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Joan Chittister speaks of wisdom, graceful aging

Thomas C. Fox | Nov. 8, 2008

Sr. Joan Chittister

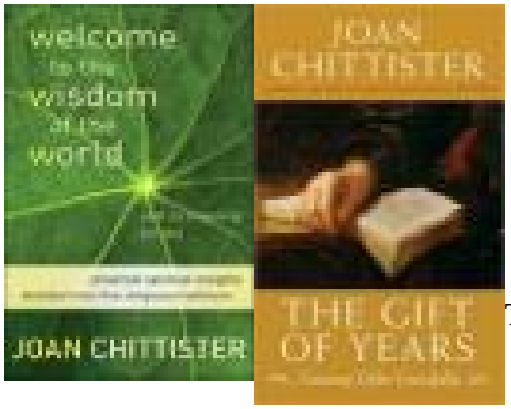
Through four decades, some 30 books, hundreds of *NCR* columns and countless public appearances, this Benedictine monastic from Erie, Pa., lets no one get away with cheap religion. Hers is a Catholicism of substance and challenge, where faith is not defined by easy orthodoxies and where difficult questions are embraced.

She's fearless, never afraid to take on abusive authority, be it in military or clerical garb. Reliably, week after week, she gives an insightful woman's take on current events, often providing a previously unexamined perspective. She gives a forum to the voiceless, offering solace to the powerless.

We are amazed at her energy, amazed that her frenetic activism doesn't seem to capsize her calm spiritual center. She redefines the very word "monastic" with her personal merging of *Lectio Divina*, reading habits, note-taking, and a sharp eye on world events. And she's recently moved to electronic speed with the purchase of an e-book reader, her new Amazon Kindle.

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister: prioress of the Benedictines of Erie; president of the Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses; president of the Federation of St. Scholastica; president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious; U.S. councilor-delegate of the International Union of Superiors General. These were just some of the positions she held -- before she was 45.

Having skipped past 70 recently with no apparent signs of slowing down, she's increasingly sensitive to the gifts of time and aging. Her writings seem to reflect this. They are focused, simple and clear. No time for the extraneous. And all the while more questions need to be answered, assumptions pondered anew. All of this energy has drawn her to matters that rest beneath denominations and creeds, into wisdom, old and new.



This is evidenced by her latest two books: *Welcome to the Wisdom of the World and Its Meaning for You: Universal Spiritual Insights Distilled from Five Religious Traditions* and *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully*.

I wanted to understand why.

It was 3:30 on a Thursday afternoon, the time I was to call. Benedictine Sr. Maureen Tobin, Chittister's good friend and assistant, was quick to answer. "Can you call Joan back in five? Somebody just phoned her."

The second time I got straight through. "Tom, so good to hear your voice," she answered, somewhat out of breath.

"You OK?"

"I'm fine. I'm fine. Really, I am. What you see is what you get. A bit jet-lagged. This has been an intense October."

Chittister, writer and lecturer, is also founder and executive director of Benetvision, the Erie, Pa.-based Center for Contemporary Spirituality, a kind of multiplatform Chittister publishing house. Somehow between books and travel she manages to feed the center with her reflections on the spiritual life. And then there is Chittister, co-chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders and co-chair of the Tikkun Community, a Network of Spiritual Progressives.

"Jet-lagged?" I asked.

She explained she had flown in from Chicago the night before after a quick "in and out" to Newfoundland, which followed another "in and out" to New York. She added that the next day she was off to California for a women's conference sponsored by Maria Shriver. And she said she was looking forward to it!

Welcome to the *Wisdom of the World* takes the reader through five wisdom traditions, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Islamic, asking five questions of each tradition. It combines stories Chittister has gleaned from

many sources with lessons taken from each. Each tradition highlights a special wisdom stream: Hinduism's eternal meaning; Buddhism's enlightenment and desirelessness; Judaism's community of justice and joy; Christianity's call to the beatitudes; and Islam's community of witness and submission.

Answers to life's questions, with essentials pared down by the author, spring from the ages. We learn we share many of these questions and out of this familiarity comes unexpected assurance.

"Why a wisdom book?" I asked.

"I wrote the book because I see coming down the mountain at me a polyglot world that will never be safe from the rest of the world. You no longer have Buddhism safely tucked away in the mountains of Nepal. You cannot go through life without ever meeting a Hindu. Sooner or later, you will encounter the Quran.

"I wrote that book because I considered it a gentle but maybe meaningful introduction to the notion that if there is only one God, then why would we be surprised that there is a common wisdom coming through every stream? And how can we ever again possibly dismiss any of these traditions as possibly not being of God?

"I believe that wisdom is where you go before theology, canons, creedal statements, denominations, because holy wisdom enables respect. The mystics of all traditions did not deal in creeds, in denominations and canons. The mystics dealt with enlightenment, insight and wisdom."

Chittister's latest book, *The Gift of Years*, offers insights into the aging process while turning some old assumptions on their heads. Yes, our bodies age, whether we like it or not. But Chittister is in no way convinced our spirits age, other than as we allow them to. Our personal choices, then, determine our essential age.

Once again, Chittister offers her readers clean, simple and insightful writing as she engages aging through the experiences of fear, joy, adjustment, relationships, sadness, solitude, loneliness, forgiveness and letting go, among others. In each instance, or chapter, she begins with quotations or parables and ends with burden and blessing, things to watch out for or be grateful for as one ages.

"Why *The Gift of Years*?" I asked.

The idea for the book, she explained, came to her more than 25 years ago when as a relatively young prioress of the Erie Benedictine community, she began observing more closely some of the older members of her community, and the way they were living with what she calls "special dignity and depth."

"I knew when I was 45 that I was going to write this book." She continued: "I didn't understand quite what I was seeing then, but I had the prescience that I knew I didn't understand. I decided that before I died I would write a book about the spirituality of aging." What she was witnessing were women who were fully engaged in life despite their aging bodies.

Typically, the first half of life is spent accumulating, she said, and with the second half comes the stripping away. "Babies grasp at everything; we clutch many things; as we age, if we are wise, we open up our hands and begin to let go; we melt into God."

The lesson, said Chittister, is that the longer we hold onto our grasp the less happy our later years will be. "Stripping down, getting down to essence is part of the aging process. It's a beautiful thing. It's a gorgeous thing. [The Benedictine women] tell you they have everything they need, except one thing -- the melting into God."

Letting go is just one aspect of Chittister's take on aging. Another part of her message is to become madly alive

and stay as engaged in the world as is possible. Science, she said, has found that the average time between the beginning of a fatal illness and death is about three months, and that increasingly our elderly are living healthy and engaged lives, free from the worries of raising children and careers, well into their 80s, 90s and beyond.

She debunks the notion that mental acuity falls with the years. Yes, there is some forgetfulness but if you know 5,000 people as an older person instead of 500 as a younger person, it is quite understandable to forget names.

And before I was off the phone, Chittister was especially energized, telling me that no older person need apologize to anyone for "who you are."

"Do not allow yourself to be diminished by anyone," she insisted. It can only harm your spiritual journey -- and that must be protected and enhanced by staying engaged and keeping a radical outlook on life.

I asked for some examples of this growth.

"OK," she began. "Maintain contact with the grandkids. Say to them, 'Let me know where you are going. I'll drive you to the basketball game. Show me your textbook. Tell me what questions you were dealing with in school today. Look at this article. Here is a book I want to talk with you about. I want you to know this movie. Come with me. I want to take you to the art gallery. I just read a book about Monet. You have to know about Monet.' That's refusing to check your name off the list of life. And it's by understanding your responsibility to make a contribution to life, your own and everybody else's, that's how you grow."

The book's summary message?

"We go on growing right to the edge of the grave. So grow."

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Book information

THE GIFT OF YEARS
By Joan Chittister
Published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, $19.95

WELCOME TO THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD AND ITS MEANING FOR YOU
By Joan Chittister
Published by BlueBridge, $20

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