

THE MONASTIC WAY

Joan Chittister

AUGUST 2017

Art by Ansgar Holmberg



The Monastic Way is for people who lead a busy life, but long for greater spiritual depth. Each month in 2017, Joan Chittister invites you to explore words of Scripture that stretch the soul and help you to construct your world differently—to discover how God dwells among us in surprising forms.



In silence and mystery,
I have begotten you.

Psalm 110

*In silence and mystery,
I have begotten you.*

My mother died in the depth of winter, the week before Christmas. As a result we never got to decorate the live Christmas tree we'd intended to plant in our back yard when the holidays were over. But given the pressures of the time, the tree simply sat in its canvas bag, dried out, went brown and, like her, also died. I had hoped that the tree would be her memorial.

On the day we finally accepted reality and dragged the dry and scrawny tree to the curb to be disposed of, a bright but emotionally wounded young man who trolled the neighborhood looking for people to talk to and odd jobs to do, objected to the action loudly. "Wait, wait," he shouted, "that tree's not dead. I can fix that." And there was no stopping him. He broke up the frozen ground with a pick ax, dug out of the ice a hole at least three feet wide, planted the tree and attached the garden hose to the outside tap.

For days, he stood shivering in the snow and soaked the dead tree in ice cold water. It was February before he patted down the last of the frozen earth around it and ended his vigil.

In May, the tree bloomed. Today it is over 18' high and covered with fresh buds every spring.

I have watched that tree for years now wondering whether or not I myself have ever had the gall, the courage, the faith, the commitment he did to waste my life on anything that seemed dead so that someday it could bloom again....

Clearly, the great mystery of life is that it is lived in an always flowing stream of change. We are one person with one set of ideas at one age, and then, when we look back years later, discover that we became another person at another age. The only certainty about it is the fact that we ourselves decide both what we are now and what we intend to become. And we make that decision one choice at a time.

Oh, there are some basics, of course. The words of our parents ring in our ears forever. My mother's favorite was "Joan, don't put it down; put it back." I don't always listen to that long-lost voice, of course. Some things stay "down" rather than get put "back" for days. But the concept, the value, the ideal never goes away despite the fact that I have lived it out in ways neither she nor I ever expected.

For the most part, the currents of culture, the demands of the time, carry us beyond our original understandings to always more stretching ones. As Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher from Ephesus, now Turkey, taught almost 500 years before Jesus, we live in a state of perpetual flux.

He describes the nature of life this way: "No one," he says, "ever steps into the same river twice, for it's not the same river and the person is not the same person."

And, he also said, “Good character is not formed in a week or a month. It is created little by little, day by day. Protracted and patient effort is needed to develop good character.”

No matter how long we live, we will never really be “finished.” We are ripening all the time, getting more spiritually defined by the day, becoming better—or worse—one choice at a time for all our lives.

And even more impacting is the notion that the mystery of life has been put into our own hands. What happens to us is not what we will become, unless we ourselves capitulate to it.

I had an uncle who was a serious alcoholic. It took years of struggle with it, but he finally became an equally serious father, husband, citizen and public advocate for sobriety.

Life, in other words, is a series of moments in process, all of them life-changing, many of them difficult and seemingly impossible. But all of them growthful, if we make them so. None of them is the end until the end.

Each of them touches another part of ourselves. Each of them teaches us something that will make the next stage even better than the one before it. We must only allow the process of human growth to wend its way from one idea to the next, from one question to the next, from one arm-wrestling match with life to the next.

Then and only then can we really become the fullness of ourselves. Life is a win-win game in which every apparent failure can become its own success. If we will only use it to become deeper, stronger, more mature at every bend that life brings. As the poet Mary Oliver writes, “Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.”

The mystery of life calls us to see that without periods of darkness, we might never understand that coming to fullness of life is a slow and evolving process. And there’s the challenge: we must not give up. Ever.

We’re not finished until we’re finished.



Tuesday, August 1: There is no facet of life—pain, anger, abandonment, illness—that does not grow us and challenge us. And as a result, we learn more than we ever wanted to know. And are all the wiser for it. “Never to suffer,” Edgar Allan Poe wrote, “would never to have been blessed.”

Wednesday, August 2: It’s normal to wish for an easy life. But it is not realistic. And it’s not even entirely good for us. After all, as athletes say, “No pain, no gain”—no chance to develop another whole layer of our best self. Theodore Roosevelt says of it, “I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well.”

Thursday, August 3: Too much ease softens us and leaves us unprepared for the challenges to come. And that’s too bad because there is so much of life that simply can’t be ignored. Sickness, age, and loss come to all of us. Eventually.

Friday, August 4: Courage is the counterpoint of challenge. It always makes us stronger than we were when we began. Even when we lose.

Saturday, August 5: Difficulties marshal all our faculties. They are the training ground for adulthood, for personal development. As the Roman Seneca wrote: “Difficulties strengthen the mind, as labor does the body.”

Sunday, August 6: A world made up of nothing but joy would be a stunted world indeed. No problems to solve; no questions to answer: a stunted, stagnant thing.

Monday, August 7: There is little to be gained by waiting for problems to go away by themselves. Problems are the goads life sends to wake us up to our own capacity for greatness. As Camus said, “In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer.”

Tuesday, August 8: It is not that life is rife with problems that is our problem. The real issue lies in allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by them rather than bend our minds to working them out one at a time.

Wednesday, August 9: There is no dawn like the dawn that comes after darkness.

Thursday, August 10: Difficulties are not meant to consume us; they are meant to stretch our souls one inch at a time.

Friday, August 11: The real danger in life is to see only its difficulties rather than to trust that its solutions are already contained within us. As Helen Keller said, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.”

Saturday, August 12: Daily patience with puny problems is the discipline that prepares the soul for life’s later confrontations with real pain.

Sunday, August 13: When difficulty is embraced rather than fled from, the difficulty itself becomes the stuff of triumph. As Ety Hillesum wrote about life in a concentration camp, “So much that was beautiful and so much that was hard to bear. Yet whenever I showed myself ready to bear it, the hard was directly transformed into the beautiful.”

Monday, August 14: Those who seek to avoid difficulty, or to ignore it, or to deny it, deprive themselves. They miss the opportunity to learn more from it about themselves, about their own character, about their capacity for endurance.

Tuesday, August 15: We all come to fullness of life one experience at a time. We are meant to learn from everything we do. The only question is whether or not we are open to the changes each of them requires.

Wednesday, August 16: The successful life is not the life that has never met an obstacle. The successful life is the life of those who have faced them and grown more mature, more loving with others because of them. Booker T. Washington said of them: “Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which s/he has overcome.”

Thursday, August 17: The challenges of life open us again and again to the need to develop the rest of ourselves: to the calm and understanding and patience and love with which a full and honest life confronts us.

Friday, August 18: When we lose one thing, we look again at the rest of life and dare ourselves to taste it. Only the taste for life can keep anyone alive. As the poet Rumi writes, “You must keep breaking your heart until it opens.”

Saturday, August 19: Every moment in life interrogates us: Are you big enough to take this? Are you strong enough to bear this? Are you courageous enough to confront this? It is the answer to those questions that measure how much we've grown—and how much further we have to go to become the most human human we can be.

Sunday, August 20: Sometimes it is when we fail that we learn the most, grow the most, become the most human. Failure is never loss; it is simply another sign on our road to ourselves. This sign says only one of two things: "Stop" or "Try again." Deciding which to follow will determine the rest of our lives.

Monday, August 21: Being willing to deal with irritations without inflating them to the level of breakdown makes life more livable than bearable. Then, we don't have to sit around hoping that someone else will save us because we have already saved ourselves.

Tuesday, August 22: News flash: happiness lies within us. All we have to do is to refuse to be controlled by our irritations and increase our awareness of the good things that surround us.

Wednesday, August 23: When things are as bad as they can possibly get in one area of life, that can be exactly the moment when life begins to bloom again. If we will only reach out and claim it.

Thursday, August 24: Clinging to the past is no answer to tomorrow. It only cements us in what is already gone and denies us the life that is waiting for us to sample now.

Friday, August 25: God does not leave us in darkness. God is in the darkness. It is only a matter of sensing what the God Darkness is trying to give us now. Thomas Merton wrote: "God, who is everywhere, never leaves us. Yet God seems sometimes to be present, sometimes absent. If we do

not know God well, we do not realize that God may be more present to us when absent than when present."

Saturday, August 26: Life is not a collection of answers. It is a consciousness of the ever-changing questions and the willingness to pursue them. Then, we are ready to move on in life. Wendell Berry writes, "When we no longer know which way to go, we have begun our real journey."

Sunday, August 27: When we know the problem that plagues us but refuse to face it, we only make it worse. To ignore it for fear that facing it will change a relationship, leave us without security, or demand more effort than we want to make, keeps us in darkness even while inside ourselves we may clearly see the light.

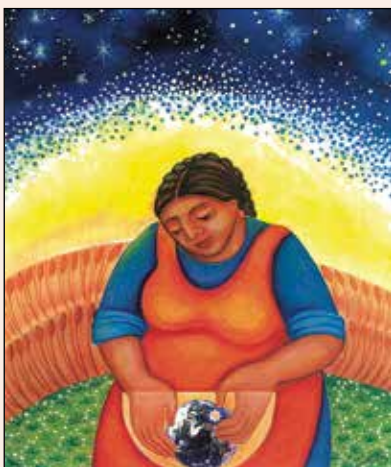
Monday, August 28: To ripen as a person, we must be willing to risk comfort in the face of personal challenge. Otherwise, we surrender to a darkness of our own making where the light of human growth no longer shines.

Tuesday, August 29: What we learn in darkness is how to maneuver ourselves into the light again. Or, as Winston Churchill wrote, "If you are going through hell, keep going."

Wednesday, August 30: When we give in to the dull and difficult life we ourselves have created by refusing to change it, to reshape it, to reform it, to reject it, we stop our own development in midair. We prefer stunted to ripe, stilted to full-grown, the death of the soul to the fullness of life.

Thursday, August 31: The last mystery of life is that, so often, we do not really know what would be good for us. We allow ourselves to believe that life is all about eternal comfort rather than eternal growth. But experience teaches that, as L.M. Montgomery wrote, "next to trying and winning, the best thing is trying and failing." If you don't, that dead tree will never grow again.

— FOR A LISTENING HEART —



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I have begotten you.*

Psalm 110

*Spend a few minutes
with this quote and
then ask yourself:*

- What do these words say to me? What feelings or memories do the words evoke in me?
- What do these words say about my spiritual journey?

- My journal response to this quote is:

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

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