

## Book Club Discussion Questions

### *Remember Joan*

Candace Minor Comstock

This book is primarily about a disease, Alzheimer's. Throughout the description of Joan's sickness, however, Joan's daughter, the author, also weaves a story of family. Discussions of the book can therefore begin with Alzheimer's disease, but continue on with a pondering of kindred relations and how individuals celebrate, cope and maneuver together in the world we all share.

*In 2011, The Alzheimer's Association estimates 5.4 million Americans have Alzheimer's disease. One out of eight people age 65 and older (13 percent) has Alzheimer's disease. By 2030, all baby boomers will be at least 65 years old. That year, the number of people with Alzheimer's will have a nearly 50 percent increase from the numbers of 2011.*

1. Has Alzheimer's disease touched a member of your family? How did the experience differ from the author's experience? What were some similarities?
2. One of Joan's first symptoms was repeating herself. Do you think you should call attention to this habit if someone in your life started asking the same things over and over again? How hard do you think it would be to calmly answer the same questions repeatedly? What if the person insisted on telling you a story that you had heard more than once. Would you stop them to say you've heard it, or politely listen again? What coping strategies can help with the feelings of frustration that can consume the caregivers?
3. Joan's next symptom was forgetfulness. How much supervision do you think you could handle if a loved one began making mistakes, some of which could be dangerous? How comfortable could you be with the role reversal of treating a parent like a child? What coping strategies can help a caregiver with the feelings of worry?
4. Joan's next stage was confusion. The author states that she felt confused during this time as well. Do you think you could tell when the right time would be to move a patient away from independent living? What if the patient did not want to be moved? Did it help or hinder the situation that Joan was in such good physical shape? What coping strategies can help with a caregivers moments of uncertainty and confusion?
5. How did you feel about the author's take on packing up the old homestead? Do you think you would have emotional attachments to physical things? How would you and your siblings handle the situation of dividing a parent's items? If you have experienced this process, did your family handle it with grace?
6. Soon after Joan's move to assisted living, the author describes a madness that takes over her mother's being. When Joan was losing her mind, Candy had a conversation with her cousin about the differences between losing your physical health and losing your mental health in old age. Which do you think is more difficult for the patient? For the caregiver? Do you think the doctors provided much help to the caregivers of Joan? How could that process be improved upon? What would you do to cope with the increasing dementia found in your loved one?

7. As Joan continued to decline, her doctors prescribed more medications. The author's account of leaving Joan in the mental health facility was heartbreaking. What do you think of the process of drugging the mentally ill? What alternatives are there? What did you think about the use of ECT? Candy mentioned the planning of her daughter's wedding occurring during this difficult time. Do you think this diversion was good timing or bad? What other coping strategies could help a caregiver with the feelings of helplessness?
8. At the end of Joan's life, Hospice entered the scene. Do you have any experiences with Hospice, and were they similar to the author's? Joan had a living will. What importance do you place on that document? What do you think about assisted suicide? The death of Joan was almost described as beautiful by the author. Do you think something so sad can have elements of beauty? What helps us get through death?
9. Joan and her family used humor as a tool to cope on many occasions. How effective do you think this tool is, and is it always inappropriate to laugh at unfortunate situations?
10. Alzheimer's disease can progress in varying rates of speed. The author was feeling both pleased and sorrowful over the speed in which Joan declined. Would you rather this disease end quickly or progress more slowly to provide you with more time with a loved one?
11. The author referred to the progression of her mother's disease as a series of good byes. Can you think of other circumstances in life that may relate to a series of good byes?
12. Do you think the government should play a larger role in financially supporting research to cure Alzheimer's disease?

The author noticeably poses some life questions within the book's pages. These questions also create obvious topics for discussion.

1. In chapter three, selfishness is examined. What are some examples of selfishness found in your personal relationships? Do you think selfishness is learned or innate? Can people change their selfishness habits? When is it appropriate to put yourself first? How did Harry's selfishness affect Candy's views of men?
2. In chapter five, parenting is questioned. Would you say your parents provided helpful or harmful guidance to your upbringing? How important is "perfect" parenting? If you are a parent, do you feel you are doing a better job at raising your children than your own parents did? Do we place too much stress on parents today? Are we too child focused? Was Joan and Harry's laissez-faire parenting style neglectful or empowering toward the three kids' development?
3. In chapter seven, alcohol use is examined. How important is the cocktail in your life? Have you or someone you love been in trouble directly related to alcohol use? What do you think about the social glamorization of drinking our youth is exposed to every day? What did you think of Candy's early experiences with alcohol?
4. In chapter nine, religion is questioned. What experiences with religion formed your character? Is religious training necessary for moral behavior? How do we teach tolerance to our children when it comes to opposing religious views? Is hypocrisy prevalent in churches? Did you think Candy struggled with the decision to forgo the Sunday church tradition with her own children?
5. In chapter eleven, the words "I love you" are questioned. Did you hear those words from your parents when you were a child? Do you say them to your family members? Can love be demonstrated in other ways? Which are more powerful, words or actions? Why was it difficult for Candy and Joan to verbalize those three words to each other?
6. In chapter thirteen, ideology is examined. How vocal are you in your political beliefs? Why does our county seem to have such polarizing views? Would you "unfriend" someone on Facebook because they posted political messages that were against your belief system? Are Candy's pro-choice beliefs inconsistent with her obvious love for children?

Many other themes fill the pages of *Remember Joan* and can lead to interesting discussion.

1. The book opens and closes with meaningful ceremonies. How important are elaborate or formal ceremonies in your life? What purpose do they serve in family life? What are some beautiful moments you have witnessed at weddings or funerals? Was there something in Bonnie's wedding or Joan's funeral you found special?
2. The author gives us a lesson she learned from her mother in every chapter. What are some of the best teachings you gathered from your own mother? What is something Joan taught Candy that you found endearing?
3. Lessons from psychology classes are also mentioned in the story. One theory elaborated upon is the nature/nurture debate. Which do you think holds more weight in personality development, the genetic makeup and temperament born to a person or the environment and socialization provided to a person? How easy or hard is it to change a child's disposition, or should we even try? Do you know a little boy like Lee with ADHD tendencies?
4. Nature is very important to the author. Do you get reenergized by things found in nature?
5. How much of a feminist was Joan really, and how important was it to her to encourage feminism in Candy? Is feminism losing ground today? Have women achieved equality? Do we have a duty to address this issue worldwide?
6. Corporal punishment is brought up more than once. What are your views on spanking as a discipline method? What do you think about the recent Canadian medical study that links spanking to mental illness? How does geographic region and culture play into the practice?
7. Joan stayed with her cheating husband for thirty five years. Do you think cheating was more prevalent in the past or is it more prevalent today? Do you think more men or more women cheat on their spouses? How difficult is it to overcome the break in trust caused when a spouse cheats?
8. Candy's brothers taught her to be tough, but she mentioned missing having a sister. How important are siblings to you? Have you experienced estrangement from a sibling? How important was Scott to Candy's life while her mother was sick? Was his accepting behavior toward a declining mother a better approach than Candy's need to take care of details?
9. Candy moved from the north to the south in her adolescence. Have you ever had to move across the country or even to a different country? What obstacles did you face?
10. Candy's husband Steve has a different personality than Candy. Do you think opposites attract? What do you think of the young age of Candy when she married? If you have a daughter, at what age would you like to see her married? Is there a correlation to lasting marriages and age at ceremonial date?
11. Candy also bore her children at a young age. What are the benefits to having children young? Do you think older parents always make better parents?
12. Joan had many friends in life, and Candy refers to only having time for a couple. How important is having many friends? What are the benefits? Are we limiting ourselves with only one or two close friends?