

THE MONASTIC WAY

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

TO LOOK AT A THING

Soul blindness is a terminal disease. The person who is soul-blind sees everything and everyone around them as if they were cardboard cutouts, one-dimensional, without sides or depth or shades of grey.

But it is those who know that what we can see with our eyes is only one facet of life, who stretch and bend and color life for the rest of us. They know that there is more than one way to make a thing real. There is more than any one single insight into one single facet of life.

The gift of seeing differently is a very special gift in life, one to be cultivated, one to be sought after, one to be celebrated.

Artists have for years shown us how to see differently, how to think differently, how to construct our worlds differently. Early 20th century German Expressionist Franz Marc's *In the Rain*, uses wild color, fluid lines, vibrant diagonals, and a swirling collection of vegetation, animals, and human profiles to capture the fury of nature, as well as the psalmist's cry that the rain falls on good and bad alike. It enables us to feel the rain, to know the storm, to realize our identity with nature.

To be able to look at something and imagine how to do it differently is the gift that frees the soul. No, it's more than that. We come to understand there is no one way, no right way to do something, to understand something, to think about something, to re-imagine something. There are as many ways as there are people. In fact, we all see everything differently. The challenge is to free imagination in ourselves. Then we, too, can begin to see the "perhaps" in a thing, a person, an institution, a plan, as well as its ghost from the past.

We live in a century that bursts with creativity: First we put computers in machines the size of a room, then into machines the size of a closet, then into machines the size of a suitcase, and now into



SUE DOUBET, OSB

machines the size of a pinhead. And all of those changes came within 50 years. Each of them in less than any single lifetime. All of them before we got accustomed to the one before it.

To have a world such as this is to have a living icon of the possible.

So why, I need to ask myself, do we keep trying to reinvent the past, to deny that it has changed, to forget that change is organic? That each new thing comes out of what came before it.

Beware any institution that teaches that yesterday is forever. That yesterday is better than tomorrow. That yesterday is holier, better, purer, more the voice of God than now. That to think about something differently is to deny the God who made creativity and growth and change a necessary part of life.

But first, it is a matter of beginning to see what is underneath, what is more than what we see on the surface of life. That's creativity.



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 1: What a thing appears to be is nice; what it might become if I allowed it the freedom to grow in a different direction, is nothing less than a miracle.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 2: We are told that someone asked Michelangelo how he could sculpt such beautiful statues and he said, “I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.” How’s that for all the people who want us to see only the marble in the marble?

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 3: Creativity is the burst of the creator in the creature that makes the world new again—for all our sakes.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 4: The ability to see life, problems, people newly, to see the possibilities in them rather than the problems, makes life an eternal adventure. It is the investment of life in one unending list of daily experiments in hope.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 5: Everyone has the ability to be creative. All we need to do is to learn to play with shapes and colors and ideas. It’s what first grade is all about. Until we learn the rules, of course.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 6: When what has always been becomes more important than what might be, institutions die, relationships die, excitement dies.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 7: There are architects now who are building buildings that don’t look like buildings anymore—a see-through house, a floating opera house in Sydney Harbor, an apartment building whose floors are of uneven height. Why? So we can all learn to live outside the boxes into which our minds have been cemented.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 8: When someone says, “Well, you certainly can’t do that!” there is only one possible intelligent response: “Why not?” Then we all can begin to think again. As Doctor Seuss says, “Fantasy is a necessary ingredient in living, it’s a way of looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope. Which is what I do,

and that enables you to laugh at life’s realities.”

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9: When what was becomes more important than what is, we doom ourselves to a life full of perpetual yesterdays. And the dull, slow, robotized mind that goes with them.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 10: Yesterday is fine for yesterday. But what does it have to do with today? Unless we are sure we know the answer and are committed to doing it, it’s time to start thinking of new ways to do old things so that the real value of the old can be maintained.

*What we think might work,
or ought to work,
or should work,
may very well work.
Whether anyone else but
you thinks so or not.
Try it, why don't you?*

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 11: Sometimes it is necessary to change in order to go on being who we are.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 12: When we release within ourselves the ability to re-imagine our own lives—life without this house, this job, this place, this way of going through the day—we begin the slow, simmering process of real thinking. Then whatever we decide to do can become of our own making rather than shackles of someone else’s design.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 13: Daydreaming is the fine art of rethinking and recreating life. As Edgar Allen Poe wrote, “Those who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night.”

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 14: When we start our lives with “no” or “can’t” or “impossible” we make life more a ghost than a spirit. We pretend to be alive but we have actually succumbed to slow death. As Jean-Luc Picard of “Star Trek” says,

“Things are only impossible until they’re not.”

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 15: Just because an idea is new does not make it good. But it doesn’t make it bad either. The trick lies in allowing an idea enough time to prove itself. It’s what Jesus means when he says, “By their fruits you shall know them.”

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 16: Refusing to give up an idea—any idea—without testing or trying it is the sign of a mind in which rigor mortis has set in. The only problem with that is that we just might be killing other people along with it by denying them a chance for a better, happier life.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 17: Creativity is not about revolution; it is about evolution. About taking an old idea and making it better for its times. “Discovery,” Albert Szent-Györgyi wrote, “consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought.”

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 18: Don’t be afraid to think differently from the people around you. Be afraid of what will be lost because you were afraid to think, and rethink, and think again of ways to make what is now necessary, real.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 19: When we take the tried-and-true for granted—as if in it all possibilities have been exhausted—we destroy life that is trying to be born. We cut off tomorrow without ever even giving it a try.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 20: The poet e.e. cummings teaches, “All creation begins with destruction.” The point is that we must be willing to let the past go for awhile in order to try out another way of being alive.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 21: If the world is going to get better because we’ve been here, it only stands to reason that we each need to do something to make it so: clean up the streets, mow the lawn, think of a better way to recycle the garbage, grow an organic tomato, plant a tree, figure out a better

way to teach a child math and get groceries to shut-ins, perhaps.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 22: Learn to look at something—at anything—and wonder what the rest of your life would be like if it were round instead of square, blue instead of colorless, now instead of later, gone instead of here. Then figure out what you would need to do to adjust to that. Would life be better? Worse? About the same?

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 23: Fear is the great impediment to life. “I dreamed a thousand new paths,” the Chinese say. “I woke and walked my old one.” The question is, Why?

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 24: “Because we’ve always done it that way” is the death knell of life. Avoid it like the plague.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 25: What we think might work, or ought to work, or should work, may very well work. Whether anyone else but you thinks so or not. Try it, why don’t you? As Aristotle said, “Intuition is the source of scientific knowledge.” Not the other way around.

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 26: It isn’t

how many times we fail when we try something new that counts. It’s the one time that succeeds that makes all the difference. As John Dewey said, “Every great advance in science has issued from a new audacity of imagination.”

*When we release
within ourselves
the ability to re-imagine
our own lives,
we begin the slow,
simmering process
of real thinking.*

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 27: It’s daring to think about other ways to do things; that is the well of creativity.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 28: “It is the creative potential itself in human beings that is the image of God,” Mary Daly writes. But if we really believed that, we would stop trying to stamp it out in the people around us. We would know that there were multiple ways to express the same thing—by color for rain, like Marc’s painting, perhaps—or music for pain, maybe—or curved lines instead of square ones for a building. We would

cultivate the gift of learning to see the world in new ways.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 29: We begin, as children, by creating a world full of other worlds in our heads. Then someone feels obliged to tell us that we’re not allowed to do that anymore. And our once colorful and fanciful life goes to black and white. Then we have to learn to think “right”—translate “dull,” “routine,” “rigid.”

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 30: Someday, look at some object in front of you and imagine another way of building, painting, describing it. Lewis Carroll, famed author of *Alice in Wonderland* put it this way: “When you are describing, A shape, or sound, or tint; Don’t state the matter plainly, But put it in a hint; And learn to look at all things, With a sort of mental squint.” Get it? That’s creativity.



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. “Daydreaming is the fine art of rethinking and recreating life,” Sister Joan writes. How much time to you give to daydreaming? Journal about your daydreaming experiences or lack of them. What did you learn about yourself?
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. Reflect on this Chinese proverb: “I dreamed a thousand new paths. I woke and walked my old one.” Why do you think so few people follow their dreams or follow a passion for new possibilities, choosing instead to settle for the tried? How about you? List one time in your life when you either followed a new path or chose to stay with the old one. What were the challenges, the fears, the joys?

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.

- Sometimes it is necessary to change in order to go on being who we are.
- Creativity is not about revolution; it is about evolution.
- Fear is the great impediment to 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...



SUE DOUBET, OSB

PRAYER

The Buddhist text, The Lotus Sutra, tells of a monk called Never Despising. Whenever Never Despising met anyone, he bowed to them and said, “You will become a Buddha one day!” This was his only practice. Try saying this mantra during the month of November—whenever you meet someone, bow inwardly and say: You will become a Buddha one day, or You will become a Christ one day.

SCRIPTURE ECHO

“Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” —ROMANS 12:2

When has creativity, seeing something differently, transformed or renewed you?

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.

The Monastic Way Vol. 32 No. 11
Free online subscriptions at
www.joanchittister.org

© 2023 Joan Chittister: Benetvision

355 East 9th St
Erie PA 16503-1107
T: 814-459-5994
benetvision@benetvision.org

No part of this publication may be reprinted without prior permission of the publisher. Benetvision is an outreach of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie.

www.joanchittister.org