

# Joan Chittister

## THE MONASTIC WAY

NOVEMBER 2022

### MYSTERY OF LIFE FULFILLED

The sunflowers seemed to go to seed early this year. A good friend died in the quiet way he'd always lived and another friend struggles with a diagnosis that defies itself at every turn. No doubt about it. The signs are clear everywhere: The shadows of life are longer now. Even the grass has seared a bit. And with the changing of the season and the dulling of the sun and the lengthening of the nights, something inside ourselves slows and changes and turns, as well. With the turning of the seasons of our lives, life takes on a far more precious hue.

It is the season of memories now. It is the time of year that piques hope and prods it to doubt. It is, then, the time of the year in which resurrection takes on a new kind of meaning. Yes, things die and no, nothing ever dies because yes, it goes on living again in us.



KAREN BUKOWSKI

Death seems so cruel, so purpose-less at times. But it's not. Death is what alerts the rest of us to life—just when we have grown tired of it ourselves, perhaps, or worse yet, simply unaware of it at all.

Death is the call to look again at life—this time with a wiser eye. Life, for the likes of us, is not a series of struggles and irritations. That, it seems, is reserved for refugees and farm families on hard soil and peasant types on mountaintops. Our life, on the other hand, is a panoply of opportunities. It does not depend on “luck.” It depends on what we do with it, how we approach it, what we make of what we have, how we distinguish between wants and needs—and, most of all, how much of ourselves we put into making it better, not only for ourselves, but for those who lack the resources even to begin to make it better for themselves.

Death, the awareness of its coming, the sounds of it around us, is what calls us to a life beyond apathy,

*Keep death daily before your eyes.*

—CHAPTER 4, RULE OF BENEDICT

beyond indifference, beyond unconcern. Death reminds us to live.

This is the period when the parts of us that died with the death of those we loved rise again in the recollection of past moments and the tears of past tenderness. This is when we know for certain that every deed we ever do lives on somewhere in someone who remembers it. This is when we are made to see death as a prod to life.

The death of the year, the death of the past begins to bloom again in old memories and the lessons we learned from them, in long known truths and newly realized loves, in new perceptions of past obscurities.

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The time is short for all those things. The time is now. The time is for reflection on what we've lost in life, yes, but for what we have left in life, too. It's time to begin to live life fuller rather than faster.

Death give us all the gift of time. Our own and the time of those around us. It calls us to stop and look at sunflowers next time, to care for the grass always, to embrace the planet forever, to pay attention to our friends, to take comfort in the dark, to remember that the daffodils will unfold again. It is time to plant spring in our own hearts, to remember the light that no darkness can overcome.

Then, when death comes for us, as it surely will, we will know that it is only prelude. “I don't know what's there,” the dying old woman said to her grieving friend. “I only know that God is there. So, don't worry. That is enough.”



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?

*Keep death daily before your eyes.*

—CHAPTER 4, RULE OF BENEDICT

**TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 1:** Death does not dampen life. It simply reminds us to live the rest of it well. "Some people," Henry Van Dyke wrote, "are so afraid to die that they never begin to live."

**WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 2:** Life we get for free. Who we are when we die, we must earn.

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 3:** Death is not only an enemy. It is a friend as well who releases us from pain, from diminishment, from solitude. We must learn to celebrate that, too.

**FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 4:** We must learn to remember when we are at our most passionate, our most stubbornly closed to the other, that we are both dying: they and we. Is this the way we want to do it?

**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5:** Life is too short to spend whining, weeping, stamping our feet. "There are those," the Buddha says in the Dhammapada, "who forget that death will come to all. For those who remember, quarrels come to an end."

**SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 6:** We waste too much of life worrying about death. It is as natural as birth and twice as exciting, twice as mysterious.

**MONDAY, NOVEMBER 7:** Death offends our sense of freedom and self-will. But, then, we have no idea of how liberating this birth into new life may possibly be. "So much do I love wandering/So much I love the sea and sky," the poet Zoë Akins writes, "That it will be a piteous thing/In one small grave to lie." As if that were the end of matter that, in one form or another, will go on forever.

**TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 8:** We cannot live our lives in thrall of death. We must live each day to be better than the last—no matter what the last has been. Whatever punishment our lives yield, we will surely pay most of it here. "I shall die," the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay writes, "but that is all that I shall do for death; I am not on his payroll."

**WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 9:** Pity is not the real response to death: It is wonderment; it is fear; it is surrender.

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 10:** When someone we love dies, we do not weep for them. We weep for ourselves. But oh, how long it takes to admit it.

**WE PREPARE FOR DEATH  
BY LIVING WELL  
ALL THE LITTLE DEATHS  
ALONG THE WAY.  
THEN WE LEARN THAT  
THERE IS ALWAYS NEW LIFE  
ON THE OTHER SIDE  
OF OUR WORST FEARS.**

**FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 11:** The major question at the death of another is not, "Where did they go?" but, "What did they do while they were here that eases the passage before them?"

**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 12:** Death is its saddest when the life that precedes it is of no great account to anyone. "I am not afraid of death," Isabelle Eberhardt writes, "but I would not want to die in some obscure or pointless way."

**SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 13:** Death is no more to be feared than life. And life, whatever its struggles, we call precious, we call wonderful, we

call gift. And why not the journey to the next one?

**MONDAY, NOVEMBER 14:** We say we believe in an afterlife. But when a person dies, we do not say, "I wonder what they will do now?" Instead we say, "I hope they did enough to merit the glory to come." Now what do you suppose that means?

**TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 15:** Only when we are old enough to realize that death is the end of our present life are we really able to live life thoughtfully, to make every moment count, to repair our broken past by living the present better than ever.

**WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 16:** Death is the final realization that life has been good. The trick to a life well-lived is to come to that awareness as soon as possible.

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 17:** If we spend too much of life worrying about death, we can lose a lot of life. If we spend too little of life thinking about death, we can lose a lot of life, as well.

**FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18:** The purpose of life is to bring us to fulfillment of heart, of soul, of experience. "There is nothing sadder than the cheerful letters of the dead," Barbara Mertz writes, "expressing hopes that were never fulfilled, ambitions that were never achieved, dreams cut off before they could come to fruition."

**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 19:** Death is the common denominator of the human race. Whatever we are, we are simply just like everyone else. Mortality is the great leveler of pride and prejudice, of profit and power.

**SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 20:** The promise of death makes all the deadly things of life bearable.

**MONDAY, NOVEMBER 21:** Life we learn as we go along. Death, too.

It is the last great mystery of humankind. It takes us to the very edge of nothingness, excited.

**TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 22:** The fear of our own death has the capacity to make us kind. The Buddhist Dhammapada teaches: “All beings tremble before danger, life is dear to all. When we consider this, we do not kill or cause to kill.”

**WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 23:** It is the very finality of death that persuades us of its purpose. How could something as beautiful as life ever really die? As Winston Churchill put it: “I remember the story of the old man who said on his deathbed that he had had a lot of trouble in his life, most of which had never happened.”

**THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 24:** When death comes, understanding comes with it. “Is death the last step?” Sir Walter Scott asked—and then answered clearly, “No, it is the last and final awakening.”

**FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 25:** Death is neither to be sought nor resisted. It is only to be accepted as the exclamation point of life. “Do not seek death,” Dag Hammarskjöld wrote, “but seek the road which makes death a fulfillment.”

**IF WE SPEND  
TOO MUCH OF LIFE  
WORRYING ABOUT DEATH,  
WE CAN LOSE A LOT OF LIFE.  
IF WE SPEND  
TOO LITTLE OF LIFE  
THINKING ABOUT DEATH,  
WE CAN LOSE A LOT OF LIFE,  
AS WELL.**

**SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 26:** Because we cannot see what happens after death, we are all the more attentive to what happens before it.

**SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27:** We prepare for death by living well all the little deaths along the way. Then we learn that there is always new life on the other side of our worst fears. “It is not dying,” Margot

Asquith writes, “but living, that is a preparation for Death.”

**MONDAY, NOVEMBER 28:** Every death calls us to a new spring in life.

**TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 29:** Epictetus teaches, “For it is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of death and hardship.” It is death that teaches us how useless fear really is. Fear of death saps our energy and does nothing whatsoever to bring us to a real appreciation of the kind of life that is beyond length of days.

**WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30:** Death concentrates both the vision and the soul. Or as Samuel Johnson says it, “Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”



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## LET'S SHARE OUR THOUGHTS

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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. What have been your responses to death: fear, wonder, acceptance...? What is your present response and why?
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 in your life has most prepared you for death? And what lesson about death has most prepared you for life? Explain.

## SCRIPTURE ECHO

*O death, where is your sting?  
O grave, where is your victory?*

—1 CORINTHIANS 15:55

Name five people who died that you loved, admired, or cared for. What did each of these persons leave you that you want to mirror in your life? Was it kindness, raw courage, a questioning spirit...? Share what these people and their legacy mean to you.



KAREN BUKOWSKI

## 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.

- Death is no more to be feared than life.
- The fear of our own death has the capacity to make us kind.
- Keep death daily before your eyes. — Rule of Benedict

**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

May it be beautiful before me.  
May it be beautiful behind me.  
May it be beautiful below me.  
May it be beautiful above me.  
May it be beautiful all around me.  
In beauty it is finished.  
In beauty it is finished.

—FROM A NAVAJO NIGHT PRAYER

*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](http://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.

**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](http://karenbukowskiphotography.com) to find many nature and landscape photographs.

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