

THE MONASTIC WAY

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

OUR UNPLAYED MELODIES

The dark feeling of times past, times over, times lost, times unfinished, unknown times ahead: Who of us hasn't known this all?

The only question is whether or not we come to see that these unplayed melodies of our lives can be as enriching for us as were all the themes we played before them.

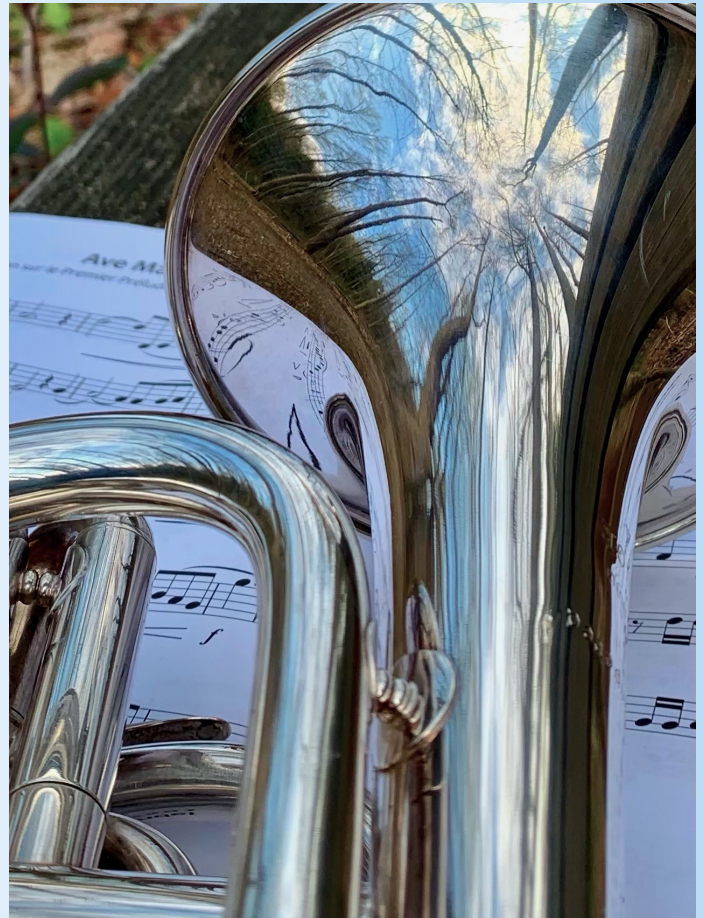
Music, for instance, had always been a hiding place for me. To this day, I often regret the loss of it. And yet, I also came to realize, there is an even deeper impact of it on my life than the loss of it alone.

Having to leave my piano behind when we left one part of Pennsylvania to settle in another was a great rupture in my young life. I was only ten years old when it happened but, more than anybody knew, to lose the piano was to lose my whole world. I had learned as an only child to make the piano my friend, my companion, my refuge.

On the other hand, I finally came to realize that to have found a new life and new possibility in my new world was itself a gift. There was a whole new world to be explored.

In the end, then, there's no doubt that it was the very loss of music that finally catapulted me into writing. And most ironic of all, it was learning to pattern my sentences on the rhythm and structures of the various musical genres—the march, the waltz, the concerto, allegro or andante, dolce or forza—that forged my writing and speaking style.

Now there's the rub: Was music, then, really a loss or not? Or was the loss of music what really



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moved me to where I was actually meant to be? “God writes straight in crooked lines,” the Portuguese say.

The problem is that it can take a lifetime to learn the full implications of that very simple insight—to come to trust today, to look forward to every unexpected tomorrow. To ask ourselves at every turn, at every moment of choice, what is most important in life right now? What really fits? Because whatever the answer to those two questions, is the answer to the direction of my life.



TUESDAY, AUGUST 1: Life is a series of different melodies, all sung separately but each, in the end, essential to its theme.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 2: “Music,” Victor Hugo wrote, “expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent.” Like music, life is made up of both spoken and unspoken elements. Getting the right relationship between the two is what makes it beautiful.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 3: All the moments of emptiness, of silence, of apparent uselessness in life are only launching points for a future yet unknown. The trick is to accept them for what they are: the time out of time that it takes to allow the soul to catch up with the body.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 4: Music is made up of chords and melodies, crescendos and decrescendos, each of which add to the texture of the piece. Life, too, is made up of alternate moods and opposite rhythms, all designed to hone in us the fullness of character for which we strive.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 5: Don’t ever wish for a quiet life. Without turmoil we can never completely learn who we really are.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 6: There’s no way to grow without growing. Or as Angelina Jolie says, “The only way to have a life is to commit to it like crazy.”

MONDAY, AUGUST 7: In every life we choose both the notes we’ll sing and the melody we give them. Some people complain about everything; some people complain about nothing. “Our life,” Marcus Aurelius said, “is what our thoughts make it.”

TUESDAY, AUGUST 8: To live well it is not necessary to do one

thing only. What is necessary is to do what is most important for both myself and for the rest of the world.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 9: What we think we want to do may not be what we most need to do to complete the growing of the self. “Talent develops in quiet places,” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, “character in the full current of human life.”

THURSDAY, AUGUST 10: To complete the song of our lives, we must be willing to sing it always and to the end. “A life without a cause,” Barbarella writes, “is a life without effect.”

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FRIDAY, AUGUST 11: The music of my life drips into the soul, low and dolorous, high and excited, until finally, we come to hear the song we’re meant to sing. Then, it won’t matter if anyone else hears it or not.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 12: It is so easy to get lost in the arpeggios of life and miss its melody completely. “Our life,” Henry David Thoreau taught, “is frittered away by detail. Simplify. Simplify.” Don’t get trapped spending the joy of it on either the frivolous or the inconvenient.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 13: All of life is an empty room. It is our task to fill it with something worth listening to.

MONDAY, AUGUST 14: It is one thing to do things in life; it is

another to make whatever we do have meaning for someone else.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 15: The good we do for others becomes the audience of our souls.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 16: To spend a life weighed down by fear of playing a wrong note is to miss the beauty of the rest of the concerto.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 17: How do I know if I’m playing as well as others, better than most? Easy. It all depends on whether or not I’m being true to my best self. Or as Friedrich Nietzsche puts it: “You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist.”

FRIDAY, AUGUST 18: We are not meant to spend our lives playing only in empty rooms. We are put here to help others make their lives beautiful, too.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 19: They’re taking art out of schools so they’ll have more money to build bombs and put more people in high-rise apartment buildings. And they wonder why we don’t have soul enough to save our own inner cities.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 20: If we would teach children beauty, the desperation this culture breeds could end overnight.

MONDAY, AUGUST 21: When the darkness of life smothers the song in you, sing even more loudly so that others can hear another melody and follow it.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 22: Everyone has something important to do in life. Right now. Here. Be faithful to the song within you so that its passion can call forth the song of others as well.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 23:

It's common for people to make a living. It's rare for people to make a life. And this culture proves it.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 24:

Down deep everybody wants to do some big thing in life. Few ever really get to do what they most want to do. But so what? It's the wanting that makes life, life. "Go confidently," Thoreau writes, "in the direction of your dreams."

FRIDAY, AUGUST 25: Each of us has come to give the world a concert. But how? Marva Collins says, "Trust yourself. Think for yourself. Act for yourself. Speak for yourself. Be yourself. Imitation is suicide." The answer rings true.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 26: The only mistake a musician can make is to fail to play the instrument they've been given. When we refuse to make out of every day the best day it can possibly be, we let the entire world down. As Andy

Offutt Irwin says, "Don't be afraid to be amazing."

SUNDAY, AUGUST 27: Life is not about knowing exactly what we're meant to do. It's about doing what must be done that makes of our lives a song.

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MONDAY, AUGUST 28: Learning to see the world differently, to appreciate it newly, to live in it with inner ease, is to make beautiful music out of straw.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 29: The only thing that stands to defeat us

is the need to do something that someone else has decided we should do. "The minute you begin to do what you want to do," R. Buckminster Fuller says, "it's really a different kind of life."

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 30: All of life is meant to be a recital for the audience that is myself. When I play that one well, I will unleash a symphony of possibility in the imagination of those around me.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 31: No pianist plays beautiful music without practicing for years. Never let either fear or failure stop you from beginning over and over again. Then, some day, you will come to understand that life is not about being perfect. It is simply about being willing to keep trying until we become what we seek.



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

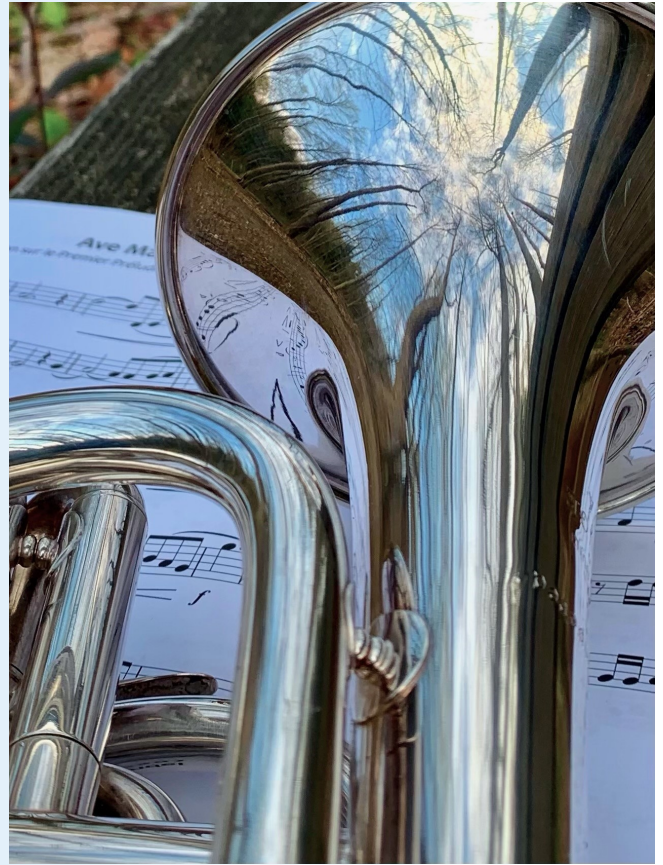
1. Sister Joan writes that the loss of music in her early years seemed unbearable. But that particular loss led her to the gift of writing. She asks: "Was music, then, really a loss or not? Or was the loss of music what really moved me to where I was actually meant to be?" Have you had a similar experience in your life? 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. "Be faithful to the song within you," Sister Joan writes. What is the song within you? You might try describing that song through a poem, lyrics, a painting, some form of creative expression. Or, you might choose a favorite poem, a song, a painting, that best captures the song that is within you.

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

- To complete the song of our lives, we must be willing to sing it always and to the end.
- We are not meant to spend our lives playing only in empty rooms. We are put here to help others make their lives beautiful, too.
- Down deep everybody wants to do some big thing in life. Few ever really get to do what they most want to do. But so what? It's the wanting that makes life, life.

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

"Whatever you do, do all for the glory of God."

- 1 Corinthians 10:31

Have the big decisions that you've made in life had anything to do with your spiritual life? What has been your reason for doing what you have done?

PRAYER

The prayer preceding all prayers is,
"May it be the real I who speaks. May
it be the real Thou that I speak to."

- CS Lewis

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.

The Monastic Way Vol. 32 No. 8
Free online subscriptions at
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Benetvision is an outreach of the
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