

JOAN
CHITTISTER



WE ARE ALL

One

*Reflections on Unity, Community
and Commitment to Each Other*

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
TO THE MEMORY OF
Sister Maureen Tobin, OSB
DEVOTED COLLEAGUE, DEAR FRIEND
AND WISE COUNSELOR

JOAN CHITTISTER is an internationally known author, lecturer, and visionary voice in church and society. She has written more than 50 books and received numerous awards for her writings and work on behalf of peace, justice, and women's rights. She is executive director of Benetvision, a resource center for contemporary spirituality, and the guiding force of Monasteries of the Heart, an online movement sharing Benedictine spirituality with contemporary seekers. Sister Joan is an online columnist for the **National Catholic Reporter** and co-chairs the Global Peace Initiative of Women. She is past president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and a former prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

INTRODUCTION

Life, we learn young, is one long, unending game of push and pull. One part of us pushes us always toward wholeness, toward a sense of connection with the universe which, in the very act of engagement with the human community, brings us a sense of peace. We are not here as isolates, we realize. We are here to become community. We are on an odyssey with potentiality, and we know it. We have been foreordained to make humanity more humane.

The other part of us, however, pulls us back into ourselves. It separates us from the universe around us and leaves us feeling distant and out of sync. We lack

the sense of kinship that the human family is a family. It deprives us of the universal concern that drives us beyond ourselves to the center of humankind. It leaves us without what it means to be a person with a purpose, a human being whose search is for the ultimate human experience for us all.

Worse, this struggle for unity is an eternal one.

And yet, it is this very paradox of life that stretches us not only to grow but to contribute to the growth of the rest of the universe around us.

We say we seek unity, yes. But lurking within every human act is the gnawing need to be independent, to think of ourselves as distinct from the rest of life. We allow ourselves to be deluded into thinking of ourselves as superior to everything around us, in control of everything and everyone we touch.

Indeed, this search for the fullness of the self is the razor's edge, the teeter-totter, the high-wire act that is the final measure of our happiness, our consciousness of what it actually means to be human. More, it is the answer to the great questions of life: Why am I here? What am I supposed to be doing? What is the spiritual purpose of existence?

It is a spiritual battle for the center of the soul.

Is the purpose of the gift of life to consume it for ourselves, to remake it in our own name? Or is our purpose to join the human race on its way to fullness of life for everyone? Is it to give my life back to Creation safe and undefined? Or is my role in life to be part of knitting life together for everyone so that we are all forever safe?

The struggle between the two sets of choices is an eternal one. The greatest question of them all haunts us: Whatever the battle, is the battle winnable?

This simple little book touches on four elements of mindfulness that account for all the angst in our society right now—moral maturity, spiritual witness, personal greatness, and universal kinship. These are the things that determine whether or not we go through life as part of its solution or part of the weight on its progress.

The choice is actually simple. We must only decide if we will go on lingering in the shadows of life, forever trying to choose between doing what a numbed world will call “nice,” or step up and, in the face of evil, proclaim instead what is right.

CHAPTER ONE

*I firmly believe that our salvation
depends on the poor.*

DOROTHY DAY



Who Will Save Us?

This insight itself is a kind of life-changer. The heart stops for a moment as the words sink in. It is, at the very least, certainly a soul-stretcher. We begin to look again at the way we see the world.

Even more than that, perhaps, it changes our very sense of the purpose and direction of our lives.

It takes a while, in fact, to process the words: Our salvation depends on the poor? Surely that's impossible. A kind of holy exaggeration. Our salvation depends on ourselves.

No, actually not. Not if we rethink some of the things we know about life.

Like everything else in life, the very concept of work has evolved over the centuries. We've gone from communal farming in agricultural communities to individual positions based on individual interests or opportunities in a money economy. As a result, of course, our social systems over time began to look very different. Except for one thing. The fact is that whatever work we do, we still work for the reasons people have always worked. We work to maintain ourselves. We earn our bread by the sweat of our hands, *The Rule of Benedict* tells us in the sixth century.

But more than that, we also work to maintain the planet itself: "Till the land and keep it," scripture commands us in Genesis. We're not put here, we come to understand, to exploit the land or threaten the life of the planet. We are to develop it and protect it. We are to take responsibility for the creation we've been given.

At the same time, we work driven by the internal need to develop ourselves—our interests and our talents. We are to create with the creator, to bring ourselves to the fullness of ourselves just as we are to develop the rest of creation.

And yet, despite the obvious, despite the fact that humans are obviously interdependent, we struggle between becoming fully human and being spiritually underdeveloped. The issue that is most in question, actually in danger, in a highly individualistic society, is whether we must also work to care for the rest of humanity, as well. And, if not, what will happen to those who cannot find work that enables them to care for themselves? And what will happen to the quality of our own humanity, as well?

What kind of human, human beings, shall we become if we become human for ourselves alone?

We must work, in other words, to develop the human community itself.

Work, you see, is bigger than ourselves. Work is a community responsibility, a community act, a community gift. But therein lies the problem. In a highly competitive, capitalist society, the new capitalist scripture is that “God helps those who help themselves.” Which is pious code for “In the end, it’s all up to you—and you are on your own.”

Unfortunately, that will be each of us before life is over. And then what? Then, like everyone else who is

alone and unprotected on our streets right now and waiting for help from us, we will be alone and unprotected. Then, we will be the ones needing help. And where will that help come from if not from those who know their own salvation depends on their willingness to help others?

Scripture is clear: We are taught to “do unto others as we would have others do unto us.” (Matthew 7:12)



“Being our brother’s and sister’s keeper” is about more than praying for the salvation of a set of disembodied souls. We are not bifurcated human beings, part body, part soul. Whatever we do, we do wholly. Or, as N.T. Wright says, “The work of salvation, in its full sense, is about whole human beings, not merely souls.”

There are as many ways of being saved as there are of being lost. Then we all need someone special, someone committed to helping us save ourselves. Mother Teresa says, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

Sometimes we feel sad, out of touch with the world around us, depressed. The people who refuse to allow us to surrender to the undertows of life are our saviors.

Only those who can help us remember that life itself is a gift too precious to waste can bring us back to the fullness of ourselves. Our saviors are not people with magical life skills. They are people who help us to make the best out of life as it is.

To see those in need and do nothing is to become a little less human ourselves.

Do not hesitate to weep and cry for those who weep and cry in front of us. The tears we shed for the pains of others are a measure of our own humanity.

The memory of being helped by someone else in our own lives is what prepares us to help another. “What you remember,” W.S. Merwin writes, “saves you.”

What others have generously done for us is what obligates us to do the same. As Jane Addams taught, “The

good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all and incorporated into our common life.”

The whole human community is waiting for each of us to redeem our unpaid debts of help and care and unearned love. Then, the poor of the world may also, like us, know the gratuitous love of God.

The poor give themselves to us asking for nothing in return but an awareness of their humanity and everything to which it entitles them.

To fail to respond to the poor around us makes the entire world a more sterile, inhuman place. What’s even more true, it marks us as a little less developed ourselves. Martin Buber teaches, “A person cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human. To become human is what this individual person has been created for.”

To save the poor it is necessary to love the poor. Not because they are poor but because no one is meant to be poor in a world of plenty.

If some people are destitute, it is because others have been dulled by affluence. Then we become just one more “Let them eat cake” society where the secure simply assume that the poor are poor because they want to be. As if the poor do not have the needs, the desires, the hopes of us all.

What we do not take responsibility for will become the new normal that destroys us all. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn writes, “The salvation of humankind lies only in making everything the concern of all.”

The distorted ideas we have about what it means to be a society, what it means to be a human being, what it means to be alive determines what the world itself will become. “Fight to escape from your own cleverness,” John Climacus writes. “If you do, then you will find salvation.”

We grow up a little at a time. And in the same manner, we grow interiorly—spiritually—a little at a time. But to ignore our spiritual development is to diminish our own becoming as well as affect the lives of those who need

us. “You cannot dream yourself into a character,” James Froude says. “You must hammer and forge yourself one.”

The poor call us to love as God loves—with reckless generosity and despite merit. They take our self-centeredness and challenge it to the fullness of its humanity.

Only what we do for the poor will count toward the valuation of our own humanity.

To ignore the poor is to ignore the very quality of human life in general. “Love and compassion are necessities,” the Dalai Lama writes, “not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.”

What we do and do not do for the poor will determine the level of our own existence. When we provide for others, we enrich ourselves. We become better, bigger souls; deeper, truer hearts.

The old clothes we give away will not change the nature of life for many. It will only warm them one more day as they go on dying. It’s what we do to end the dying that

counts. “Every day,” Che Guevara writes, “you have to fight so that love for humanity can be transformed into concrete deeds.”

It’s what we set out to do to raise the quality of life for everyone that will, in the end, define what it means to be really human. “We cannot trample upon the humanity of others,” Chinua Achebe writes, “without devaluing our own.”

Evolution, they say, is not over. It is an ongoing state of life. The only question is, Have we ourselves reached its peak, or is there still hope for humanity as a species?

Jewish wisdom teaches that, “To save one life, it is as if you have saved the world.” None of us can save the world, but by saving just one other person we can show the rest of the world how it’s done. Dag Hammarskjöld writes, “It is more noble to give yourself completely to one individual than to labor diligently for the salvation of the masses.”

Only those who live for others as well as for themselves ever really live at all.