

THE MONASTIC WAY

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

THE GIFT OF WORK

In this society, work has become the way we make money, the way we enable ourselves to do what we would really prefer to do if we didn't need to work. No other approach to life, perhaps, explains so clearly what has happened to the quality of the world around us than this. If there is anything that measures spiritual depth in a work-oriented society, it is surely the work we do, and why we do it, or conversely, the work we won't do any why we won't do it.

Work is the contemplative's response to contemplative insight. In fact, it is everybody's answer to the profundity—or the shallowness—of their ideas about creation. To know the presence of God in all things has serious implications for the way a person lives the rest of life. When I float in a sea of God, there is nothing not sacred. "Treat all things as vessels of the altar," the Rule of Benedict instructs. It is a profoundly contemplative statement.

One of the most demanding, but often overlooked, dimensions of the creation story is that when creation was finished, it wasn't really finished at all. Instead, God committed the rest of the process to us. What humans do on this earth either continues creation or obstructs it. It all depends on the way we look at life, the way we see our role in the ongoing creation of the world.

Work is our contribution to creation. It relates us to the rest of the world. It fulfills our responsibility to the future. God left us a world intact, a world with enough for everyone.

The first thing Genesis requires of Adam and Eve is that they "till the garden and keep it." They are, then, commanded to work long before they sin. Work is not punishment for sin. Work is the mark of the conscientious human. We do not live to outgrow work. We live to work well, to work with purpose, to work with honesty and quality and artistry. The floors the contemplative mops have never been better



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mopped. The potatoes the contemplative grows do not damage the soil they grow in under the pretense of developing it. The people the contemplative serves get all the care that God has given us.

The contemplative is overcome by the notion of tilling the garden and keeping it. Work does not distract us from God. It brings the reign of God closer than it was before we came. Work doesn't take us away from God. It continues the work of God through us.



FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1: Work is the gift we give to the world. That's why it's so important that what we do for a living has value, not simply for ourselves but for the world at-large.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 2: Good work is work that develops us as we develop it. To know if the work we are doing is worth it, we need to ask ourselves what it's bringing out in us: creativity, commitment, artistry, compassion?

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 3: The work we do in life is what we leave behind for others to remember us by. It is our legacy to the future. If our work has been good work, it becomes one more brick meant to leave a better tomorrow to those who will come after us.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 4: The fact is that our work shapes us as much as we shape our work. Because of what we do and the way we do it, we become different people than we would have been without it. To know if the work we're doing is leading us to the fullness of ourselves it's important to ask what we feel we'd lose—other than simply our wages—if we lost that work.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 5: In this society we train young people to look for jobs that make the most money. The problem is that good money is not always the sign of a good job—either for us or for the world around us. Cicero wrote, “If you pursue good with labor, the labor passes away but the good remains; if you pursue evil with pleasure, the pleasure passes away and the evil remains.”

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6: Whatever we do—however mundane, however routine, however ephemeral—has dignity and value if we do it as best as it can possibly be done. Cleaning a room, programming the computer, completing a high-level political project, are all to be evaluated by the same norms. Was it done honestly? Was it done for the sake of the common good? Was it done well?

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 7: Most of us have one gift that shines far and above all our other talents. Some times it's technical, sometimes it's physical, sometimes it's social. But whichever it is, that's the work we should be doing.

Not any of them should be chosen simply for money.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 8: To steer a child to take a job for profit rather than to enable the blossoming of the soul is to do a disservice to that life. As Elbert Hubbard says, “We work to become, not to acquire.”

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 9: Good work, the kind of work that makes us happy, is not work that we're paid to do. It's work that we would pay to be allowed to do.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 10: Talent is one thing but excellence is another. It can take a lifetime to make the perfect meringue. It can take a lifetime to shape the perfect pot. It can take a lifetime to find the missing idea—the one that improves on the one we have. But when that day comes, one thing we know for sure: we have not lived in vain. Life is a practiced art. As Samuel Johnson wrote, “Excellence, in any department, can only be attained by the labor of a lifetime. It is not purchased for a lesser price.”

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MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 11: Discovering what we are meant to do in the world is our first gift to humankind. It may take a while to find our real gift and its real purpose but the excursion is worth the time—for all our sakes. Thomas Carlyle wrote, “The work an unknown good person has done is like a vein of water flowing hidden underground, secretly making the ground green.”

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12: The Torah required the Chosen People to deliberately leave food in the field for the sake of those who without it would not have enough to sustain themselves and their families. Clearly, at least some part of what we ourselves earn is meant to be given for the welfare of the rest of the community.

Without that, the quality of our own lives and our own community is in danger.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13: When we begin to consider work an unnecessary evil rather than a necessary blessing, we not only lose a sense of our interdependence with the rest of humankind but we lose a sense of the real importance of our own lives.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 14: We don't work to put in time; we don't work to store up wealth; we work to make the world a better place because we ourselves have been here. It's knowing the reason we work that changes the character of the work we do. It becomes a standard for choice. It becomes a mark of our own quality. As Diane Ravitch says, “The person who knows how will always have a job. But the person who knows why will always be the boss.”

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 15: Vision is the ability to set our course in life. Work is the vehicle that is meant to take us there. One without the other is useless. As Emerson says, “The prize will not be sent to you. You have to win it.”

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 16: The economic value of work lies only in what we do with the money we get from it. If all we do is spend it on ourselves, that is a very puny life indeed.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 17: There are two things in life that fulfill us. They are not unrelated. Doing what we were born to do and doing what we love to do for the sake of the rest of the world are of a piece. As Theodor Reik says, “Work and love—these are the basics. Without them there is neurosis,” a psychological wound to the soul that leaves us depressed about the present and anxious about the future.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 18: Work gives flesh to our dreams and substance to our hopes in life. It makes our goals real and takes us beyond our disappointments.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 19: Work is the blessing we are given in order to be a blessing to others.

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20: Poverty in an industrial society is not an individual problem but a corporate problem, a national problem, an institutional problem.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 21: Where some have jobs and many have none, when most eat well but many are forced to glean the nation's garbage cans, the nation is suffering from a disease of the soul that is not only pernicious but may also be terminal, not only for the jobless but for the comfortable complacent as well. What we allow to happen to the least of us, will eventually pollute our own lives as well.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 22: Work is a blessing in itself. As Voltaire wrote, "Work keeps at bay three great evils: boredom, vice, and need."

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 23: One of the blessings of work is the ability it gives us to give alms, to give dignity to those who, however hard they work, cannot sustain themselves. To deny alms to a person in need is to deny them life. To judge harshly those who cannot provide fully for themselves is to expose our own lack of experience. The God who gives us life without merit expects us to do the same for others. As Emerson noted, "Noblesse oblige; or, superior advantages bind you to larger generosity." At the end of the day, the poor have the responsibility to be responsible but we have a responsibility that is just as binding. Our responsibility is to be compassionate.

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 24: The Haitian proverb teaches, "Rocks in the water

don't know the misery of rocks in the sun." To be comfortable ourselves is to risk the life-stopping sin of becoming insensitive to the life-searing distress of others.

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 25: Wealth has become a synonym for success in this world. But few ask where the money came from or how it was earned or what is being done with it or how it is affecting the world. And, in the end, that may destroy us all.

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TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 26: It is not enough simply to sustain people; it is necessary to see them as people and to treat them as people. Otherwise we make commodities of the poor. The Chinese philosopher Mencius wrote: "To feed people and not to love them is to treat them as if they were barnyard cattle. To love them and not to respect them is to treat them as if they were household pets."

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 27: "What you do for the least of these, you do for me," Jesus said. The question is how to translate that into political science in this day and age. But one

thing is clear. As John F. Kennedy wrote, "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich." Point: Whether we want to admit it or not, we are all in this boat together. And it is sinking.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 28: To balance the national budget on the backs of women and children is a national disgrace, a national sin, and the national mistake of historic proportions. No nation can succeed when its mothers and its children are not equal to its future.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29: No amount of tax breaks, no amount of industry, no amount of national wealth in the face of national poverty can save the nation. "Teach this triple truth to all: A generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion," the Buddha teaches, "are the things which renew humanity."

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 30: In the face of great national greed, corporate corruption, and the rising levels of working-class poverty, Mother Jones, the Irish woman who helped found one of America's first labor unions, reported the following conversation: "I asked a man in prison once how he happened to be there and he said he had stolen a pair of shoes. I told him that if he had stolen our railroad instead, he would be a United States senator." If only that were funny.

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. Do you like your work? Does it make you happy? Do you think of it as your gift to the world? Explain.
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. "One of the blessings of work," Sister Joan writes, "is the ability it gives us to give alms...to give dignity to those who cannot sustain themselves." Is this true of you? Do you see the giving of alms as integral to your work? Explain. Or, write the words "The reason I work is..." five times on a sheet of paper and finish the thought. Then reflect on your answers.

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.

- Whatever we do—however mundane, however routine, however ephemeral—has dignity and value if we do it as best as it can possibly be done.
- Discovering what we are meant to do in the world is our first gift to humankind.
- One of the blessings of work is the ability it gives us to give alms, to give dignity to those who, however hard they work, cannot sustain themselves.

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...



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SCRIPTURE ECHO

“When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, You will be happy and it will be well with you.” - Psalm 128:2

Think of a time when you have “eaten the fruit of your hands.” What happened? How did it affect your work after that?

PRAYER

“Be a gardener. Dig a ditch, toil and sweat, and turn the earth upside down and seek the deepness and water the plants in time. Continue this labor and make sweet floods to run and noble and abundant fruits to spring. Take this food and drink and carry it to God as your true worship.”

—Julian of Norwich

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.

www.joanchittister.org/donations

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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