

Joan Chittister

# THE MONASTIC WAY

APRIL 2022

*Birds make great sky-circles  
of their freedom.  
How do they learn it?  
They fall, and falling, they're given wings.*

-RUMI

## IN PRAISE OF FAILURE

I never had a lot of interest in Julian of Norwich, the 14th century mystic whose works struck me, by modern standards, to be a bit dense, somewhat abstract, certainly more arcane than I was looking for at the time. I stuck with materials that smacked more of the stuff of life as most of us experience it a day at a time. But then, suddenly, I found myself in a situation where Julian's "showings"—the description of her sixteen visions—were the very basis of a project.

The first twelve of Julian's narrations I found relatively unremarkable—with the exception, of course, of her identification of Jesus as "mother"—but the thirteenth "showing" brought me to complete attention. There, tucked into the middle of one of her discourses on the ways of God with the human soul was a statement so profound, I could hardly believe it was there. "All shall be well," she wrote, "and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." I had heard that verse sung in liturgy after liturgy for several years by then.

What I did not know was that what we sang was

only part of one sentence. The first part of the sentence read, "God does not punish sin; sin punishes sin and all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."



KAREN BUKOWSKI

Suddenly, I saw another whole dimension to life, the dimension that Rumi, another mystic, is talking about in this month's quotation: If we allow ourselves to learn from it, failure is its own kind of success.

God doesn't have to punish pride; pride, Julian says, will make it impossible for us to learn from anybody else. And lust will

make love impossible. And greed will make contentment impossible. And covetousness will make serenity impossible. And anger will make inner peace impossible. But all of them, then, will give us a depth of understanding we might never have really achieved otherwise.

It's what we learn from our failures that brings us to new levels of holiness. Then, indeed, "all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well."



If the monastic life teaches us anything, it teaches us to seek God, to find God everywhere. The monastic learns that God speaks to the heart in many tongues. This year's *Monastic Way* looks at the insights of great writers and asks the question, What of God is in this for me?

*Birds make great sky circles of their freedom.*

*How do they learn it? They fall, and falling, they're given wings.*

- RUMI

**FRIDAY, APRIL 1:** To fail is to have the opportunity to begin again, wiser this time.

**SATURDAY, APRIL 2:** Failure is not the end of life. It is the beginning of another way of living.

**SUNDAY, APRIL 3:** A society, a family, a group that makes perfection its norm deprives itself of the wisdom that comes from discovering that limits do not limit us at all. They simply redirect our lives to where they were meant to be in the first place.

**MONDAY, APRIL 4:** Education is about learning. Failure is about re-learning in such a way that we come out of an experience with more than skill, more than luck.

**TUESDAY, APRIL 5:** Beware of an addiction to perfection: it either fools us or breaks us. It can fool us into thinking that we really are "perfect" or precipitate a breakdown when we finally have to admit that we are not.

**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 6:** When something seems impossible for us, it is time to keep on trying. How else can we ever discover of what we are really capable? "Difficulties strength-en the mind," Seneca wrote, "as well as labor does the body."

**THURSDAY, APRIL 7:** Being good at something does not mean that we do not have to learn it, do not need to study it, have no reason to prepare for it. On the contrary. It means that the learning and the study and the preparation are what it takes to become as good as we appear.

**FRIDAY, APRIL 8:** Moral perfection is a contradiction in terms. Our souls

need to grow just as our bodies and our minds do.

**SATURDAY, APRIL 9:** Perfection can be a major obstacle to learning. When we think that what we do is good enough, then we deprive ourselves of the chance to become better.

**SUNDAY, APRIL 10:** Many a master painter has left a faint image of a first mistake, the correction of which made the piece a masterpiece rather than merely the repetition of a previous technique. "In a total work," May Sarton writes, "the failures have their not unimportant place."

**FAILURE DOES NOT DESTROY  
US UNLESS WE ARE  
RELUCTANT TO TRY AGAIN  
AND TO TRY DIFFERENTLY.**

**MONDAY, APRIL 11:** If you haven't really succeeded yet, it may well mean that you simply haven't failed enough.

**TUESDAY, APRIL 12:** Never fear failure. There are some things in life—perseverance, faith, humility—that only failure can teach.

**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 13:** There is really no such thing as failure. There is only the opportunity to find more of ourselves, more of the journey to God, in life. Both of which take courage. Or as Minna Thomas Antrim put it, "Three failures denote uncommon strength. A weakling has not enough grit to fail thrice."

**THURSDAY, APRIL 14:** The desire for perfection is the need to be beyond learning, above advice, greater than the rest. And that is

life's only really serious failure because it cuts us off from growth, respect and mutuality.

**FRIDAY, APRIL 15:** Failure is the lesson that teaches me that I am not self-sufficient. It gives me the opportunity to recognize the gifts of others and depend on them.

**SATURDAY, APRIL 16:** Real success is an experience of the fullness of the self, not the diminishment of anyone else. We are all meant to know a sense of our potential fulfilled. It is of the essence of being alive.

**SUNDAY, APRIL 17:** My gifts are meant neither to diminish nor destroy the gifts of the other. On the contrary. They simply make all of us stronger together. Then we are, thanks to one another, all a success.

**MONDAY, APRIL 18:** The function of failure is to stretch me beyond what is expected to what is possible. "When we give ourselves permission to fail," Eloise Ristad points out, "we at the same time give ourselves permission to excel."

**TUESDAY, APRIL 19:** The sin of failure, the sin against success, is to be unwilling to celebrate my successes with a grateful heart. "Is it age," Lillian Hellman wrote, "or was it always my nature, to take a bad time, block out the good times, until any success became an accident and failure seemed the only truth?"

**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 20:** When we finally begin to be comfortable with failure we are free to try everything in life. We become explorers of the multiple paths to happiness we may not have found if we had not failed in so many areas.

**THURSDAY, APRIL 21:** The greatest lesson failure has to teach is that we must never give up. "It is difficulties," Reverend Doctor Sharpe says, "which give birth to miracles."

**FRIDAY, APRIL 22:** When we are

defeated by another, we have not met an enemy, we have discovered a mentor. We have been taught that we have more to learn. “One that wrestles with us,” Edmund Burke writes, “strengthens our nerves and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper.”

**SATURDAY, APRIL 23:** Failure does not destroy us unless we are reluctant to try again and to try differently. Samuel Beckett says of it, “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

**SUNDAY, APRIL 24:** Those who fail once and never try again will never become fully alive. Too much of themselves is left unchallenged to ever discover who they were really meant to be.

**MONDAY, APRIL 25:** There is no success without failure—which may be exactly the reason that we do not experience all the success in life that we are meant to have. “Half the failures in life,” Julius Hare writes,

“arise from pulling in one’s horse as it is leaping.”

**TUESDAY, APRIL 26:** We teach children to be perfect when we should be teaching them to try again or try something else ‘til what they are doing they do well.

**FAILURE IS THE LESSON  
THAT TEACHES ME  
THAT I AM NOT SELF-SUFFICIENT.  
IT GIVES ME  
THE OPPORTUNITY  
TO RECOGNIZE  
THE GIFTS OF OTHERS  
AND DEPEND ON THEM.**

**WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27:** When we don’t try new things, we surrender the opportunity to become new again ourselves. “Those who risk nothing, risk much more,” the proverb says.

**THURSDAY, APRIL 28:** We would be happier people if we took

the words “failure” and “mistake” out of our vocabularies and said instead, “What I did must have been for something. I’m just not sure what it is yet.” Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, wrote, “There is no mistake; there has been no mistake; and there shall be no mistake.”

**FRIDAY, APRIL 29:** When what we planned does not happen, it is time to plan something else. And that is the gift of failure. Or as Frank Lloyd Wright put it, “The physician can bury his mistakes, but the architect can only advise his clients to plant vines.”

**SATURDAY, APRIL 30:** Remember always: “A ship in port is safe, but that’s not what ships are built for.” Sail on.



## LET’S SHARE OUR THOUGHTS

The following discussion questions, Scripture echoes, 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. Once a month, *The Monastic Way* staff will convene a Zoom conference where you can share your insights. Three times a year Sister Joan Chittister will join that Zoom conference to give more input and respond to your questions and ideas regarding one issue of *The Monastic Way*.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you name any so-called “failures” in your life that turned out to be experiences in growth, in your development as a person? 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. Sister Joan writes on April 12 that only failure can teach us perseverance, faith, and humility. Do you agree? If you can, cite an experience from your own life where this proved true.



## SCRIPTURE ECHO

*We have fallen but will rise again.  
We are in darkness now, but God will give us light.*  
—MICAH 7:8

For a few days this month, read, listen to, or watch the daily news and list all the worldwide “failures” that the headlines expose. Then repeat the Micah Scripture and do one action to help bring light to a dark situation.

## 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.

- There is no such thing as failure.
- Beware of an addiction to perfection.
- “And all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well” —Julian of Norwich

**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 BUKOWSKI

## PRAYER

*Our Father, Mother, who are in this world and surpass the world,  
Blessed be your presence, in us, in animals and flowers, in still air and wind.  
May justice and peace dwell among us, as You come to us.  
Your will be our will;  
You will that we be sisters and brothers, as bread is bread, water is itself,  
For our hunger, for quenching of thirst.  
Forgive us.  
We walk crookedly in the world, are perverse, and fail of our promise.  
But we would be human, if only You consent to stir up our hearts. Amen.*  
—DANIEL BERRIGAN, SJ

**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.

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