

## THE MONASTIC WAY

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

### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF LIFE?

Everyone has hard days. For all of us, there are those dark periods of life from which it seems like there is no liberation: A husband becomes sick and there is no cure; a child starts down a life path that is dangerous to themselves, unexplainable to friends, unacceptable to family; a wife chafes at the narrowness of her horizons; a friend betrays a trust.

But all of those things, difficult as they may be, are redeemable. A second marriage, we find, can be wonderfully happy; life itself teaches children to settle down and begin again; we come to realize that we can spend ourselves in different, more fulfilling ways, good not only for us but, as a result, good for the people around us as well; new and better friends come to rebuild our sense of security. No, such things as these are not the stopping points of life. They are simply part and parcel of it all, milestones along the way to growth and understanding and fullness.

There is one point, however, at which all life stands to sink precariously into the pit, comes to a crossroads, demands a resolution. If, all of a sudden, we discover that life has lost its sense of purpose for us, the dark closes in, smothers our hearts, blinds our steps, leaves us swimming in a sea of uselessness. Getting up in the morning takes all the energy we have. Going to work becomes a grind. Putting up with the family irritates to the bone. Caring about what we cared about before this comes to a full stop. Why? we ask. Why anything? Why everything?

The ancients were well-acquainted with the problem. They called it *acedia*, listlessness, a poisoning of the will. And they had two answers to it. The first is reflected in a Zen saying, “O marvel of marvels,” the disciple recites. “I chop wood; I draw water from the

well.” It is, in other words, in the daily, the ordinary, the regular, and the necessary that the soul grows and the heart expands. It is by doing what we must, consequently, that we come to enlightenment in life, seeing it for what it is and giving ourselves to make it better.

The second is a story from the Talmud. Rabbi Akiba, the Talmud tells, in the midst of a long journey, stopped at a town to lodge along the way. None of the townspeople, however, would give him room. So Akiba took his only three possessions—a lamp, a rooster, and a donkey—to a field outside of town and settled down for the night. While he slept, the wind blew out his lamp, a cat devoured his rooster, and a lion ate his donkey. Now, he had no light for the night, no food for the journey and no way to complete the trip. Undeterred, Akiba said, “Whatever the Merciful One does, it is done for the best.”



EMMAUS MINISTRIES

That very night, a band of thieves raided the town and carried off half the population to sell to the caravans. “I am sad for them,” he said, “but their turning me away from the town simply proves even further that whatever the Merciful One does, it is done for the best. And, had the light been burning, and the rooster crowing and the donkey braying, I could also have been abducted as well.”

Life is about coming to an awareness of the eternal demands of the ordinary and learning to trust the loving presence of God in what we too often regard as burdens. Then, we will indeed have life and have it abundantly.



**FRIDAY, MARCH 1:** The purpose of life is to come to the awareness that our purpose is to come to the fullness of life.

**SATURDAY, MARCH 2:** The purpose of life is to bring to it the gifts in us that make it better for those who come after us. “I am in the world,” Käthe Kollwitz wrote, “to change the world.”

**SUNDAY, MARCH 3:** “When one has great gifts,” W. H. Auden wrote, “what answer to the meaning of existence should one require, beyond the right to exercise them?” The point is not that there is purpose in life. The point is that the purpose of life is to find a purpose.

**MONDAY, MARCH 4:** Without a sense of purpose, everything we do in life, however good, is only an accident, not a direction that gives life—to others as well as to me.

**TUESDAY, MARCH 5:** If our lives are about only ourselves, and that superficially, we drift into the kind of despair that masks as boredom and ends in indifference. It is the mildew of the soul.

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6:** It is better to fail to achieve a purpose than to have no purpose at all.

**THURSDAY, MARCH 7:** Purpose is what we decide to do for the world around us because if we do not do it, not only will it not be done, but we will be only half the person we were meant to be.

**FRIDAY, MARCH 8:** It is a sense of purpose that turns the humdrum into the fully human. It makes of the bland and the baneful the stuff of greatness. As William James says, “The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.”

**SATURDAY, MARCH 9:** When we have a sense of purpose, an awareness of a God-goal in the center of our souls, then everything that happens to us is simply another step toward the gaining of it.

**SUNDAY, MARCH 10:** When what happens to us is not according to the plans we have made for ourselves, we must learn to look for the blessing in the burden, for the greater purpose that is really being served by the change of plans.

**MONDAY, MARCH 11:** The purpose of life is not worked out in any single moment. It is seen only in the patterns we create or in the options we refuse. Aldous Huxley says of it, “At any given moment, life is completely senseless. But viewed over a period, it seems to reveal itself as an organism existing in time, having a purpose, tending in a certain direction.”

*Life is about finding  
good everywhere,  
in everything.  
There is really  
no such thing  
as “bad” in life,  
only things in which  
we have yet to discover  
the good that came  
out of them.*

**TUESDAY, MARCH 12:** Life can be lived any one of three ways: unconsciously, haphazardly, or intentionally. The choice we make among them determines the quality of the life we live. “Such as we are made of,” Shakespeare wrote, “such we be.”

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13:** To live life unconsciously is to refuse a sense of purpose, to become a kind of barnacle on the side of the rest of the world, the pilot fish of life, people who hang on and watch while everyone else takes us where we’re going.

**THURSDAY, MARCH 14:** To live life haphazardly is to understand purpose but to abandon the demands of it when those demands inconvenience us. “Life only demands from you the strength you possess,” Dag Hammarskjöld wrote. “Only one feat is possible—not to have run away.”

**FRIDAY, MARCH 15:** To live life intentionally is to know that I am here for some reason. It means that I have found my place in the universe and honor it. It says that God’s will for the world and mine are one. That is our function in life: to make a declarative statement. To know if you’ve gotten there yet, write it down.

**SATURDAY, MARCH 16:** A sense of purpose in life is the deep down awareness that I am doing exactly what I was born to do and that it is good for others, as well as for my own development.

**SUNDAY, MARCH 17:** Greatness comes when we are least aware of it. It comes from working out the minutiae of the day with the future in mind. Stephen Leacock said of it, “Life, we learn too late, is in the living, in the tissue of every day and hour.” Purpose is not necessarily exalted; it is simply clear and real and true and bigger than myself.

**MONDAY, MARCH 18:** When we talk about the plan God has for our lives, there is a temptation to assume that God is going to drop us someplace to do some Herculean deed and all we have to do is wait for it to happen. But if we did that, we’d never do anything: get a job, have children, undertake a project, take responsibility for someone else.

**TUESDAY, MARCH 19:** “There is not one big cosmic meaning for all, there is only the meaning we each give to our life,” Anais Nin wrote. Our purpose in life, God’s plan for us, is only that we see what needs to be done and do it. That’s what co-creation is all about. If the world is not perfect, the question is, What have I failed to do to make it so?

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20:** The ultimate meaning of my life is what, if anything, it has meant to anyone else.

**THURSDAY, MARCH 21:** Every life is measured according to two sets of goals: its short-range responsibilities and its long-range purposes. To substitute one for the other is sad. To

concentrate on one and ignore the other is tragic. No wonder some people feel so unfinished as they age.

**FRIDAY, MARCH 22:** The well-lived life is the life that leaves something behind. “Use life to provide something that outlasts it,” B.C. Forbes wrote. Purpose is what tells us what we want to leave behind.

**SATURDAY, MARCH 23:** We all have a choice: We can live a schedule or we can live a life. “To be caught up in the nickel-and-dime, day-to-day, mundane affairs of everyday life is to lose sight of what life is intended to be,” J.A. Kurtnacker, Jr. wrote. The purpose of life is to know the rushing waters of a trout stream under our feet, the wind on the top of a mountain, as well as the timetables of the institutions that control us.

**SUNDAY, MARCH 24:** That life is lamentable that divides itself into categories of “good” or “bad.” Life is about finding good everywhere, in everything. There is really no such thing as “bad” in life, only things in which we have yet to discover the good that came out of them.

**MONDAY, MARCH 25:** We debate the concept of “free will” in order to

excuse ourselves from the obligation to become: to become whole; to become responsible; to become fully alive. Jawaharlal Nehru put it this way, “Life is like a game of cards. The hand that is dealt you represents determination; the way you play it is free will.” The purpose of life is to play it well so we become all we can.

*Greatness comes when we are least aware of it. It comes from working out the minutiae of the day with the future in mind.*

**TUESDAY, MARCH 26:** If life is meaningless, how is it that we can have such an effect on the people around us? How is it that we have managed to be loved and despised far beyond our meaningless merit?

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27:** The purpose of the hard days in life is to infuse them with new meaning. They call our attention to the obsessions we are allowing to destroy the fiber of our souls.

**THURSDAY, MARCH 28:** When we say that there is no purpose to life,

we are either saying that we don’t yet have the will to shape one or that we don’t have the heart to want one.

**FRIDAY, MARCH 29:** A sense of purpose is the energy of life. To fail to pursue what the world needs and that I have the ability to do is to give myself over to the ultimate selfishness, to the bottomless lassitude of self-centeredness. And worst of all, I fail myself.

**SATURDAY, MARCH 30:** Never doubt for a moment that there is great goodness in great difficulty. Hardship exercises the soul and strengthens it for the next step on the climb toward the summits of purpose.

**SUNDAY, MARCH 31:** Do you want to know if your life has been meaningful, worthwhile, purposeful? Easy. Mark Twain put it this way, “Let us endeavor so to live that when we come to die, even the undertaker will be sorry.” Do something in life that other people will miss when you’re gone.



## 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. How would you define the purpose of life? Has it changed for you over the years?
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 that the solutions to a sense of purposelessness is to focus on one’s daily duties, and to cultivate a sense of gratitude. Have you used these skills in your own life? Were there other responses to purposelessness that helped 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.

- The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.
- If life is meaningless, How is it that we can have such an effect on the people around us?
- Never doubt for a moment that there is great goodness in great difficulty.

**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....



EMMAUS MINISTRIES

## SCRIPTURE ECHO

*"I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly."*

—JOHN 10:10

## PRAYER

Prayer for a Deeper Understanding of the Incarnation

The Incarnation is no mystery, Jesus.  
You make it easy to understand.  
Because you walked our earth we are to see  
the face of the Divine in every person we meet:  
the friend who betrayed  
the family gathered for a meal  
the welfare mother  
the man on death row  
the clerk in the store  
the teenage thug on the corner  
those my government calls enemy and trains me to kill.  
Every time I love, the mystery of the Incarnation happens.  
Every time I love, I birth you on earth, Jesus  
I fall on my knees and beg you, Jesus,  
deepen my living of the Incarnation.

—Mary Lou Kownacki

## 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.

### 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. 33 No. 3  
Free online subscriptions at  
[www.joanchittister.org](http://www.joanchittister.org)

© 2024 Joan Chittister: Benetvision

355 East 9th St  
Erie PA 16503-1107  
T: 814-459-5994  
[benetvision@benetvision.org](mailto: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](http://www.joanchittister.org)