

Discussion Questions

Called To Question: A Spiritual Memoir

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Question



a spiritual memoir

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QUESTIONS:

1. Pretend you are listening to the conversation between the monastic and the seeker in the opening two sentences of this section. By way of response, what you would say to the monastic after hearing what he said? To the seeker?
2. Prayerfully reflect on the first paragraph on p. X. Then share a time when you discovered “. . . the freedom that comes with beginning again, with finding new truth, new ways of being alive. . . .”

Preface to the Paperback Edition

QUESTIONS:

1. “We live at a crossover moment in history. Nothing is what it used to be. . . Things we thought would never change are now barely recognizable” (XIV). Sister Joan wrote these words in 2004. She gives several examples of what she meant. These many years later offer 3 examples you think uphold her point today.
2. Sister Joan writes, “In a culture of questions, thinking is the highest art, conscience is the highest virtue” (XIX). Choose a person in the US/world today you believe embodies this art and virtue. Explain why.

Overview Question

QUESTION:

1. After each chapter share what sentence or idea was most meaningful for you. Explain why.

Prologue: The Journey from Religion to Spirituality

QUESTIONS:

1. Read the 4th paragraph on page 4 several times. Focus particularly on these words of Sister Joan: “That day. . . was the day I began the conscious, perilous, journey from religion to spirituality, from the certainties of dogma to that long, slow, personal journey into God.” When did this same journey happen for you? Discuss.
2. On page 9 Sister Joan writes, “The spiritual life begins when we discover that we can only become spiritual adults when we go beyond the answers, beyond the fear of uncertainty, to that great encompassing mystery of life that is God.” How would you describe the spiritual life?

Chapter 1: Religion: A Finger Pointing at the Moon

QUESTIONS:

1. Answer one of the two following questions found on p.13:
 - a. What is it that can possibly take us so far afield from the initial believing self?
 - b. How do we explain to ourselves the journey of getting from there to here, from unquestioning adherence to institutional answers, to the point of asking faithful questions?
2. “The tension between religion at its best and religion at its worst drives people from church to church, searching for authenticity. It drives them as well, from the God of the institution to the God of the spirit within” (16). Do you agree or disagree with this statement by Sister Joan? Explain why and give an example to support your position.

Chapter 2: Spirituality: Beyond the Boundaries of Religion

QUESTIONS:

1. In this chapter, Sister Joan writes many statements about the meaning or definition or nature of religion and of spirituality. Copy three statements about religion that you found helpful. Explain why you chose these. Then copy three statements about spirituality that you found helpful and explain why you chose them.
2. What is the most significant awareness you have gained by reading what Sister Joan has said about religion and spirituality in this chapter?

The Inward Life: A Discovery of the Obvious

QUESTIONS:

1. Once upon a time, a person over sixty years of age said, sparingly to a very few people, “When I grow up I want to become a mystic.” Did you find any irony in her statement? What? If she said this to you, what questions might you ask her?
2. Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB, writes about “the gift of incarnation: of seeing ‘God with us’. . . everywhere.” Do you think her description of “the gift of the incarnation” is a way to describe what it may mean to be a mystic? Discuss.

Chapter 3: The God Within: Who Shall I say sent Me?

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you agree or disagree with Sister Joan that, “The system never changes because the people with the power to change it know that they would stand to lose power if they did.” Explain your position.
2. “To find God means to be obliged to search beyond the images of limitation, to the essence, to the mystery, to the spirit” (35). How would you describe your search for God currently? What are two or three aspects of your search that led you to where you are now?

Chapter 4: The Presence of God: The Truth that Sets us Free

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes regarding what she was taught about God, sin, faith as a little girl on p.38. She states, “It worried me in second grade. It worried me for years.” (38) Did you have some of the same worries about these matters as a young child? Please share.
2. The story is told about a little girl, also in second grade, who was told by Sister Hildegard in religion class that she was to love God above all things, all people. The little girl came home and said, “Mama, Sister said I am supposed to love God more than you.” Her non-Catholic mother responded, “Well, honey, you should.” The little girl vehemently exclaimed, “Well, I DON’T!” Have you experienced similar “cognitive dissonance” growing up in the faith community of which you were a part? Discuss.

Chapter 5: Prayer: Every Time I do get Time

QUESTIONS:

1. In this beautiful chapter find at least five or more descriptions of prayer. Which one or two has deepened your understanding of prayer? Elaborate.
2. Go to the website of the Erie Benedictines. Using one of Sister Joan's descriptions of prayer, identify information on the website that affirms that description. See www.eriebenedictines.org.

Chapter 6: The Call of God: An Echo in the Heart

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes on p. 50: "Any road is a good road as long as it takes us where, at the deepest center of the self, we know that we should be." Are you on "a good road" at this time in your life? What is it like? Where and how did you discover this road?
2. "Everyone of us is called, by virtue of what we love and what we do well, to give something to the world that will bear the stamp of our presence here" (51). What have you given to the world that you hope you will be remembered for?

Chapter 7: Insight: The Alchemy of Experience

QUESTIONS:

1. Re-read the last paragraph on p. 56. Notice the second last sentence in particular: "In the end, I finally came to see that I needed all those things to become more than the person any single one of them could evoke in me." Reflecting on your own life, could you say this is also

true for you? Please share.

2. What “insight” did this chapter give you about “selfness”?

Chapter 8: Solitude: The Balm of the Soul

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes at the bottom of p.66: “I had peace, but I had yet to determine whether the desire for aloneness was really a spiritual call or simply the temptation to hide for a while.” Does this conflict also ring true for you? Please share.

2. “Solitude brings the raw material of life to the surface of our souls. It turns an inner light on the external chaos of our lives and requires us to come to grips with it. Then the questions speak to us loud and clear. . .” (68). Do you think this may be one reason why many people use “busyness and responsibilities” as an excuse for avoiding finding time for solitude in their lives? Discuss your thoughts about this.

Chapter 9: The Self: The Ground of our Becoming

QUESTIONS:

1. A courageous honesty emboldens the following lines on p. 73: “I have worshipped so many false gods in life, yet in the collapse of each of them – and they have indeed all collapsed – I have come closer, ironically, to the god who is God.” Can you say the same about your life? Recall at least 5 false gods you may have worshipped at one or more times in your life. How did they come to collapse? Did the collapse lead you to a closer relationship with God? Share as honestly as you are able.

2. Referring to the quote by May Sarton at the bottom of p. 73, have

you fought for growth and understanding, no doubt painful, in your own life? Share two or three instances that illuminate this “fight.”

Chapter 10: Commitment: The Place of Change in the Spiritual Life

QUESTIONS:

1. Of the many statements Sister Joan makes in this chapter about commitment, choose two or three that have resonated with you the most. Explain why.
2. What is your response to Sister Joan’s assessment of the decision by the Sister to leave the community? Discuss your thoughts about this.

Chapter 11: Balance: Going Through Life Whole and Holy

QUESTIONS:

1. Can you identify with Sister Joan’s “confession” on p. 85 which begins, “The message is a clear one. . .”? Explain.
2. Read Sister Joan’s quote on p. 86 that begins, “I don’t know what holiness is anymore but I doubt that it is rule-keeping, because nobody does.” What do you think “holiness” is?

Chapter 12: Darkness: A Way to the Light

QUESTIONS:

1. Imagine you and Sister Joan are having a conversation about darkness in the spiritual life. She says to you: “Darkness, I have discovered, is the way we come to see. It creates the depressions that,

once faced, teach us to trust. It gives us the sensitivity it takes to understand the depth of the pain in others. It seeds in us the humility it takes to learn to live gently with the rest of the universe. It opens us to new possibilities within ourselves. Darkness is a very spiritual thing.” How would you respond to her?

2. Sister Joan writes on p. 94: “I have decided that security is my sin but not only my sin.” What is your sin?

Immersion in Life: The Other Side of Inwardness

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes of the theology of negation on p. 98: “But it thrived in earlier ages. And it did untold amounts of damage. Not only to the body itself, but to the spirit as well. It made all of life suspect...” Were you exposed to this theology growing up? If yes, can you share an incident where it caused you damage? Did you grow beyond it? What helped you in that process?

2. “Life is one long learning process never achieved, never accomplished,” writes Sister Joan on p. 100. Do you find such a statement hopeful or disconsolate? Explain.

Chapter 13: Relationships: To Know and Be Known

QUESTIONS:

1. Among other things, Sister Joan writes about love in this chapter. Reflect on the quotation about love below. Share what memories or experiences it resurrects in you.

“When we are mirrored in the eyes of someone who loves us and accepts us in our essence, our soul is released.” ---Marion Woodman,

p. 107

2. “I thank God I was never seduced by ‘detachment’” states Sister Joan on p.106. Were you? What has it meant to you positively or negatively? Why?

Chapter 14: Friendship: The Gift of Independence

QUESTIONS:

1. “Friendship is a holy thing, but it is not an easy thing,” from Sister Joan’s perspective. Do you think it is possible that sometimes being a friend means “getting out of the way”? Share your thoughts.
2. Sister Joan makes many significant comments about friendship in this chapter. Which one or two most closely resemble your own experience of friendship? Explain.

Chapter 15: Listening: The Beginning of Wisdom

QUESTIONS:

1. “We become those who have touched us,” states Sister Joan on p. 122. Also, someone once wrote, “We become what we love.” Choose one of these two quotations and share how true it has been/is for you.
2. Name one or more persons who is or has been a wisdom figure in your life. Explain why and share the most important lesson you have learned from them.

Resistance: The Gospel Imperative

QUESTIONS:

1. In this section Sister Joan writes about the chasm between the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the secular. She decries

“...the kind of spirituality that gets out of touch with reality and so calls itself more spiritual because of it” (127). Give several examples you have observed of such an out-of-touch spirituality in one or more religions today.

2. “Every era manufactures a heresy proper to the times. Quietism is ours. We call it ‘separation of church and state’” (128). Do you think this is the strategy many “religious” politicians use to support policies that clearly contradict gospel teachings such as the Great Commandment, Matthew 26: 36-40? Share why or why not?

Chapter 16: Justice: Passion for the Reign of God

QUESTIONS:

1. “The truth is, I think, that what we don’t name we enable,” states Sister Joan. (133) Prayerfully reflect upon one personal and one political reality/circumstance that you have been reluctant to name and have therefore enabled. Share if you can.
2. What justice issue are you most committed to in both word and deed? Discuss your efforts.

Chapter 17: Power in the Powerless: The Courage to Refuse Evil

QUESTIONS:

1. In failing to “speak truth to power” responding to the Vatican’s refusal to ordain women in 1976, Sister Joan said of herself: “I failed to claim my power and in that failure failed to empower others, as well.” Please share an example from your own life where you have done the same. What did you learn from your failure?
2. The real spiritual question, Sister Joan asserts is “Do I have the

courage to say no to it” (145). Can you share one or more examples of what you have said “NO” to in the name of justice?

Feminist Spirituality: The Coming of a New World

QUESTIONS:

1. In this book Sister Joan references many feminist women who have had the courage to denounce sexism, misogyny, racism, etc. Some are Ada Maria Isasi Diaz; Rita Nakashima Brock, Anne Carr, Carter Heyward, Maria Harris, Janet Kalven, Mary Buckley and others. Choose one of these women and research, briefly, what their contribution was/is to the feminist movement in the USA.
2. “Feelings are the hallmark of feminist spirituality,” Sister Joan claims on p. 152. Why are feelings so central to feminist spirituality? What does this imply for both women and men?

Chapter 18: Society and Women: The Loss of Soul

QUESTIONS:

1. How has feminism impacted your life personally and professionally?
2. Share a story about a woman in your life who has been a role model in terms of her courage confronting sexism and misogyny. What was her greatest gift to you?

Chapter 19: Men and Women: The Discovery of the Adult

QUESTIONS:

1. As a woman, how have you grappled with the sex-role stereotyping Sister Joan highlights on page 166. As a man reading this, how have you done this?
2. “Feminist spirituality demands that women become adults” (165). Sister Joan lists some examples of what that means. Would you add others? Which have been most challenging for you? Explain.

Chapter 20: The Church and Women: Speaking in the Name of God

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan asks some searing questions about the Catholic Church on p. 169 in her journal entry for May 23rd. Prayerfully reflect on them. Could it be that a question aligned with hers is the one Diarmuid O’Murchu contends a new generation of theologians is asking today, namely, “How do we cultivate a spirituality (or religion) that can transcend the addiction to patriarchal power” (ADULT FAITH, 119). Share any insights you may have.
2. “. . . women have for long ignored the truth in themselves in order to avoid the pain of knowing” (172-173) What do you think this “pain of knowing” includes or requires?

Ecology: The Other Side of the Spiritual Life

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan writes, “There is no doubt about it: Ecology is an essential element of the spiritual life. And if we are not converted to it soon enough, it may well be too late.” React to that statement. Do you think this is true? Explain.
2. Have you been tainted by the cult of human superiority? How has it effected your relationship with nature? How about white superiority? How has it effected your relationships with other races and cultures? What about male superiority? How has it effected your relationship with men and women?

Chapter 21: Nature: The Voice of God around US

QUESTIONS:

1. “God is speaking to me all the time,” Sister Joan writes in her journal for August 30th. Can you say the same thing? Why or why not? If yes, what has helped you to hear God’s voice “all the time?” If no, what obstacles have impaired your hearing?
2. Do you believe, as does Sister Joan, that in the end, “all shall be well”? Explain.

Chapter 22: Creation: The Process that Never Ends

QUESTIONS:

1. “It is when we face God in one another, in creation, in the moment, that the real spiritual journey begins,” states Sister Joan. What spiritual practices help you to do this as you embark each day on your spiritual

journey?

2. Prayerfully reflect on the “shrines in your life” past and, if you have any, present. Name each. How did you grow beyond them? Describe the liberation you have experienced.

Dailiness: The Gifts of the Mundane

QUESTIONS:

1. “God is where we are, calling us to be Christ there” (203). What advice would you give to someone who is struggling to be conscious of this throughout the day?
2. Sister Joan writes, “It’s when we go on despite the fact that quitting would be more satisfying that we know that God has taken control of our lives. Then, we are being used for something greater than ourselves.” Share an experience you have had that has proved this true in your life.

Chapter 23: Struggle: The Search for God in Darkness

QUESTIONS:

1. On p.209, at the end of her journal entry, Sister Joan states that “Suffering exposes us to ourselves.” And, in his book, *Just This*, Fr. Richard Rohr reflects: “If we understand suffering to be whenever we are not in control, then we see why some form of suffering is absolutely necessary to teach us how to live beyond the illusion of control and to give that control back to God and the flow of reality” (78). Examine an experience of suffering you have had. Do these insights about suffering from Sister Joan and Fr. Rohr say anything to you? Discuss.

2. Sister Joan mentions “. . . the moment of spiritual emancipation” on p.212. What has such a moment been like for you? Please share.

Chapter 24: Joy: The God Who Loves Laughter

QUESTIONS:

1. “Life, bare and simple, is a wonderful thing,” states Sister Joan. (216) Then she asks, “How do we learn that? And what does it mean for the spiritual life itself?” While she answers these questions in this chapter, how would you answer them?
2. Name three things that bring you joy and share how each in its particular way affects your spiritual life.

Chapter 25: Sanctity: The Task of Growing into God

QUESTIONS:

1. Sister Joan declares, on p. 222, that “The face of God is imprinted on the face of every one we see. God is no one of them, and God is more than all of them, but without them, we miss all the tiny glimpses of God we’re being given on the way.” Share any five people, places, animals, flowers, etc. where you find “glimpses of God” in your daily life. How do these enrich your spiritual life?
2. Find a photo, poem, song, symbol that helps you to remember, “there is no standing still in the spiritual life” (225). Explain why it does so.

Epilogue

QUESTION:

1. What sentence in this final section of the book has the most meaning for you? Share why.