there a sort of a prophetic word there to our society about how we in American culture care for our elders or perhaps don't care for them?

Joan Chittister: Thanks for asking that, Lillian, because that's core and key. Most people wouldn't know that Benedictine monasteries in Europe opened the first infirmaries in the world. Why? Because the theology of the time still struggled between life as a process and infirmity as punishment for sin. The monks went out, the sisters went out, and picked up dying people in the road and brought them in to their own monasteries to care for them as a sign that God's love follows us all the way to the grave; that sickness or illness is not a sign that we have been cast out by God.

When that happened to my mother, I was not in the country—you won't be surprised to hear! And our sisters went to the housing for the elderly complex that I had her in at that time. She had oil on the stove and she didn't know it was there. The oil burned black. They thought that it was a fire. As a matter of fact, it was simply that she sat in the middle of it and didn't know what was happening. Our sisters went to the door. They couldn't contact me. Nobody could call me and ask me what's to happen. It was immediate. They went to the door, they knocked on the door and they said, "Mrs. Chittister, Sr. Joan wants you to come home with us until she comes back." And my mother said, "To Joan's house?" And they said, "Yes. Sr. Joan wants you to come to her house with us and then when she comes back you can decide what you do next." And my mother said, "Isn't that nice! You're going to take me to Joan's house with you?" They said, "Yes." She said, "Where's my purse?" She picked up her purse and she walked out. She never asked again. She never asked what the apartment was like. She never asked if the rent was paid. She simply moved into the monastery and became one of the funniest creatures the house has ever seen!

Daniel Pawlus: Well, one of the beautiful things about this story for me, too, and it resonates in the work that you continue to do, is by acknowledging the struggle and your own scars you're able to have a deep compassion for people who are also in struggle. How do you see that as a reward in your daily life for all that you do?

Joan Chittister: Without struggle, you will be doomed to perpetual, narcissistic selfishness. It's

in struggle that you really learn. Oh yes, we all need one another, we say blithely, until there's nothing left of ourselves and some stranger walks in and saves us. Then you know, your insides know, forever that you're the next stranger in line. When something happens in front of you, you respond. Struggle is the grace of the call to witness and without it you have nothing but "do good-ism." You don't have compassion. You don't have understanding. You don't have presence. You just have a fine sense of what a good person you are.

Daniel Pawlus: But being in that moment and acknowledging the reality of the struggle and what it is for that unique individual.

Joan Chittister: Who saved the man beaten on the road to Jericho? The Samaritan, who was the total outcast in society that nobody wanted to talk to, nobody would touch, nobody would go with. This is clearly the parable, the paragon, of suffering making the world go round.

Lillian Daniel: Do you think, Sister Joan, that there's a way in which parents, in their desire to protect their children from suffering and struggle, do their children a disservice?

Joan Chittister: Do I think? I know! I know. The message I got at home was fight your own battles.

Daniel Pawlus: Which is very clear in the walk that you've shown us.

Joan Chittister: Well, thank you.

Daniel Pawlus: And I admire that so much about you because you're not afraid of struggle. You almost seek it out in a way to embrace it, to show your love for it, to continue to examine what it's going to bring up in you and your spiritual process.

Joan Chittister: Well, I'm no masochist, I'll tell you!

Daniel Pawlus: Certainly not.

Joan Chittister: But, yes, you're right about the fact that I think I am quite sensitive to the suffering other. I can see it in their eyes before I see it in their body. I know that people are lost. Having said that, I have to also say I have another memory. In second grade, Sister said, "All those of you who want to be a martyr, raise your hand." I'm the only kid in the class who didn't raise my hand! I didn't think it was a good idea then. I don't think it's a good idea now. The fact of the matter is that you take as gift what the pitfalls in your own life are and if you really grow from them and learn, then you learn that now you're prepared, you see. Now you understand struggle. Now you are prepared to be a presence in the life of the struggling other. So, yes, of course, you begin to say, "Where do I belong?" Of course, you do.

Daniel Pawlus: Thank you for being with us, for sharing your love with us.

Joan Chittister: God bless both of you. Thank you, Lillian.

Lillian Daniel: It's been wonderful.

CLOSING REMARKS

Daniel Pawlus: We've come to the end of our three-part series with Sr. Joan Chittister. I hope you've enjoyed this time as much as we have. We want to thank our studio audience and you at home for being with us.

If you'd like a free printed transcript or audio copy of today's program—or the entire series—stay tuned for our phone number and address. We also have DVDs available for a \$25 donation. Thanks again for joining us. I'm Daniel Pawlus.

Lillian Pawlus: And I'm Lillian Daniel. Now, from all of us at "30 Good Minutes," have a wonderful week and, even in the face of struggle, may your heart be filled with hope.