



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5105

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WELCOME

Lillian Daniel: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re delighted you’ve joined us for the first program in a three-part series that explores the spirituality of struggle and hope. I’m Lillian Daniel.

Daniel Pawlus: And I’m Daniel Pawlus. Our guest for the next three weeks is Sr. Joan Chittister, one of America’s towering spiritual voices. She’s a best-selling author, internationally known lecturer, and a champion for peace.

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. This 3-part series is based on her award-winning book, “Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope.”

Daniel Pawlus: We’re so glad to have a studio audience for this series, many of whom are students from Loyola and DePaul Universities. So a special welcome to them.

In the next three weeks we’ll get to know Sr. Joan as she shares some deeply personal stories. A while ago we visited her at the monastery in Erie, Pennsylvania, where she talked about her earliest days as a Benedictine novice. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Joan Chittister: I was born in the hills of Pennsylvania in a small town by the name of Dubois. My stepfather was a welder and he moved us out of Dubois into the Pittsburgh area. There were just the three of us. My mother and I had a very close relationship. She was brilliant. I don’t use that word casually about anybody.

I had already entered the monastery. I was sixteen. I was sent to a local doctor with what everybody thought was a sprained back of some type. As each doctor examined me, I felt the tension in the room get higher and higher. Suddenly, the third doctor came in and he said, “My dear child, I am sorry to tell you this but you have polio. We have an ambulance on the way.” When they took me into the hospital, my mother and father were already standing at the end of the walkway into the front door. It was a most poignant moment. I remember their faces. I remember thinking that somehow or other what had happened to me was hurting them more than it was hurting me. And it’s funny, because I said to myself, “I have to get well. This is going to

kill them. I have to get well.” And it was a drive. I never for a moment, therefore, thought I wasn’t going to get well. At that time you were rolled down a hall and lowered into a boiling hot water tank. It was probably very helpful but I can’t tell you how traumatic it was. When I look back at those moments now, I realize, I say to myself, “My Lord in heaven, sixteen!” And then I say to myself, “Ah! What a wonderful passage into a adulthood, to have literally been tried by fire and survived.”

There is no doubt about the transformation that came to me during that period. When I sit here and go inside now and say what was really operating in you: fear. Fear I would be rejected, fear that I couldn’t function, fear that I couldn’t succeed, fear that I’d be left behind. But the other side of the scar is survival. You can survive anything. You can survive. You have to decide to survive. All you have left now is to choose how you will live.

INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: And now, it’s my great pleasure to welcome Sr. Joan Chittister.

MESSAGE

Joan Chittister: Thanks, Lillian.

“We grow because we struggle,” the writer L. C. Allen said once. “We learn and we overcome.” From the age of fourteen, I had known myself to be a writer. I wrote short story after short story after short story. Always secretly, but always seriously. They were my life within a life. I created characters and situations and places that said something to me about what I saw around me, about human struggle, about dark, driving motives and hidden pain. Writing was all I ever wanted to do in life, in a world in which women writers were an almost totally unknown quantity. But at the same time, I had no idea how to go about doing it. And complicating the situation was the fact that I had wanted to be a nun even longer than I had wanted to be a writer.

So, in the end, I entered the monastery, but I went on writing regardless and began to live in two worlds, the world of secret writing and the world of the teacher. Why? Because what the community really needed was teachers, so I was allowed to major in English. But my secret hope went on. My secret hope was that I would also learn to write there by reading great writers. The literature program I was in was a good one, but it was still a cavernous distance from the world of creative writing. But then, suddenly, out of a black hole of nothingness it seemed to me, word came from the prioress of my community that now that my undergraduate degree was completed, I was to apply for admission for a master of fine arts in creative writing at Iowa State University, the then Mecca of professional writers.

I remember that my hands shook as I signed the final registration papers, enclosed the writing sample, and sealed the large manila envelope. All this time, it finally seemed, the superiors of the community had known what I really wanted, where I really belonged, and it was going to happen. It was going to happen here in this monastery. And to me.

It was January when I received the letter of admission. I would begin the two-year program in June it read. I really don't remember much else about the rest of that year except that every day

seemed easier than it had *ever* been before, every moment now was light. I was on my way. Mid-May came before I even realized that it was spring. And then, out of nowhere, I got another telephone call.

No explanation was ever given. All I know is that the purpose of that call, from the very superior who had told me to make the application, was to tell me that I was now to withdraw it, that it would, she said, "be better for my humility to go to our children's summer camp as third cook than to go to graduate school." I was not, she said, "ready for a master's degree."

Now that may not seem like much to many, but to me it began one of the greatest struggles of my life. It was, you see, the clear end of the dream, the loss of the hope. It was forced change at the center of my personal universe.

How do we explain such things? How do we survive them? And most of all, what happens to us spiritually as a result? The great secret of life is how to survive struggle without succumbing to it, how to bear struggle without being defeated by it, how to come out of great struggle better than when we found ourselves in the midst of it in the first place.

There *are* ways to survive the interruptions of life. We can, for instance, simply assume that life is a "plan" God has made for us. Then we see ourselves as a collection of dancing puppets on a string. We are simply victims of God's designs. Whatever happens, we know, happens because God wants whatever perverted, malignant thing it is. Everything then, they tell us, is God's will: God's will that the poor are poor, I guess. God's will that women are routinely beaten and routinely ignored. God's will that lives are ruined and children abandoned and villages full of the bombed out helpless. God's will that my life is warped and broken and desperately unstable. God's will. This spirituality feeds the notion that God is responsible for evil—not we, not I. We human beings are simply pawns in God's great godless game.

Or a second way to deal with struggle, just as groundless, just as unhelpful as the first, is to assume that God is the magician who molds circumstances and consequences to our liking. This God makes red lights turn green. This God sees to it that death and suffering and pain become a kind of vending machine game. You put enough suffering in, you get a blessing out.

In both those approaches, what makes the victim a victim is that they have failed. Either they believe too little or they feel too much. Either they don't accept God's plan for them or they don't accept the fact that pain is good, that unhappiness is better than happiness, that defeat is better than victory.

But God is not a puppeteer and God is not a magic act. God is the ground of our being, the energy of life, the goodness out of which all things are intended to grow to fullness. Yet how can we possibly equate the two: a God of good with a life of struggle?

But struggle, we learn as the years go by, is not without its own great gifts. To struggle is to begin to see the world differently. It gives us a new sense of self. Struggle tests all the faith in the goodness of God that we have ever professed we have. It requires an audacity we did not know

we had. It demands a commitment to the truth. Struggle is what leads us to self-knowledge. It builds forbearance. It tests your purity of heart. Struggle, in other words, brings total metamorphosis of soul. If we are willing to persevere through the depths of struggle we can emerge transformed. Enduring struggle is the price to be paid for becoming everything we are meant to be in this world.

I can taste to this very moment the sick feeling that came with that phone call that would, in the end, change the entire direction of my life. I remember feeling tossed in the air like dry straw. I remember barely being able to breathe on the other end of the line. There went the short stories; there went the novels I would write. There went what I had wanted all my life. And all for no reason. All without cause. All without sense. And in its place, nothingness.

What I did not have that day was the wisdom of soul it takes to see what would come in their place; that someday I would find myself writing fact instead of fiction; concentrating on the real rather than the maybe; working with people rather than characters; writing my truth rather than my fantasies. In fact, I had no patience at all for the thought of anything else. What I did not have that day was the strength of spirit to imagine that whatever the pain of the change, there was something in it that would call more out of me than I ever imagined was there.

The kind of struggle that shocks us into new beginnings is the kind of struggle that gives us new life. It forces us down unwanted paths. It leads us stumbling through the rills and recesses of the dark sides of the soul—angry, fearful, resistant, and unbelieving. But it also prods us from task to task in life until, at the end, we find ourselves full-statured and full of grace. Indeed, as Allen says, “We grow because we struggle. We learn and overcome.”

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, we are always so delighted to have with us and I'm thrilled today we get to talk about you a little bit more in addition to the topic that you're addressing. I want to start by asking you about the part of your message that talked about the perception of God, not as a magician, not as a puppeteer, but grounded in this presence. And for you personally, what I sense is that it's a partnership on a daily basis for you. Tell us how you awake. What motivates you in your personal relationship each day with God, your understanding of that? If you could speak to that a little bit more.

Joan Chittister: Well, you're asking a wonderful but a difficult question, Dan, because having been in monastic life all my life, I've lived immersed in the Scriptures, where for the monastic, God and I are in constant conversation, you know, three, four times a day, one way or another, in sacred reading or in formal choral prayer. The point is that pretty soon we become what we do. You know, it's like the happily married couple who finish one another's sentences, who see life through the scrim with the other person's face painted on the scrim. Pretty soon, God's face is on that scrim and the presence of God becomes the walking companion of life. You don't do anything without the sense of that presence or the measure of that presence.

In a sense, I honestly believe that every human being has that and doesn't realize it. We have taught people that life has something to do with your distance from God. At the same time we'll tell them God is everywhere, but not in you! We make life some sort of a hula-hoop game: jump this hoop, get a little piece of God; jump two hoops, get two pieces of God; go to church five times a week, get a big piece of God.

The rule of Benedict written in the sixth century, in chapter seven on humility, says that the first degree of humility is to be aware of the presence of God in you. It's not a merit theology. You don't buy God. You don't coax God. You don't persuade God. You don't captive God. You don't put salt on God's tail. like they told you when you were a little kid, you could catch a bird. Put salt on the bird's tail! You could catch God. We spend our lives trying to catch God. Where is God?

Lillian Daniel: He's right here.

Joan Chittister: Right here! We're slivers of God. Once you become aware of that, once you know that the function is the awareness of God, the growing into the presence of God, the awesome responsibility of consciousness of God, then you can proceed. Then you can stop the false guilt. Then you can stop this vending machine religion or spirituality. Then you can sink into life as it is for you because God is the companion in that life. Then it becomes a conversation of life. So I guess you're right. Yes, I think you're right.

Daniel Pawlus: But it's an active participation each day, each moment with the work that you do with your writing, with your speaking, with everything.

Joan Chittister: Well, you always know that everything you're doing is of God. Active participation. Sometimes I think it's passive participation. God is there!

Daniel Pawlus: Working through you.

Joan Chittister: I hope! Or at least me working through God.

Daniel Pawlus: That's what I mean. It's this wonderful partnership. Absolutely.

Lillian Daniel: Sister Joan, I want to go back to the moment where you got the phone call telling you that you could not go to the master's degree program and explore that a little bit with you. Maybe it's the Protestant in me, but I want to ask, did you ever think of saying, "Okay, that's what you say, but I have an acceptance letter here. I'm going anyway because I think this is my calling and God could be in that program." We know that religious leaders are fallible and perhaps that person who made the phone call could have been acting out of some other motivation. Did you struggle with that?

Joan Chittister: I struggled with staying in community as opposed to leaving community but I didn't think you left God for something as silly as writing. And for me, there was something in me that knew that that path had something to do with the fulfillment of the spiritual life for me. But I want to go back to your question and in a different way, because my own struggle was

horrendous and we'll find that out as it goes on a bit, but I always...it was my awareness that God is above all the gods you make. And I struggled with a notion of whether or not, secretly, I hadn't made writing my own god. So I struggled with a genuine depression at that time. They hardly had a word for it then. Nobody would have said, "That young woman is depressed." Nobody would have said that. They would have said, "Shape up! Offer it up. Obey." Funny how that is not a good recipe for depression, but it was the only one we had at the time!

Lillian Daniel: Hand it over to the puppet master.

Joan Chittister: Hand it over to the puppet master. That's right. This is God's plan for you. This is God's will for you. Third cook at a children's camp. I couldn't cook a thing! A third cook meant scrub the floors after all the good cooks dump the flour on them. That's what it meant. But there is another side to your question that's important for you as a younger woman to understand. These were the early 60s. Almost no woman would have done that in any circumstance. Women were not self-initiating. Oh, they were being educated then. They even, quote, "after World War II had jobs" then. But the notion, the real clear notion that a woman was a moral agent and independent clay maker of her own life, who could as a matter of fact, and should, function on her own, was an idea from another planet. It wasn't on this planet at that time.

Now you overlay that with what was the theology of religious life on top of it. I always say our theology of suffering was: dancing is bad, drinking is bad, hemorrhoids are good! I mean that was all religions. It was, in my opinion, a pseudo-spirituality of suffering. You will find as you go through life, you don't have to make it up, you know. You don't have to be the great master of suffering. You'll have plenty, thank you very much. Just learn to deal with it when it comes. But you overlay that theology of suffering, the more you suffer the happier you are, the better God loves you, the fuller life will be for you, in that period. And that was the essence of that theological period. Then you'll understand.

Daniel Pawlus: I'm so glad we have more time to explore this in the coming shows, but thank you for this right now.

Joan Chittister: Thanks, Daniel.

CLOSING REMARKS

Daniel Pawlus: Our time is almost gone, but I want to remind you that part two 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. We also have a DVD of the entire series available for a donation of \$25. I hope you'll visit our website at 30goodminutes.org for more information about this program and a 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 no matter what comes your way, may your heart be filled with hope.