

THE MONASTIC WAY

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

HOW DO I DEAL WITH THE BAD THINGS THAT HAPPEN TO ME?

“Life’s not easy, sometimes unkind,” Alison Brown, the bluegrass singer, sings. And who doubts it? Our friends die before their time, and our mortality suddenly seems more fragile than ever. The company closes, the perfect job ends, and the bills get out of control. The marriage goes dull and the children turn out differently than we imagined. Or, on the way to glory, we find ourselves forced to settle for the mundane. Life is disappointing and crooked and totally unpredictable. We grasp at things but they run through our fingers like water in a raging mountain stream. Nothing we planned happens and everything we never dreamed could, does. Why?

The problem may be in the question itself. It’s a foolish question, “why.” It implies that the answer to why matters, when, in fact, that’s not the important question at all. The question is not, Why do bad things happen in life? The question is, Why do we ask “why” when there are so many more important questions? The fact is that it is not what happens but what I do about it, and how I deal with it, that counts. The answer to, Why did God do this to me? may simply be so that I could become more than I was before it happened.

Hard times have two lessons. The first we hear about from the poet Robert Browning. He writes:

The year’s at the spring,
And day’s at the morn,
Morning’s at seven,
The hillside’s dew-pearled,
The lark’s on the wing,
The snail’s on the thorn,
God’s in the heavens,
All’s right with the world.



KAREN GROUCUTT

Browning’s answer is that there is an essential goodness and graciousness to life. Whatever happens to us, there are some things that simply cannot be taken away. The secret to life is that we come to the point where its basics are more important to us than its trimmings.

But there is another dimension as well. The Persian mystic, Jalal Al-Din Rumi, wrote, “I saw grief drinking a cup of sorrow and called out, ‘It tastes sweet, does it not?’ ‘You’ve caught me,’ my friend answered, ‘and you’ve ruined my business. How can I sell sorrow when you know it’s a blessing?’”

Under every agonizing, painful, irritating, worrisome thing, Rumi teaches, is the blessing that needs to be discovered there. Until we come to realize that, hard things will be impossible and greatness will be unattainable.



WEDNESDAY, MAY 1: How we deal with the hard things in life is what makes them good things.

THURSDAY, MAY 2: The hard things in life take our gifts of character and double them.

FRIDAY, MAY 3: Hard things aren't meant to destroy us. They are meant to make us see life differently than we did before they came along. The question is, What am I not seeing now that I saw then?

SATURDAY, MAY 4: Don't be afraid of hard things. They stretch us and challenge us and mold us anew. They make us dig down deep and find parts of ourselves that we never knew even existed in us.

SUNDAY, MAY 5: Difficulty is a part of life. No one escapes it. "Suffering belongs to no language," Adelia Prado wrote. But if suffering is part and parcel with all life, everywhere, then it is not an accident. It is part of the process of growing to fullness.

MONDAY, MAY 6: Hard things teach us what good things cannot: compassion, courage, understanding, patience. Enid Starkie put it this way: "Unhurt people are not much good in the world."

TUESDAY, MAY 7: Hard things weather us. They bring grit to the soul and softness to the hardest heart.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 8: Resistance to the vagaries of life, to those things nothing can stop and nothing can change and nothing can control—things like death and loss and rejection, loud neighbors and irritating relatives—only makes them harder to deal with and turns them to acid in our soul.

THURSDAY, MAY 9: One thing we learn from having to deal with difficulty is ourselves. We find out

how truly brave, how deeply confident, how honestly full of faith we really are.

FRIDAY, MAY 10: "True knowledge comes only through suffering," Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote. When we face the hard things of life, we come to know the difference between what is difficult and what is essential.

SATURDAY, MAY 11: We sleepwalk through most of life. It's when we find ourselves bereft of all the things we take for granted that we come to a real awareness of how little we really need to be happy.

*Holiness requires
that we do not see
good times for ourselves
as the justification of bad
times for the other.*

SUNDAY, MAY 12: "Every life has a measure of sorrow," Steven Tyler says, "and sometimes this is what awakens us." Difficulties bring us to the edge of our souls, tax all our inner resources and flex our spirits.

MONDAY, MAY 13: Difficulty is not meant to destroy us. It is in the midst of difficulty that we are most fully charged spiritually, most deeply alive. Difficulty brings us to come to terms with life. "Even pain," Amy Lowell said, "pricks to livelier living."

TUESDAY, MAY 14: We grow as we go through hard times. We become more the people we are meant to be. We become the fullness of ourselves. All the things we thought we could never stand to bear, we do. And in the doing of them, we become spiritually invincible.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 15: Jesus said, "I am with you always." In

the midst of hard times we come to know most clearly that it is what we have developed in the soul that carries us when we think we cannot go another step. It transports us beyond the boundaries of intellect, past the privileges of status, despite the limits of our strength.

THURSDAY, MAY 16: The only question we face in hard times is whether we intend to live through it or try to escape it. "One does not die from pain," Wakaso Yamauchi says, "unless one chooses to."

FRIDAY, MAY 17: When life is hard, the first decision we need to make is whether we intend to let it sour us or not. If we are intent on coming through it better than we were when we went into it, the problem is already solved.

SATURDAY, MAY 18: To lose something is to find something else. What makes loss hard to survive is that we refuse to let one thing go so something new can happen.

SUNDAY, MAY 19: Hard times are either holy-making or crazy-making. It's all a matter of accepting them or resisting them. The Turkish proverb reminds us, "They ran away from the rain and were caught in a hailstorm."

MONDAY, MAY 20: To accept the hard things of life is not to become passive; it is to become aware that nothing lasts forever—and accepting that, to go on.

TUESDAY, MAY 21: Like any old tree, the scars we bear in life are the measure of our growth in calm and courage and faith.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 22: Suffering is not something that is meant to be sought for its own sake; it is meant to be recognized for what it is: another milestone, another stage, another lesson on the road of life.

THURSDAY, MAY 23: “Where there is sorrow,” Oscar Wilde said, “there is holy ground.” There is the place, in other words, where we decide either to travel with the Spirit who guides us through the dark to the light of new life or to run from those summons to the future that sanctify us.

FRIDAY, MAY 24: Something is only hard in life when we refuse to consider that it will have some good in it for us.

SATURDAY, MAY 25: Hard things make us better partners, parents, and friends. It is only when we have suffered ourselves that we are best prepared to empathize with others.

SUNDAY, MAY 26: It is only when we have known pain that we can know joy.

MONDAY, MAY 27: Steel is forged in fire. “We are healed of a suffering,” Marcel Proust said, “only by experiencing it to the full.” Then we put it down. Then we’re free to go beyond it. Then we have faced and found what it was meant to forge in us in the first place.

TUESDAY, MAY 28: Perseverance with hard things can be the source of the greatest pleasure, the deepest satisfaction. What we work hard to achieve, we value most.

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of hard things.
They stretch us and
challenge us and
mold us anew.
They make us
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WEDNESDAY, MAY 29: The Italian proverb says: “One who would have no trouble in this world must not be born in it.” Trouble is one of the pillars of everyone’s world. It is the part of life that opens doors, that prods us on, that takes us from one level of living to another.

THURSDAY, MAY 30: Good times for the fox, bad times for

the hare, nature teaches us. But holiness requires that we do not see good times for ourselves as the justification of bad times for the other.

FRIDAY, MAY 31: A businesswoman was driving toward home in Arizona. On the road ahead of her, an old woman was walking through the desert with bowls on her head. The businesswoman pulled the car over and invited the old woman to ride with her for awhile. Seeing the bag on the passenger seat, she apologized, “Don’t worry about that. Just put the bag on the floor. It’s a silver necklace I got for my husband.” The old woman was quiet for a moment, got in, and then said thoughtfully, “Good trade.” Hard times depend on where you’re standing and how you think about them.



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

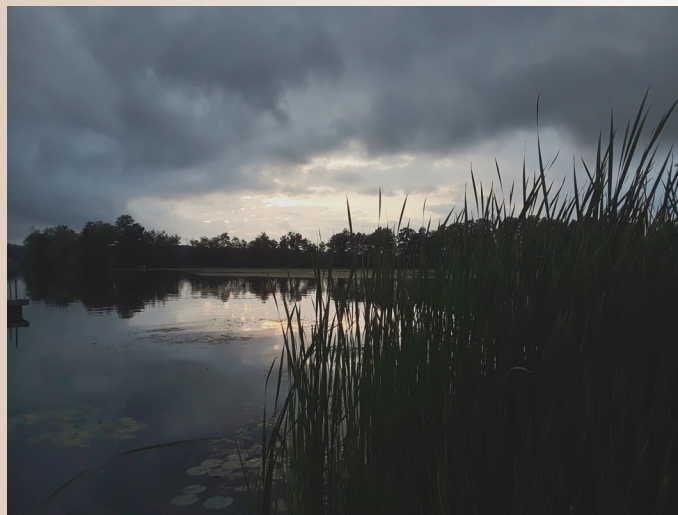
1. Think about how you have dealt with difficult experiences in your life. Are there some that you now count as blessings? Any that you have grown from? Is there a difficulty that you have avoided or run from?
2. Which daily quote in *The Monastic Way* is most meaningful to you? Why? Do you agree with 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, novel that echoes the theme of this month’s *Monastic Way*.
5. Sister Joan writes, “Difficulty is not meant to destroy us. It is in the midst of difficulty that we are most fully charged spiritually, most deeply alive. Difficulty brings us to come to terms with life.” (May 13) Has this been your experience? In what way? Of, if not, what has been your experience?

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.

- The question is not, Why do bad things happen in life? The question is, Why do we ask why when there are so many more important questions?
- Difficulty is not meant to destroy us. It is in the midst of difficulty that we are most fully charged spiritually, most deeply alive. Difficulty brings us to come to terms with life.
- Hard things make us better partners, parents, and friends. It is only when we have suffered ourselves that we are best prepared to empathize with others.

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....



KAREN GROUCUTT

SCRIPTURE ECHO

*“How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and sorrow in my heart all day long?”*
—PSALM 13:3

PRAYER

At Midday

Let not the heat
of the noonday sun
wither my spirit
or lay waste my hopes.
May I be ever green,
a strong shoot of justice,
a steadfast tree of peace.

—Mary Lou Kownacki

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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