

Joan Chittister

THE MONASTIC WAY

MAY 2022

Only passions, great passions, can elevate the soul to great things.

-DENIS DIDEROT

THE HEARTBEAT OF LIFE

It's all around us. Passion is the very heartbeat of life. I saw it in action when I got invited to an International Women's Day luncheon in Ireland. I didn't know a soul there and discovered later that most of the other women didn't know many of the other 300 participants either. But that didn't matter. We had been invited into passion and they came. Why? Because the \$125 a plate luncheon was a fundraiser to provide education on all levels for women in working-class suburbs. These were women whose passion had been touched. And that same passion is in very average people like ourselves.

We all know people like them. Sometimes we even look at them and shake our heads. But in that case, we need to be careful. They are in our lives to model for us exactly what we may need to know about the fine art of living.

Eddie, for instance, played golf every day of the year. Every single day. When the course was covered in snow he practiced his swings in an attic the length of the house. And he took the same kind of passion to local politics, as well.

Sean played Gaelic football as a boy and, if truth were known, never really stopped. Not mentally, at least. He haunts Dublin for tickets to every game, then comes home and watches the replay of what he had video-taped while he was in the stands. When the professional season ends, he travels from province to province to watch the local matches. But he is even more passionate about his Center for Jewish-Muslim-Christian Studies in this newly fragmented world.

Bernie does photographs. You don't have to ask her to do it. She will do it whether you ask her or not. She simply goes around taking pictures, crops them, frames them, sends them away to photo contests, and piles them up beside her on her desk. And she is just as passionate about care for the sick.

Marie Claire did African violets, hundreds of them. There were saucers full of fresh cuttings everywhere. Every windowsill was another part of the green house. And when she went away, people—a few perfectly responsible, equally committed people—were commandeered to come



in and water them. And she was passionate, too, about teaching young pianists to add to the beauty of the world.

All of these people do things both to enhance life and to make the world a better place. They are perfect examples of what Etty Hillesum was referring to when she wrote, "To live fully, outwardly and inwardly, not to ignore external reality for the sake of the inner life, or the reverse—that's quite a task."

One kind of passion, it seems, fueled the other. They teach or do research. They are musicians or social service personnel. They are retired business people or corporate managers. They pour themselves into life and, at the same time, they make life better for everyone. They live life to the hilt. They are passionate people.

We have been taught to fear passion, however. What a pity. What we have not been well taught, perhaps, is that a life without passion is a dull life indeed. Maybe even a very limited one. Certainly, a barren one. Without passion, life turns routine. Blah sets in.

What we do with our passions, how we control them, how we nurture them, how we direct them, determines what will become of us the rest of our lives. More than that, perhaps, it determines who we are.

Passion, you see, is one of the hallmarks of being human. And it is everywhere. The only question is whether or not there is really enough of it.



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?

*Only passions, great passions,
can elevate the soul to great things.*
-DENIS DIDEROT

SUNDAY, MAY 1: Passionate people change the world, their own and the world around them, as well. They bring it color and skill, joy and focus, interest, and excitement.

MONDAY, MAY 2: Passionate people show us how to live with intensity and care. The person without a passion for something is a person without a passion for life.

TUESDAY, MAY 3: Those with a passion for life have saved the world for us all. Helen Keller's passion saved the deaf. Florence Nightingale's passion saved the sick. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s passion saved Black America. The question for us now is a simple one: What passion of ours is saving the world at the present time?

WEDNESDAY, MAY 4: Let your passion be your guide to what it means to be great of soul in our time and this place. Anything else is not living in the here and now. It is only the fact of being alive.

THURSDAY, MAY 5: It is passion that leads a person always to conflict, always to new life. Because of the passion we have for the great things of life, we find ourselves at odds with the hard things of life. But as Garrison Keillor put it, "It is a shallow life that doesn't give a person a few scars."

FRIDAY, MAY 6: The test of what it is to be truly alive is the determination of what has meaning to us. What makes us cry? What makes us angry? What makes us sorrowful? What gives us joy? "Live to the point of tears," Albert Camus wrote. Live, in other words, as if the life of the rest of the world depends on yours.

SATURDAY, MAY 7: There is only one great obstacle to the release of passion within us. That is the effort it will take to go out of our comfort zone to do something about it. It's so easy just to

let life go by. It is also so stultifying.

SUNDAY, MAY 8: When we come alive to the life of others—and then set out to make it better for them—we become fully human.

MONDAY, MAY 9: It isn't true that some people are passionless. As Rachel Field says, "There's plenty of fire in the coldest flint." The problem is that they have simply not done anything to bring it to flame. If you know someone like that, invite them along.

**IF YOU WANT THE WORLD
TO BE A BETTER PLACE,
ASK YOURSELF WHAT MAKES
YOU FEEL ALIVE.**

TUESDAY, MAY 10: It is our passion for something beyond ourselves that keeps us alive. It gives a purpose to life that is far beyond breathing. It makes us into the human, human beings we are meant to be.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 11: When we are passionate about something then the blood runs hot. Everything counts. Everything is important. "I postpone death by living, by suffering, by error, by risking, by giving, by losing," Anaïs Nin writes.

THURSDAY, MAY 12: Passion is the human being's reaction to the inadequacies of the present. Passion is what enables us to go beyond a stale status quo, to go on growing together as a people, as a civilization, as a community.

FRIDAY, MAY 13: The most searing question of age is this: What did I ever do in my life to change one thing that needed changing? If the answer is, "nothing," think carefully. There is still time.

SATURDAY, MAY 14: A life without passion is life half-lived. It is a life without purpose, without depth, with-

out enduring value. "I don't want to get to the end of my life," Diane Ackerman wrote, "and find that I lived just the length of it. I want to have lived the width of it as well."

SUNDAY, MAY 15: It's important to be invested enough in something to care what happens to it. Otherwise, how will we ever really know the depth of ourselves?

MONDAY, MAY 16: Passion and anger are not the same thing. To have a passion for something is to feel drawn to it, to be invested in it, to care about it. To be angry about something is simply to be emotionally aroused. And maybe destructively so.

TUESDAY, MAY 17: When we are passionately involved in a topic, we find ourselves living at a new level of life. We become intensely aware, focused, committed.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 18: For some people, the great questions of life, meaning the issues that are bigger than their own lives, simply do not exist. They are, as Queen Margrethe of Denmark put it, simply "passengers in life." It's one thing to do nothing to steer the boat; it's something else entirely to complain, then, about where it's going.

THURSDAY, MAY 19: The larger a population becomes, the farther away from the issues they become. No wonder we get so deeply involved in mismanagement, corruption, and the power plays of authoritarian managers when so many are asleep. "The tragedy of life," Thomas Carlyle wrote, "is not so much what we suffer but rather what we miss."

FRIDAY, MAY 20: Passion is not a problem. Passion is a virtue. "You taught me to be nice," Garrison Keillor wrote, "so nice that now I am so full of niceness, I have no sense of right and wrong, no outrage, no passion." Niceness in an unacceptable situation is nothing but a moral disease.

SATURDAY, MAY 21: If we want something to happen, something to change, something to begin, we have to care about beginning it ourselves. We must care about something passionately. "Nothing great in the world," Georg

Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel wrote, “has been accomplished without passion.”

SUNDAY, MAY 22: The human inclination is to sit back and let things happen, to sit back and let someone else make it happen. But Marcus Aurelius Antoninus was very clear about it. He wrote: “Waste no more time talking about great souls and how they should be. Become one yourself.”

MONDAY, MAY 23: Passion is not an emotional outburst. It is awareness that turns to interest that turns to study that turns to action that then, finally, turns to good. But only provided that someone, you and I, begin it.

TUESDAY, MAY 24: Social change does not happen in a day, or a year, or sometimes, even in a lifetime. It took over 75 years of unrelenting petition, education, pressure, resistance for women in the US to get the vote. Half the country was disenfranchised for over 150 years. And without the passion of our foremothers, would be still.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 25: Do not spend your life on small questions. Trina

Paulus says, “There must be more to life than just eating and getting bigger.”

THURSDAY, MAY 26: It isn’t what great effort takes out of us that matters. It’s what we put into it that will, in the end, define who and what we really are.

FRIDAY, MAY 27: Unless we stand for something worth a life, we fail life completely. “They are committing murder,” May Sarton writes, “who only live.”

**IT IS PASSION THAT
LEADS A PERSON
ALWAYS TO CONFLICT,
ALWAYS TO NEW LIFE.**

SATURDAY, MAY 28: If you want the world to be a better place, ask yourself what makes you feel alive, what makes your nerves tingle and your blood run faster. Then, go get involved in it.

SUNDAY, MAY 29: The passionate are not unusual people. They are just like you and me. The only difference is

that they have passion for both the personal and the public aspects of life.

MONDAY, MAY 30: Passion is another word for love. “I have not loved enough,” Lorene Cary writes. “I’d been busy, busy, so busy preparing for life, while life floated by me, quiet and swift as a regatta.” If you haven’t loved enough yet, by all means begin now. For your own sake.

TUESDAY, MAY 31: Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said, “Abba, as much as I am able, I practice my little Rule, keep my little fasts, do my prayers and meditation, remain quiet, and, as much as possible, I keep my thoughts clean. What else should I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched out his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten torches of flame. And he said, “Why not be turned completely into fire?” There comes a time when the spiritual life is more than a program of spiritual exercises. It is the whole-souled plunge into life; a life lived from a spiritual perspective, through the eyes of the poor and needy. A time when we become “completely turned into fire.”



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. Sister Joan writes on May 1 that, “Passionate people change the world, their own and the world around them, as well.” Share a story about a passionate person who changed or influenced you in some significant way.
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. What is your passion? Name it. How has it shaped your life?

SCRIPTURE ECHO

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."
—MATTHEW 6:21

*"Hope in God! Your strength will be renewed.
You will soar like an eagle, run and not grow weary."*
—ISAIAH 40:31

What if anything, might one or both of these Scriptures be saying about "passion"?

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.

- Do not spend your life on small questions.
- A life without passion is a life half-lived.
- Live as if the life of the rest of the world depends on yours.

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

*Ignite my soul, Divine Mother,
with the Holy Spirit's fire,
and set me free from bondage.
May your freedom become the emblem of my devotion.*

—BEVERLY LANZETTA

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.

KAREN BUKOWSKI, an Erie native, is a nature photographer and former LPGA and PGA Golf Professional who holds a master's degree in public administration. Visit karenbukowskiphotography.com to find many nature and landscape photographs.

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