

Here is John Koller's selected reading for Spirit Buddies on 3-21-2018. It is a chapter entitled "Joy" from Joan Chittister's book: *The Gift of Years*. I'm certain "Joy" will be an enjoyable choice for welcoming in Spring 2018. Several years ago, Buddies read sections of this book. You might still have this on your shelves.

JOY

"As for old age," Seneca said, "embrace and love it. It abounds with pleasure if you know how to use it. The gradually declining years are among the sweetest in life.... Even when they have reached the extreme limit they have their pleasure still."

There is something about being free of the expectations and deadlines, pressures and responsibilities, schedules and public activities of the middle years that put the later years of life in a totally different light. There is space now and time. There is possibility now and the kind of accent on people, rather than projects, that we haven't known for years. There is a sense of freshness in these years that speaks a foreign language to the heart.

But Seneca emphasized, "If you know how to use it." That's the important part. Knowing what to do with this new sense of time and space is what determines in the end just how happy, how fulfilling those years will be. And so few of us, creatures of a hard-driving, work-ridden society, really do know.

"Did you hear that we're both retiring next month?" she said. Her voice was tight; the words were strained. She was troubled and too embarrassed to admit it. "I don't know what I'm going to do when we're together all the time." She said, affecting a light laugh after a long, troubled pause. "What do we do now? Sit around and look at one another?"

The worry is a common one. In a society that is productivity-centered, what happens to life once the regular routine ends? What happens to us as people because it ends? We haven't been home together all day every day for years. The

very idea can turn the preretirement months into a quiet kind of personal agony. We put on a brave face, but inside the insecurity rages. What will we do now when we get up in the morning? If this is retirement, who needs it? Why go on living when there's nothing left to live for anymore?

Once the great retirement trip is done and over – what do we do then?

All of a sudden, we find ourselves faced with what we thought was supposed to be the acme of life, the pinnacle of it. But when we look down from it now, there's nothing there.

The realization that, after all these years, all we know to do is to work comes thundering down into the center of us. And the center is empty.

We find ourselves at the greatest moment of choice we've ever had, at least since we left home on our own, since we identified what we wanted to do in life, since we made the first great career move, since we decided, finally, to settle down. Now we have to decide how to live without being told how it's done.

The slate is clean. The days are ours. The task now is to learn how to live again.

We can decide to live with joy. Or we can allow ourselves to live looking back with bitterness. We can be bitter about all the things we wanted to do, but felt to constrained to risk. We can be bitter about all the hours we gave to a company that was able to say goodbye to us, without so much as remembering to send a card at Christmastime. We can be bitter because we chose security and independence rather than depth and companionship. We can decide to be bitter because at the end, only the end is left. But whichever we decide – bitterness or joy – decide we must. The rest of our life depends on it.

It can take a while before we begin to realize that retirement really plunges us into joy.

But if we decide to live this new, unscripted time with joy, then life will come pouring into us, almost more fully than we can sometimes bear.

This is the period of life of which the psalmist spoke when he prayed, “O taste and see that our God is sweet....”

What we have been doing all these years was part of God’s will for life. It was all meant for something. It was everything we needed at that time to become a full human being. It was indeed, we know now, very, very sweet. And so is this time now – and for the very same reason. Long life is part of the will of God for us.

This is the period for allowing ourselves to rejoice in the past that brought us to this point, as well as to revel in the possibilities that are the present.

There are lessons to be learned from life before this period that will serve us still – if we will only attend to them. We have every right to live in gratitude for all the stages of life that brought us here, for the memories that gave us great joy, the people who helped us get this far, the accomplishments we carved on our hearts along the way. These experiences cry out to be celebrated. They are no more past than we are. They live in us forever.

They merit a loving smile, a happy laugh, a bittersweet tear or two as well. We can be proud of where we’ve been, what we conquered as we grew, what we became in the doing of it.

We heed to allow these experiences to wash through us again, this time not so much for the circumstances we remember as for the insights they bring, the warmth they give us yet. These are the experiences that had meaning to us then and there is meaning in them yet to be sucked out, to be savored – differently, of course, but still.

We can be full of joy, too, because we have come to the moment of new freedom. Now, heads up and alert, we can examine every possibility and decide for the first time, perhaps, what we really want to do with life, rather than what we must do, or should do, or ought to do. We have the joy of immunity from propriety now. Like children on a beach, we can decide whether we will wear sandals or go barefoot through life from now on.

Most of all, we can decide to walk gently through this last great stage of life when everything begins to come together for us, to make sense, to have new meaning.

We can simply sit and watch a sunset, since we are not rushing home through traffic as the sun goes down.

We can walk across the lawn in the morning dew, smell the grass and pick a dandelion, because like the glorious rose, it has a beauty all its own, as do all things, if we will only learn to look for it.

We can be happy to be seventy, to be where we've been, to know what we know, to have today to do even more. We can begin to make creation the spirit of our spirit and, this time, breathe it in slowly so it saturates our heart and enables us to see the parts of creation we have failed to see before this moment in our lives.

We can decide to smile at everyone we meet, to play with children, to talk to seniors, to ask questions of youngsters – and this time to listen to their answers.

We can determine to pursue something new today, become a learner again, and feel the excitement that begins to rise in us when we do.

We can decide to give ourselves to those who have no one else but us to count on for quality of life themselves.

Now we have it all: opportunity, freedom, and the sense to know what those things demand of us. We have a chance to be the best self we have ever been. And we have the chance to help others do the same.

A burden of these years is to fail to get beyond the bitterness of having been displaced, and to not see that being moved quietly off the platforms of life is also to be free of the stagecraft that goes with them.

A blessing of these years is to wake up one morning and find ourselves drunk with the very thought of being alive. Then, wherever we go we will spread the joy we have finally been able to find in ourselves.