

THE MONASTIC WAY

...daily insights to stir the heart and seed the soul.

WHAT IS A "TRUE SELF"?

We are a culture of misfits—not because there is anything wrong with us as a people but because we are accustomed to becoming things we aren't. So, we don't fit into our own souls. Our schools put out students to fit the economy, for instance, rather than the heart. Good thinkers go into accounting rather than philosophy because accounting pays more. Fine writers go into law because law is more prestigious. Young people with artistic talent go into computer science because computer programming or hotel management or engineering are full of "opportunities"—read money—that a water-colorist lacks.

The problem is that when we do not do what we are clearly made to do, we are doomed. We spend the rest of our lives looking for the missing piece of ourselves that we lost before we knew we had it.

Then we wonder why the work we do bores us, no matter how many cars we have, no matter how beautiful the vacation house may be. We can't figure out why we still feel restless about life. We wonder what it is that isn't right: the schedule, the children, the marriage, the place.

We lose a taste for life.

Then, it's time to give ourselves the space and means to become again. We need to rearrange the furniture of life to make way for the essence of life: We need to set up an easel and paint. We need to start the woodworking we always wanted to do. We need to

take courses we always wish we had. We need to join the book clubs that talk about the things we are interested in discussing. We need to begin to knit and cook and write and garden. We need to do those unfinished, unstarted, undeveloped things in us that ring the bell of bliss and authenticity. Then life will become life again and all the rust of it will wear away. An Irish poet gives us one view of it. He writes:

His father gave him a box of truisms
Shaped like a coffin, then his father died;
The truisms remained on the mantelpiece
As wooden as the playbox they had been packed in
Or that other his father skulked inside.



Then he left home, left the truisms behind him
Still on the mantelpiece, met love, met war,
Sordor, disappointment, defeat, betrayal,
Till through disbeliefs he arrived at a house
He could not remember seeing before.

And he walked straight in; it was where he had come from
And something told him the way to behave.
He raised his hand and blessed his home;
The truisms flew and perched on his shoulders
And a tall tree sprouted from his father's grave.

-Louis MacNeice (1907-1963)

When we become what we know ourselves to be, we
have come home to ourselves.

When we live from the inside out rather than from
the outside in, everything in life begins to fit.



MONDAY, JULY 1: When we allow ourselves to become who we know ourselves to be, work is not difficult, the days are not long, life is not empty.

TUESDAY, JULY 2: Money, investments, security will not substitute for the down-deep happiness of being at home with the self.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 3: Discovering the self is a matter of trial and error. When we find the fit between our souls and our skills, life becomes more energy than effort.

THURSDAY, JULY 4: To be able to say, “I love what I do” is the sweetest song a life can sing. But finding it requires the courage to look.

FRIDAY, JULY 5: Commitment is the elixir of life. “Passion is our ground, our island—do others exist?” Eudora Welty wrote. To have a passion for what we do will carry us far beyond either financial definitions of success or the social retirement age. To have no passion at all is to drown the soul in inertia.

SATURDAY, JULY 6: It’s not necessary to do what we love to do all the time, but it is necessary to be able to do what we love to do regularly. Then, we can concentrate on becoming rather than on doing.

SUNDAY, JULY 7: To live without passion for at least something we’re doing is to be simply a shell of a person waiting to become.

MONDAY, JULY 8: “I’ll walk,” Emily Bronte wrote, “where my own nature would be leading./ It vexes me to choose another guide.” The sign is this: If you don’t get up every day with real energy for something you intend to do that day, you are living by another guide. Change it.

TUESDAY, JULY 9: It’s true that few people have the luxury of changing the work that pays their bills and sustains their lives. But it is also true that all of us can develop

something in our lives that releases in us a sense of being more than an empty robot. The catch is that it requires a conscious decision to discover what we like to do and do it, however little, however small. As Shirley Abbot puts it, “Everybody must learn this lesson somewhere—that it costs something to be what you are.”

WEDNESDAY, JULY 10: There is a nagging, driving impulse in all of us to be the deep-down thing inside ourselves. Find it and do it. If we did as Joseph Campbell said and “followed our bliss,” all the rest of life would be happier for us.

*It is essential to realize
as we go through life
that meaning comes
from within a person,
not from something
outside of themselves.*

THURSDAY, JULY 11: When we become what we want to be, no matter how hard we work at it, it will never be work at all.

FRIDAY, JULY 12: The unfinished parts of ourselves may well be the truest parts of ourselves. It isn’t always that what we’re doing isn’t right, it is just that it is not everything. “I want to be all that I am capable of becoming,” Katherine Mansfield wrote. In fact, otherwise are we ourselves at all?

SATURDAY, JULY 13: What energizes us is what we should be doing, not just for our own sake but for the sake of the rest of the world, as well. “Nothing great in the world,” Hegel says, “has been accomplished without passion.” Find your passion; we’re waiting for it.

SUNDAY, JULY 14: My passion is writing. What’s yours? How much of it are you doing? What are you doing instead? Why aren’t you

doing more of it? Now is that really a reason or an excuse? “Unless I am what I am and feel what I feel—as hard as I can and as honestly and truly as I can—” Elizabeth Janeway says, “then I am nothing.” Hard words. Think about them. Your life may depend on it.

MONDAY, JULY 15: Society provides us with standard masks: wife, professional, clergy, public servant, academician, businessperson, whatever. But underneath the mask of a healthy person is a full human being trying to get out, to become more than a role.

TUESDAY, JULY 16: Unless we manage to be what we really are, we will never come to fullness of life. “We have to dare to be ourselves,” May Sarton writes, “however frightening or strange that self may prove to be.” Otherwise, how can we be anything worthwhile at all?

WEDNESDAY, JULY 17: When we are our true selves, we release other people to be the same. It is a gift we owe a world driven to be more “successful” than it is real.

THURSDAY, JULY 18: We get the idea that becoming a stereotypical someone—a successful businessperson, a famous celebrity, a perfect mother, a wealthy man—is the acme of self-development. What if we made the development of the self, rather than the role, the aim of life? Imagine how exciting a world without a population of designer people might be. Especially if I started with myself.

FRIDAY, JULY 19: What is important in life is to find what really interests me and follow it. Rare.

SATURDAY, JULY 20: When we discourage a person from following their bliss—when we tell children, for instance, to do one thing rather than another because they can make more money doing what they don’t want to do—we trample on their souls and wonder why their lives lack joy. “I have spread my

dreams under your feet,” the poet Yeats wrote. “Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams.”

SUNDAY, JULY 21: To be born a human being is to be expected to become one.

MONDAY, JULY 22: When a child wants to take piano lessons, forcing him to take violin because the family already has one of those is not to foster his musical talents. And so, his heart may never learn to sing.

TUESDAY, JULY 23: “Vocations which we wanted to pursue, but didn’t, bleed, like colors, on the whole of our existence,” Balzac wrote. We never really get over not becoming what we know we are to be meant to be.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 24: To be what we know we can become is to give meaning to life that nothing else can ever provide. It is essential to realize as we go through life that meaning comes from within a person, not from something outside of themselves.

THURSDAY, JULY 25: Sliding over the top of life, giving nothing our

whole commitment, makes life a very shallow experience indeed.

FRIDAY, JULY 26: When we put off till the elusive tomorrow of years from now the things we really want to know, explore, try, begin, be in life, we put off the birth of the self. Then death, with unfathomable regret, comes to sweep over the funeral of the soul.

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get up every day with
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SATURDAY, JULY 27: What a person really is, really wants to do, they do very hard. When we find it difficult to get out of bed in the morning, when we find ourselves simply waiting for one thing after another to be over, we are not doing what we are meant to do in life.

SUNDAY, JULY 28: What makes you sing inside while you’re doing it? Do more of that. It’s you.

MONDAY, JULY 29: Those who die who they are, die happy. Those who die still trying to be who they are not, have never lived.

TUESDAY, JULY 30: The central question of life may be, why is it that we consider it more virtuous to do what we do not like than to do what we do?

WEDNESDAY, JULY 31: “Science,” Helen Keller wrote, “may have found a cure for most evils; but it has found no remedy for the worst of them all—the apathy of human beings.” It is the apathy in our own hearts that squeezes the life out of us. It is refusing to pay the price to be who we are that smothers our souls. And everybody around us suffers for it, too.



LET'S SHARE OUR THOUGHTS

The following discussion questions, Scripture echo, journal prompts, and prayer are meant to help you reflect more deeply on *The Monastic Way*. Choose at least two suggestions and respond to them. You may do it as a personal practice or gather a group interested in sharing the spiritual journey.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sister Joan writes, “My passion is writing. What’s yours? How much of it are you doing? What are you doing instead? Why aren’t you doing more of it? Now is that really a reason or an excuse?” How might you respond? How do you feel about your response?

2. Which daily quote in *The Monastic Way* is most meaningful to you? Why? Do you agree with it? Disagree? Did it inspire you? Challenge you? Raise questions for you?

3. After reading *The Monastic Way* write one question that you would like to ask the author about this month’s topic.

4. Joan Chittister uses other literature to reinforce and expand her writing. Find another quote, poem, story, song, art piece, or novel that echoes the theme of this month’s *Monastic Way*.

5. Sister Joan reflects on this month’s question, “What is a true self?” and responds: “When we become what we know ourselves to be, we have come home to ourselves. When we live from the inside out rather than from the outside in, everything in life begins to fit.” Does this describe your experience? Your hope? Your dreams? Or does this describe a time in your past? Are there insights for you about areas of growth you are called to at this point in your life?

JOURNAL PROMPTS

Prompt 1: Here are a few statements from this month's *Monastic Way*. Choose one that is most helpful to you and journal with it.

- "Discovering the self is a matter of trial and error."
- "We have to dare to be ourselves however frightening or strange that self may prove to be."
- The central question of life may be, why is it that we consider it more virtuous to do what we do not like than to do what we do?
- "To be able to say, 'I love what I do' is the sweetest song a life can sing. But finding it requires the courage to look."

Prompt 2: Spend a few minutes with this photograph and journal about its relationship to this month's *Monastic Way*. You can do that with prose or a poem or a song or....



PRAYER

"On Dressing"

What I learn from lilies
that grow in fields
is a gentle and simple spirit,
natural beauty,
and how to rest confidently
in God's arms.

—Mary Lou Kownacki

SCRIPTURE ECHO

"I alone know my purpose for you, says God,
my purpose for your prosperity and
my purpose not to harm you,
my purpose to give you hope
with a future in it."

—JEREMIAH 29:11

Joan Chittister FUND FOR PRISONERS



"Prisoners are the most forgotten people in society and the least served in Christianity. Help me change that."

—Joan Chittister

We work with a network of prison chaplains and volunteers across the country to send thousands of free copies of *The Monastic Way* to women and men in prison.

A donation of \$12.00 will send a one-year subscription to a prisoner that can:

- provide beauty to battered and bleak lives
- deliver daily positive reflective messages to stir the heart and seed the soul
- enable caring conversations that give people in prison something to believe in and a sense of the presence of God in themselves.

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JOAN CHITTISTER is an internationally known author and lecturer and a clear visionary voice across all religions. She has written more than 60 books and received numerous awards for her writings and work on behalf of peace and women in the church and in society.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Each month, join the staff of Benetvision on a free Zoom call to discuss the current issue of *The Monastic Way*. Several times each year, Sister Joan leads the Zoom session. Subscribers will receive invitations to register for these calls in their email inbox.

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