

“Two words come to mind in reading this biographical sketch of the life and work of Elizabeth Johnson: integrity and courage. As a theologian she witnesses to integrity in her quest to experience and understand the mystery of God; as a religious and fellow pilgrim, her courage and fortitude merit emulation.”

—Robert F. Morneau
Auxiliary Bishop Emeritus of Green Bay
Pastor of Resurrection Parish

“Elizabeth Johnson’s ground breaking theological work has nourished me all my religious life. This biography of her describes her journey and profound integrity. Beth’s commitment to holy curiosity helps us all move towards insight. This book explains why.”

—Simone Campbell, SSS
Executive Director NETWORK, Washington, DC

Elizabeth Johnson

Questing for God

Heidi Schlumpf



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*For my parents,
Ed and Mary Schlumpf,
who inspired my Catholicism,
my feminism,
and my love of writing—
all of which come together in this book.*

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A biographer is not supposed to fall in love with her subject, but when your subject is Beth Johnson, it's nearly impossible not to. Before writing this book, I knew Beth only through her work, though I must have met her at least once, as I owned a signed copy of *She Who Is*. She is not someone who enjoys the limelight, so I am grateful that she consented to the project and was so open with me throughout my year of research and writing. She also is the most organized person I have ever met, which is extremely helpful when you're trying to gather and sift through a life's worth of information. Above all, she is kind and caring—this, on top of being one of the most astute and creative theological minds of our generation. I am honored to write about her life.

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Heidi Schlumpf

Introduction

During the busiest season of the academic year, just days before the pinnacle that is commencement, the three dozen members of the theology faculty at Fordham University set aside their grading of final exams and other end-of-the-year administrative tasks for an annual daylong retreat. The idea is to reflect and dream, not to consider specific proposals but rather to brainstorm how to make one of the strongest Catholic theology departments in the country even better. Some still refer to the day as “Mitchell Farm,” since it used to be held at a villa in the Hudson Valley that had been donated to the Jesuits. But after the order sold that property, the retreat day was moved to Fordham’s Westchester campus in West Harrison, New York, which houses the university’s graduate and professional programs. It is a less bucolic site but still remote enough that faculty will not be tempted to scurry back to their offices or meet with students.

The day begins with prayer and ends with a cocktail party and dinner. Faculty members bring their own specialties; the homemade guacamole made by one professor being particularly popular. But before drinks are served, they gather for a final, vespers-like prayer service to conclude their day’s work. The Westchester campus chapel is too small

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to hold them all, so a classroom is turned into a makeshift sacred space. The service, planned by a committee of faculty members, begins with music, includes readings from Scripture, and ends with petitionary prayers that mention any deaths or births that have touched members of the department during the past school year. It is a rare opportunity for these academics, who talk theology all day, to pray together and witness one another's spirituality in a less academic setting.

In May 2011, toward the end of that year's prayer service, a lector began reading a beautiful litany of names for God: Gracious Mystery, Holy Wisdom, Divine Presence, The God Who Accompanies, Ground of Our Being, A Bountiful God. As the names were recited, one faculty member, Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, smiled with knowing recognition. The names had been culled from Johnson's book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, which six weeks earlier had been publicly rebuked by the US bishops' Committee on Doctrine. Although the members of Fordham's faculty had already expressed solidarity with their colleague in various ways—signing statements of support, speaking out in the media, offering comfort and advice—this gesture was perhaps the most poignant. As the many names for God were spoken, Johnson was touched by what was clearly meant as a tribute, but even more importantly, she was struck by the magnificence of the rich theology being done in the church today that those names represented—exactly what she had tried to capture in the book. “It was a real moment of grace,” she recalls.

At the time, Johnson was still embroiled in the controversy that would make her something of a cause célèbre among Catholics, an individual symbol in what came to be seen as part of a larger, unfair attack on women religious in

America in the new millennium. It started in 2008, when the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life initiated an apostolic visitation of the four hundred non-cloistered communities of religious women in the United States out of concern for "the welfare of religious women and consecrated life in general."¹ After the visitation's final report in 2014, another Vatican office, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), began a "doctrinal assessment" of a group of US women's congregations, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), saying it suspected "dissent" and "doctrinal confusion" on the part of that organization.² In the midst of those two headline-producing controversies, the US bishops' committee issued a public criticism of perhaps the most prominent woman religious theologian in the country. All three backfired, at least on the public relations front, with American Catholics rallying to support the beloved sisters who had taught them in their youth and who were seen, in contrast to the male hierarchy, as embodying the best of Christianity in the way they lived out the gospel message of Jesus.

At the time of the retreat prayer service in 2011, Johnson was in the middle of writing what would be a thirty-eight-page response to the bishops' criticism of her book—a response they requested but ultimately would ignore in their "response to her response." She was physically and mentally exhausted, and somewhat spiritually wounded, by the whole ordeal, which had started at the end of March. Still, she was looking forward with enthusiasm to a planned sabbatical the next school year, during which she would put Thomas Aquinas and Charles Darwin in conversation to explore how theology could better respond to the ecological crisis facing the earth. The litany at the retreat prayer service

reminded her of the joy she found in what has been her life's work: to wrestle with the mystery that is God, especially in the context of the experience of Catholics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

That is Johnson's quest, and, despite the hurdles she has faced in her decades of trying to understand God, it is an assignment Johnson has willingly and happily embraced. "To me, it's a spiritual adventure," she says, explaining why she chose the word *quest* for her book's title. "We're never going to capture the fullness of God. God is still going to be greater than all of us."

While such a journey is the responsibility of every human being, it is the particular task of the theologian to ask the questions pertinent to his or her age. Johnson draws on her beloved Karl Rahner, a German priest and theologian who influenced the Second Vatican Council, in seeing questioning as one of a theologian's vital activities. "The day we stop questioning is the day we're dead," she says. "We have an infinite number of questions in us to ask, and each one is implicitly orienting us to the truth, the beautiful, and the good that is God."

At seventy-four, Johnson has lived through times in the church when questioning was suppressed, then encouraged, and once again suppressed. Throughout it all, she has stuck to her belief that theology is not only "faith seeking understanding," as St. Anselm put it in the eleventh century, but "love seeking understanding," as she has put it in the twenty-first. To her, God must be the "living God" mentioned in the Scriptures, most notably in the Psalms and the books of the prophets. The term, to her, means "a sense of the God who is full of energy and spirit, alive with designs for liberation and healing, always approaching from the future to do something new,"³ as she writes in the introduction to *Quest*

for the Living God. The living God is the God of flowing water and wind, the God of justice, and the God of love.

It is this groundedness in the living God and in God's mystery that has sustained Johnson during difficult times: at the death of her father after her high school graduation, in her twenties when she struggled with pre-Vatican II religious life, after Vatican II as one of the first women to earn a doctorate in theology at the Catholic University of America and the first tenure-track woman professor of theology there, during her heated battle for tenure at CUA, and finally during the criticism of *Quest for the Living God* and subsequent controversy over being given LCWR's Outstanding Leadership Award in 2014.

In one of her first public talks, as commencement speaker at St. Joseph Academy in New York in 1980, Johnson laid out her belief in God's mysterious goodness. "In real life, the future breaks into every life in ways that are startling and strange. Sometimes it comes creatively, filled with new possibilities. Sometimes it brings destruction, and ruins what we love," she said. "But what will last is *life*, transformation, happiness beyond our wildest imaginings. . . . No situation is so desperate, no person so broken, that God cannot arrive with an entirely new possibility for an even greater future."⁴

Yet when asked to describe her personal spirituality, Johnson is reticent and at something of a loss for words. As a child growing up in Brooklyn, she was in love with the prayers and devotions of the pre-Vatican II church. Similarly, the Ignatian *examen* and daily Mass were a part of her life as a sister for decades. Today, however, she is careful to attend a parish where she can be an anonymous member of the community. She used to listen to a radio program every Friday afternoon at five o'clock that broadcast the Sabbath service from Temple Emmanuel in New York City, and she

would pray along with the *Kaddish* prayer for the dead. Johnson admits she finds Judaism appealing. “So much of Christianity is taken from Judaism: God acting in history, the presence of the Spirit, the call to be honest and care for the neighbor,” she says. “Jesus gave it a new kind of life in the Gentile world, but the heart of it is very Jewish.”

Jesus is important to her faith, of course, and so is Mary, but she is not one for typical Catholic devotions at this point in her life. The closest she gets to a daily ritual is to get up each morning and make a cup of tea, light a candle, and pray for a while, usually with the Scriptures. Mark is her favorite gospel, because of the simplicity of the narrative, and she loves the Psalms and Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures. When praying, she avoids reading commentaries and other books so she can “turn off the thinking.” She says she finds the Bible refreshing. “I can go for days at a time praying with just a phrase of Scripture,” she says. “It’s disastrous if I start reading. Then my theological side kicks in.”

Her image of God is fundamentally trinitarian, tending to emphasize the Spirit as the presence and action of God in the world. She is “of the world,” but not worldly, caring little about money or material possessions. All of her book royalties, speaking honorariums, and prize monies—as well as her salary—go directly to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, her religious congregation. Her clothes are professional looking, but after a while, it is easy to tell from the rotation of outfits that she doesn’t have a lot of them. Although she lives simply, she has no interest in being cloistered and believes it is her task to challenge people to think about God in such a way that it affects how they act in the world.

As a teacher and writer, she works with words, but she eschews words when she prays. “I love to be in communion

with God, without a whole lot of talking going on,” she explains. Her goal is to “be in God’s presence,” which can happen in a variety of ways, including in nature. She lives near a lake and frequently takes walks around it. Each summer she reconnects and rejuvenates with a week or two at the family cottage on the Atlantic Ocean. But she also learned from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor executed by the Nazis, that God wants Christians to be out in the world where the suffering is. For her, that means she can experience God while washing her windows or sitting with a student—and she doesn’t have to be explicitly thinking about God while she’s doing it for it to be holy.

In the 1960s, reading Bonhoeffer’s letters written from prison—and French Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—helped Johnson let go of a neoscholastic understanding of God as a rule-oriented judge or monarch, a release she found liberating. Bonhoeffer wrote: “Before God and with God we live without God”—a phrase Johnson says she put on a banner when she was young and “in the banner making stage.”⁵ To her, it means God is beyond humans’ complete understanding, but God touches people so they can get on with the business of serving the world and those in need. She calls it a “holy secularity,” which doesn’t deny the existence of God but neither requires constant overt religiosity to acknowledge God’s connection to creation.

Her deepest experience of God is as “Infinite Holy Mystery,” a phrase from Rahner that emphasizes that the Divine is beyond all imagination. Yet, ironically, her life’s task has been to wrestle with who this ineffable God is and to help others recognize that the way we imagine and talk about God matters. Ultimately, to understand Johnson’s spirituality, you must go to her work. That is where she has worked out

who God is, what God means in her life, and what the ramifications are of that God for the church and for the world.

Her early theological work began in Christology, sparked perhaps by her own experiences of suffering, including the tragic loss of her father. Her senior thesis in college was on the resurrection, and her first paper submitted to (and rejected by) an academic journal was about freedom and the book of Job. In her graduate studies, Johnson quickly found herself interested in language about God. Her doctoral dissertation studied a Protestant, German theologian (Wolfhart Pannenberg) whose work on the resurrection intrigued her, but she also ended up analyzing the use of analogy in the way Christians speak about God.

Johnson's first book, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*, was a Christology primer, but her first real work of theology looked at language about God in a feminist context. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, which proposed reclaiming feminine images of the Divine, was perhaps Johnson's best-known work before the bishops' investigation of *Quest for the Living God*. Her love of the Catholic tradition led her to try to reimagine Mariology in *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* and the communion of saints in *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*, while her most recent book, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, is about theological implications on the environmental crisis. There is hardly an aspect of systematic theology she has not written about, but throughout it all, the key issue is God. "Is God a mystery beyond all comprehension, and if so what is the nature of our language about that?" she asks.

Despite the seriousness of those topics, Johnson is surprisingly personable, even nice. Colleagues and students say she

can be “mom-like,” and they mean that in both a positive and negative sense. She’ll give a student chocolate when one is feeling down, but still give the D she or he deserves on a poorly written paper. She is extraordinarily prolific and productive, in part because her choice of religious life means she has no spouse or children to care for. But she serves as the matriarch of her extended family, the one who keeps track of all the birthdays and organizes the annual Thanksgiving get-together. She likes to cook, loves her cat, and enjoys the symphony.

In all things, Johnson is disciplined. Her papers, recently donated to the University of Notre Dame archives, are amazingly organized, each file folder labeled with her perfect penmanship, nearly every card and letter she’s ever received carefully saved and cataloged by her. She has a sense of humor, but overall she is quite serious, especially about her work. She takes criticism, from fellow academics and even from students, but not if it misinterprets her thinking. Johnson can be single-mindedly focused. A friend remembers her working on a paper in graduate school, a note pinned to the curtain next to her desk reminding her to get a rare criticism from a professor out of her mind. She went on to write an A paper.

She is known worldwide and likely to be remembered as one of the most prominent and influential theologians of her generation. Yet, the prominence, the awards, the hundreds of requests to speak, and other accolades have not gone to her head. She’s somewhat embarrassed by attention to her personally; she’d much rather people would talk about her work than about her life. When two colleagues put together a book called *Things New and Old: Essays on the Theology of Elizabeth A. Johnson*, in which other scholars reflected on her work, she was moved and humbled.

In her own contribution to that book, she wrote that it had been an “inestimable privilege” to be engaged in the “intellectual adventure” of theological work with so many fine colleagues. Yet she acknowledged that, whatever her contributions, they pale in comparison to the wondrous mystery of God, writing, “Just let my tombstone read: ‘She lost as gracefully as possible in the effort to understand God for the sake of resisting evil and healing the world.’”⁶

CHAPTER ONE

Eldest Child

Growing Up in Brooklyn

Giggles erupt as the players in the annual Christmas pageant take their places “on stage” in the crowded living room of the attached brownstone on Sixty-First Street in Brooklyn. The Johnson family’s seven children—all about a year and a half apart plus some neighborhood kids—mean enough cast members for two angels, three innkeepers, and one shepherd. That leaves the writing, directing, and narrating of this five-scene production, as usual, to the eldest child, Elizabeth or “Beth.”¹

Beth was always making up games for her six siblings—postdinner games of softball and “I declare war on . . .” or “I see the color of . . .”—or staging plays that involved the whole neighborhood. As the oldest, she was responsible for her younger siblings, but she made chores fun by incorporating singing into them. “She was a natural leader,” remembers her sister Dr. Margaret “Peggy” Johnson Bia. “Beth was always very no-nonsense, purposeful, somewhat on the serious side, as opposed to frivolous. But she always had self-confidence.”

Peggy is the youngest of the four oldest girls; next came their brother (“He got treated like a royal prince,” Beth remembers), and finally the last two girls. The Johnson home was small—with three or four kids to a bedroom, only a bath and a half, and little yard to speak of—so creativity was required to keep seven kids occupied and happy while stuck indoors. Squabbles weren’t uncommon. Every Sunday night was the family “council of war,” in which each child was allowed one complaint that the parents would negotiate. “The fact they called it the ‘council of war’ tells you everything,” says Susan Johnson, the second youngest.

Although she was nine years younger, Susan saw her eldest sister, Beth, as an ally she could count on. Once, when she was five or six, Susan captured a dozen caterpillars and put them in a peanut butter jar with holes in the top. Later that night, she was overtaken by guilt and determined to free the little critters, although she didn’t dare break the rules by getting out of bed after lights out. “I thought of all the people who could help me liberate those caterpillars, it was Beth,” she says. The two sneaked outside and let the insects go.

Beth is simultaneously remembered as the leader of childhood fun but also as hyper-responsible and always having her nose in a book. While she was reading *Heidi*, she taught her siblings to drink milk out of a bowl and eat cheese like the main character.² Imaginative yet disciplined, she was influenced by several strong women in her life, including her mother and an aunt. “Our Irish family was the scene of frequent lively debates (usually revolving around politics) and as children we were encouraged to participate,” she wrote in a statement for a graduate school scholarship.³ As a young girl, Beth would set her alarm clock and make the four-block uphill climb to the parish church for daily Mass,

so no one was surprised when she entered the convent after high school. For the most part her childhood mirrored that of most Irish Catholic families of that generation; Beth remembers growing up in a happy home filled with family, unconditional love, and faith.

Elizabeth Ann Johnson came into the world on St. Nicholas Day, December 6, 1941, less than twenty-four hours before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Born at St. Mary's Hospital in Brooklyn, she was named for "The Blessed Mother's mother and cousin,"⁴ according to her baby book, which is as detailed as only a first child's can be. It is recorded that Beth spoke her first word on July 15, 1942, for example, and her first outing was on January 1, 1942, when she went "for a ride in the auto along Shore Road and Belt Parkway in Brooklyn."⁵ The healthy but bald baby was baptized two weeks after her birth at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish on Fifth Avenue between Fifty-Ninth and Sixtieth Streets in the Sunset Park neighborhood.

Her father, Walter Johnson, was working as an insurance broker when his first child was born, but eventually became a safety inspector for American Airlines at LaGuardia Airport. (He later returned to the insurance business.) One of thirteen children, Walter had five brothers, all of whom would serve in World War II, though Walter did not, since the airline needed him for domestic flights at home.

Johnson has fond memories of her father, including a visit to the airport that included a chance to walk up the steps to a plane—thrilling to the then seven-year-old. His bedtime stories, told as bribes to get his children to go to sleep, included tales of how Oklahoma oil wells looked like Christmas trees from the window of an airplane. Every Father's Day he would go on retreat to Mount Manresa, a Jesuit retreat house on Staten Island, and his children would tuck handmade cards

and gifts in his suitcase before he left. Beth always asked him to bring her back some specimens for her leaf collection. As the oldest, Beth had a closer relationship with her father than the other children had, her siblings remember.

Walter Johnson was a native of Brooklyn; his parents, Thomas and Loretto, owned the brownstone where Beth grew up, and her grandparents lived upstairs. Walter's was a religious family, according to an article written on the occasion of his parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary by their daughter Virginia Therese Johnson, a Maryknoll sister. Beth's paternal grandparents had married in 1912; Thomas worked two jobs, in a controller's office and at the post office, so the children could have piano and violin lessons and go to summer camps, Niagara Falls, and Washington, DC. "The mother bought almost every juvenile book sold in the religious goods stores on Barclay Street in Manhattan for the home library,"⁶ recalled the Maryknoll daughter. She also remembered daily recitation of the rosary, the singing of hymns to the Sacred Heart and Blessed Mother, and a large home altar with statues of each child's patron saint. Both parents were daily communicants, and priests were frequent dinner guests. Of the six girls in the family, five entered religious life, including two to the order their niece would later join.⁷

As one of thirty-six grandchildren to her paternal grandparents, young Beth was not as close to them as she was to her mother's side of the family. Her mother, Margaret Reed Johnson, was born in Massachusetts, but grew up in Brooklyn after her father moved the family to the city to find a job during the Depression. Margaret's father's ancestors came over on the Mayflower, while her mother was the child of Irish immigrants. The Protestant, blue-blooded Reed family opposed the marriage.

Beth remembers her maternal grandmother, Mary Agnes Donovan Reed, who went by Agnes, as “full of spunk.” After graduating from high school, she worked as a secretary, and her first purchase with her earnings was rather luxurious and impractical: a boat. “She was full of songs and music and poetry,” Johnson says. She even penned a poem about her first grandchild:

She doesn't hide her light under a bushel,
She lets it shine where're it can,
No child could give more satisfaction than clever
Elizabeth Ann.⁸

Frescos painted by Johnson's grandmother still decorated the walls of the family home in Westchester County when Margaret's sister, Barbara, lived there after their parents' deaths. As a child, visits to Beth's grandparents' home in the country, with its large yard, were fun, and rides on her grandparents' boat a welcome respite from the city.

Aunt Barbara Reed, Johnson's godmother, was a special influence and would remain an important part of her life even past the death of her parents. Unmarried with no children of her own, Reed worked for AIG, the insurance company, and used some of her salary to spoil her goddaughter with treats. She would buy pretty dresses for her on her birthday and take her to restaurants or Coney Island. Johnson still has the gold cross her Aunt Barbara gave her on her baptism. A later baby photo of Beth depicts her with a few damp curls, a dress embroidered with flowers, and the gold cross around her neck and a gold ring on her middle left finger.⁹ The ring also was a gift from Aunt Barbara and has been passed down to Beth's eldest niece.

Johnson's maternal grandmother, aunt, and her mother were strong women who clearly influenced young Beth, although they would not have been called feminists at the time.

“They lived their lives the way they wanted to, being loving, strong and faithful,” Johnson recalls. “They were just being who they were.” The Johnson daughters include a nurse, a physician/professor at Yale Medical School, the CEO of a large hospice corporation, and, of course, a prominent theologian. When people would ask their mother how she had such successful daughters, she would say, “I have no idea. I had nothing to do with it.” But of course she was a role model, Peggy remembers. “She wouldn’t go out marching with Betty Friedan, but she was a very strong woman. She didn’t want to talk about women’s lib or anything. Yet she was out there living it.”

Although she worked as a homemaker after she married, Johnson’s mother had graduated from Hunter College with a degree in mathematics. Education was highly valued and expected of all the Johnson children, regardless of gender. Young Beth was a model student at Our Lady of Perpetual Help School (OLPH), which was divided by gender, so for all intents and purposes an all-girls school. Those early experiences in a single-gender environment may have contributed to Johnson’s leadership qualities. “There was a lot of emphasis on learning, getting good grades, achieving,” she recalls. On report card day, if all the children in the family had passed their subjects, their father would buy a gallon of ice cream as a treat. Johnson remembers her mother saying, “Not everyone has to get an A. You just have to do your best and pass.”

Johnson did more than just pass. An early report card from 1951 is decorated with five gold stars. Johnson earned all high As, except for an 85 in penmanship, which she brought up to a 91 by the spring term. She received 100s in religion. Although she had a few absences, she was never late and had no absences for Mass.¹⁰ At her eighth-grade

graduation in 1955, Johnson received a gold medal and ten dollars for first prize in religion.¹¹ She had gotten glasses at a young age, and her family teased her that she was going blind from reading so much. “She was an avid reader, always looking things up,” recalls Peggy. “Every place you went, Beth was buried in a book.”

Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish was founded and run by Redemptorist priests and served predominantly Irish families. The large stone church, now a basilica, sits atop a hill and can be seen from quite a distance, including from the Narrows harbor. The artwork in the church was traditional, as were the pre-Second Vatican Council devotions. This was the parish where Johnson first received the sacraments of communion and reconciliation. As a young girl, she recalls marching her siblings up the hill on All Souls’ Day to earn plenary indulgences for saying six “Our Fathers,” “Hail Marys,” or “Glory Bes.” Although her friends still kid her about the practice, Johnson saw it as an important lesson in being oriented toward others. “The sisters told me that I could get a soul out of purgatory. That was a lot of power to put in the hands of a ten-year-old girl—affecting someone’s eternal salvation,” she says. “I took it seriously.”

Of course, the Sisters of St. Joseph who taught at the school were also planting the idea of a religious vocation in the minds and hearts of their students. Johnson remembers the sisters as excellent teachers. “We never had that hitting your hands with the rulers. It was just concentrated, good teaching. They really wanted you to understand the material,” she says. The annual vocation talk from Sr. Margaret Andre was a welcome break from regular classes, but also painted an attractive vision of a life spent loving God. It didn’t hurt that the young nun was one of the girls’ favorites, a kind, funny woman who seemed to enjoy her life in the convent.

Johnson was among nine girls from OLPH who earned entrance into St. Brendan's Diocesan High School for Girls in the Midwood neighborhood of Brooklyn, where she would continue her academic success and discover her own intellectual bent. Studying French, algebra, and world history made for four glorious years of learning. "I would just eat it up," she remembers. Her leadership skills also were groomed in high school: she served as editor of the school newspaper and president of the Glee Club, performing in concerts and learning to dance the Charleston.

Although she was one of the smartest girls in the school, Johnson wasn't competitive or proud, according to childhood friend Jean Hostetter Ramierez. "She did her best because that's what you do. She used her gifts, but she didn't lord it over other people," recalls Ramierez, who believes her friend accepted her intelligence as a fact of life and gift from God.

At St. Brendan, Johnson and Ramierez were part of a group of five friends from the academic side of the high school (it also had a commercial side for young women not planning on college). They were all good students, more focused on choosing a good university than finding a husband. Ramierez remembers going to dances and out for sodas at Hinsches ice cream shop. She also accompanied the Johnson family to their summer bungalow in the Rockaways at Breezy Point, where she got a taste of life in a big family. At some point, someone started calling Beth Johnson and Jean Hostetter the "Johnstetter twins," even though they look nothing alike, and the nickname stuck. The two are still close today.

Three of that group of five young women entered religious life; in addition to Beth, two joined the order affiliated with the Missionary Cenacle Apostolate, a lay Catholic organization founded in the early twentieth century by a priest in

New York. Johnson and her friends had become involved with the apostolate through volunteer work at the Henry Street Settlement House near the Brooklyn Bridge. As part of the Student Service League, the young women tutored African American and Puerto Rican children from nearby housing projects. Johnson remembers being “floored” by the poverty, compared to the relative wealth of her working-class neighborhood.

Another memory emphasizes how Johnson’s parents taught their children to respect others who were different. One year the family piled into the station wagon to go to the Chinese New Year parade in Manhattan. As they got close to Chinatown, one of the kids started laughing at a man with long, black braids walking down the street. Johnson’s mother turned to the back seat and scolded: “Don’t you dare ever do that! God created them in his image and likeness, just the same as you. They’re God’s children.” Johnson remembers not only the colored paper dragons from that day, but her mother’s anger. “She hardly ever got mad, so when she did, it made an impression.”

Decades later, after Johnson’s mother’s death in 2002, Aunt Barbara would take over as the matriarch in the family. As her godmother aged, Beth picked up the responsibility. All six of her siblings married, and she is an aunt to eleven nieces and nephews and great-aunt to twelve grandnieces and grandnephews. She is the one who keeps track of everyone’s address, email, and phone number, updating a family document annually and sharing it.

She also has become the organizer of the annual Thanksgiving dinner, one of two holidays the whole family tries to celebrate together (the other is the Fourth of July). Traditionally, Aunt Barbara had always organized the holiday, but gradually Beth took over, assigning siblings a dish to

bring and asking everyone to email her the things for which they are grateful that year. Rather than go around the table and share gratitude, which was always interspersed with giggles, the practice of writing them out beforehand gives family members time to write deeper reflections, which Beth reads before dinner. When Aunt Barbara became too ill to host, Beth secured a nearby Boy Scout cabin large enough to hold the whole clan. In 2014, thirty-five members of the family, including Aunt Barbara in a wheelchair, gathered in the cabin, with its big, roaring fireplace, to give thanks.

After her Aunt Barbara had a stroke in 2013, Beth found herself taking care of her godmother, rather than the other way around. Her aunt lived not far from Johnson, who did her grocery shopping, arranged for a hospital bed, and handled all the other details of caring for an aging family member. In 2015, the family decided she needed an assisted living facility, which Beth, who holds power of attorney, also spearheaded. (Aunt Barbara died in October 2015.) “Everyone in the family pitches in,” Johnson notes. But as the eldest, she is the coordinator.

Back in the spring of 1959, as high school graduation for the eldest Johnson child approached, she continued to accumulate academic awards, including honors in Latin and French, a certificate of superior merit for proficiency in Latin, membership in the Leo Honor Society, and a National Merit Scholarship. She would earn three college scholarships: to St. John’s University in New York, Wilmington College in Ohio, and the University of the State of New York Regents Scholarship, the latter garnering a letter from the president of the Borough of Brooklyn congratulating her for proving “once again that our Brooklyn students are second to none in the entire United States.”¹²

Johnson would not end up using any of those college scholarships. She had already made up her mind to enter

the convent of the religious women who had taught at her elementary and high school, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood. She was ready to make the move toward religious life, but one thing almost stopped her. One rainy morning, on the way to his job at an insurance company on Wall Street, her father slipped on the stairs to the subway and fractured his skull. He was rushed to the hospital, where he underwent brain surgery for a blood clot. There, he caught meningitis and died. He was forty-four and left a wife and seven children. The eldest, Beth, was just seventeen.