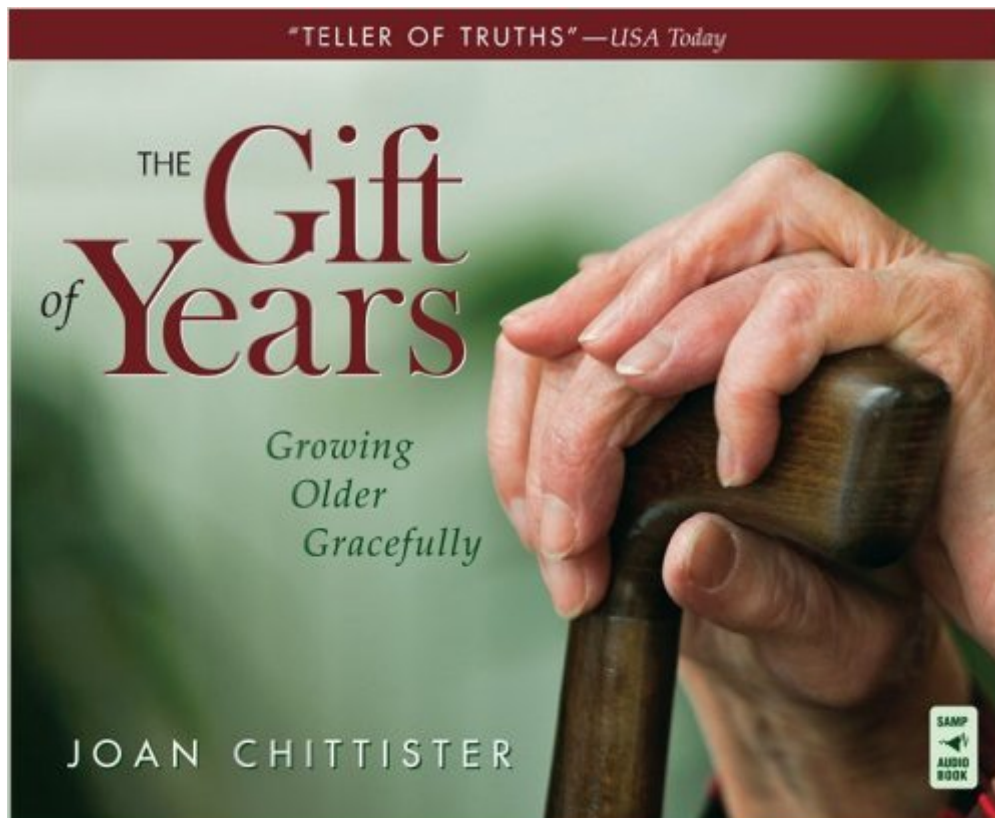


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# The Gift Of Years: Growing Older Gracefully



## Synopsis

Joan Chittister, one of our most celebrated spiritual writers, invites us to embrace older age as a natural part of life that is both active and contemplative, productive and reflective, and deeply rewarding. She encourages us to cherish the blessings of aging and to overcome its challenges. And she shows us clearly that this is a special period of life "maybe the most special of them all. The Gift of Years looks at the many dimensions of aging, the purposes and concerns, struggles and surprises, the potential and joys. And perhaps the most important dimension of older age, Joan Chittister illuminates, is to become aware of its profound purpose: These are the capstone years, the time in which a whole new life is in the making again. The gift of these years is not merely being alive, it is the gift of becoming more fully alive than ever.

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## Customer Reviews

When "The Gift of Years" by Joan Chittister made its way to my mailbox for me to review, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. Was I really the right person to be reviewing this? After all, I am in my thirties, transitioning from youth to middle age. I'm not quite ready for senior citizen status yet. As it turned out, "The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully" is a wonderful lesson in how to live, regardless of our chronological age. Chittister, a Benedictine sister, is 70 years old. She suggests that she may actually be too young to write this book because life still has lessons left to offer. She "reserves the right to revise this edition when she is ninety." Chittister views how we live at any age to be a choice. We are each given the gift of today. It is up to us what we do with it. She counters the idea that old age need be a time of isolation and loneliness and uselessness. Rather, it can be a

time of great connectedness and joy and purpose. It is a time for looking back, not with the pain of regret for opportunities lost, but with understanding of how the life that has been lived has meaning for who we are right now and what our future holds. Chittister maintains that senior citizens have so much to offer to the world at large. Their wisdom and their stories and their experience are a great gift. They also have the time to get involved. Without the pressures of a 9-to-5 job or raising a family, they can volunteer more, make more of a difference. They have the chance to do all the things that they always wanted to do that there was never time for before. "Age does not forgive us our responsibility to give the world back to God a bit better than it was because we were here.

"The thing most wrong about this book," Joan Chittister tells us in this vibrant collection of essays on growing old, "is that I may be too young to write it. I am, after all, only seventy." She is, she tells us, among those whom gerontologists call the "young old," those who are sixty-five to seventy-four and may not yet have attained the ripest wisdom. We are indeed fortunate that Chittister decided not to postpone the writing of *The Gift of Years*, for it is full of the grace of decades of thought and meditation. It is written not only for those of us who are among the old, but for everyone: we are all growing older, and all of us may eventually undertake the search for meaning and fulfillment that lies at the deepest heart of the aging process. *The Gift of Years* is a full basket of rich gifts: forty-plus short essays on the many dimensions of eldering, "its purpose and its challenges, its struggles and its surprises." Each essay begins with words of wisdom from someone who has considered the meaning of growing old, then tells a brief story or an anecdote, offers a reflection, and invites us to participate in a meditation on the burden and blessing of the years. In "Time," for instance, Chittister quotes Pablo Picasso: "It takes a long time to become young." There is an anecdote about a potter named Thomas, who at eighty had lived long enough "to release the beginner in himself again and again." There are reflections: time ages things; time deepens things; time ripens things. And then there is the meditation. The burden of years is allowing time to "hang heavy on my hands," Chittister writes; a blessing of years is to "realize what an important and lively time this final period is.

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, has written over twenty-five books that map the terrain of the Christian life, with special attention paid to issues of feminism, international justice, the monastics, and reform in the Catholic Church. I've especially enjoyed *Scarred By Struggle, Transformed By Hope* (2003) based upon the Jacob narrative, *Listen with the Heart* (2003), and *Called to Question* (2004). In *The Gift of Years* she writes for a broader audience that is not necessarily Christian or even religious. Now that she has passed her seventieth birthday, Chittister explores what it means

to grow older gracefully. To do this she has written short (3-5 pages each) meditations on forty themes like regret, ageism, adjustment, letting go, sadness, solitude, success, etc. She begins each chapter with a pithy aphorism from a broad range of poets and prophets, both ancient and modern -- Plato and Picasso, Browning and Byron, Emily Dickinson and Jung. After the brief meditation, she summarizes the chapter by observing both the "burden" and the "blessing" of the theme under consideration. On the idea of the future, for example, she writes, "The burden of these years is to assume that the future is already over. A blessing of these years is to give another whole meaning to what it is to be alive, to be ourselves, to be full of life. Our own life." Which is to say that much of my future of growing older is what I intentionally choose to make it. We all face the inexorable biology of the body and the deterioration of our physical condition. But we also enjoy the possibilities of the "eternity of the spirit" and the frame of mind we choose to follow. One can choose to age passively or actively, says Chittister.

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