

THE MONASTIC WAY

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

WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

When life feels empty, it is so easy to get caught up in the fantasies of someone else's happiness, and miss our own. Celebrities must be happy, we think. They get so much attention. Bankers must be happy, we're sure. They make so much money. Nuns must be happy, we know. They have so little stress. Couples must be happy, we're convinced. They have someone who really cares about them.

It's not uncommon, this internal struggle to measure happiness against something we can see or something we have or something we want. One thing for sure: the nature of happiness is one of the great universal riddles of all time. The answers vary and often collide but it is the riddle itself that is important. Not to ask myself, Am I happy?, is to fail to ask what may be the greatest spiritual self-development question of all time.

As the now unknown poet wrote:

In Palazzo Rezzonico, Venice
By the Grand Canal, within
Sound of San Marco's clock tower,
Lay Robert Browning, vigorously dying.
Someone brought him Asolando to hold,
His new book: and for a moment he
Rifled the pages; then he said,
"I have given my life to that,"
And tossed it down lightly on the bed.

The poetry does not reduce the rawness of the underlying question, Am I spending my life on something meaningful enough to give joy to my existence?

But there is another dimension to the question and the masters tell a story about it, too: "What good work shall I do to be acceptable to God?" the disciple asked the rabbi.

"How should I know?" the rabbi answered.
"Abraham practiced hospitality and God was with him. Elias loved to pray and God was with him. David ruled a kingdom and God was with him too. Judith led her people and God was with her, too."



ANN MUCZYNSKI, OSB

"Well, then," the disciple said, "is there some way I can find my own allotted work?"

"Yes," said the rabbi. "Search for the deepest inclination of your heart and follow it."

The second question is, then, whether or not I am doing something that taps the best and most natural gifts in me.

Clearly happiness has something to do with doing something we do well that also gives joy to our own life and meaning to the lives around us.
us.



MONDAY, JANUARY 1: The answer to, What is happiness? may itself be a question: Are you doing what you like to do and are you doing it in such a way that it makes life better for others? In other words, you must be happy.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 2: Aristotle called happiness, “the activity of soul in conformity with excellence.” To be the best human being we can be, in other words, whatever it is we do: to be capable workers, to be good parents, to be kind neighbors. But then he added the most important insight of all. He said, “But we must add, ‘in a complete life,’ for one swallow does not make a summer.” It all takes time. Happiness is something we develop, not something we get.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 3: It is important not to confuse happiness with pleasure. Pleasures come and go. Happiness is that certainty of soul that says I am doing what I was born to do and I am doing it well.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 4: Happiness is not something that can be added on. That’s why an accumulation of things doesn’t do it. It is something that comes from the satisfied insides of us.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 5: Happiness is the serene awareness that wherever we are is where we belong, whatever the storms in which we find ourselves.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 6: Happiness is the key to happiness. “Make happy those who are near,” the Chinese proverb teaches, “and those who are far will come.” When we wonder why the kids don’t visit or the neighbors don’t call or the relatives don’t come or the invitations are lacking, this proverb might bear remembering.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 7: Happiness is not a material thing, it’s a spiritual quality. It says of us that wherever we are, whatever we do, we are always becoming more beautiful ourselves because of it.

MONDAY, JANUARY 8: No one can make us happy but us, the psychologists tell us over and over again. Until we begin to pursue our own joy, we will

forever look to someone else to provide it for us. Impossible.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 9: The consumer society teaches us that having things will make us happy. But there are a lot of people out there whose lives are glutted with things—a lot of children with every stuffed animal known to humankind, a lot of women with every shade of eyeshadow, a lot of men with every gadget, a lot of professionals with every certificate the world has to offer—who fight a sense of emptiness day after day after day. But all we really need is what enables us to be ourselves.

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with ourselves
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WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 10: Pianists need pianos, artists need paint, writers need time, fisherfolk need good water and fresh air to be happy. Who are you really and what do you need to be it? Answer that question and you will be happy.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 11: Happiness and narcissism are not synonyms. Self and selfishness are not the same things. The narcissist never gets enough affirmation. The selfish person never gets enough of anything to be satisfied. The happy person, on the other hand, has a sense of adequacy that no amount of lack can destroy, a sense of possibility that no amount of effort can dampen.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 12: Happy people do what they love and they love what they do. It’s that simple. Strange how few do it.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 13: “The majesty of duty,” Immanuel Kant wrote, “has nothing to do with the enjoyment of life.” Life is made of more than simply grinding out the duties of the day, in other words. Life is made of matching what we do well with what we love to do and then doing it in such a way that others can enjoy it too.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 14: If I love woodworking and I do woodworking, then I must do my duty to preserve the forests, to charge no more than a just price for my woodworking and to see that I do something on the side to enable other people to enjoy the beauty of the wood, as well.

MONDAY, JANUARY 15: Those who are themselves happy increase the happiness of the group. So don’t do anybody any favors by denying yourself everything that would give you yourself joy. Martyrs are hard to bear and little help to anyone else.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 16: “Finding myself” is not an exercise in narcissism. It is a prerequisite to being able to be any good to anybody else. Discover what it is you can do for the world that really makes you happy in the doing of it and you will find a way to make other people happy, too.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 17: The only way to be really happy is to stop looking for it and start being it. “Happiness,” Margaret Lee Rumbeck wrote, “is not a state to arrive at but a manner of traveling.”

THURSDAY, JANUARY 18: Happiness is not a matter of being all wrapped up in me. It is a matter of being all wrapped up in something I love that is worthwhile being wrapped up in.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 19: Happiness depends on how we view what happens to us. If we call it the end of the world, it is. If we call it a new beginning, it is. “If you want to be happy,” Tolstoy wrote, “be.”

SATURDAY, JANUARY 20: “The supreme happiness in life,” Victor Hugo wrote, “is the conviction that we are loved.” To be loved means to be able to do whatever it is that we know we ought to be doing. Beware the relationship that wants you to be what they want you to be rather than what you want you to be.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 21: Nourishing within ourselves those things that give us the greatest degree of joy—reading, fishing, music, children, animals, work, whatever—is the secret of happiness

unlimited. “Nothing will content those,” the Greek proverb teaches, “who are not content with a little.”

MONDAY, JANUARY 22: Pleasures are not permanent. The kind of happiness that makes us content with our life stays forever. “Don’t mistake pleasure for happiness,” Josh Billings said. “They are a different breed of dog.”

TUESDAY, JANUARY 23: It is when we immerse ourselves in something big enough or beautiful enough to consume us beyond the moment and forever that we find the unreachable limits of human happiness.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 24: There’s no point in sitting around asking ourselves if we’re happy. If we aren’t, we’ll know it. “Happiness is a mystery, like religion,” G.K. Chesterton wrote, “and it should never be rationalized.”

THURSDAY, JANUARY 25: It’s when we don’t have everything we want and it doesn’t make any difference that we know we’re happy.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 26: To use what we do best for the rest of humankind is the essence of real happiness. “One thing I know,” Albert Schweitzer wrote, “the

only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.”

SATURDAY, JANUARY 27: Happiness comes when we are being our best selves and totally unconcerned with ourselves at the same time.

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SUNDAY, JANUARY 28: The purpose of doing what makes us happy is so that we can spread happiness to those around us. Or as George Bernard Shaw puts it, “We have no more right to consume happiness without producing it than to consume wealth without producing it.”

MONDAY, JANUARY 29: It’s when we think that happiness is a thing that we’re in trouble. Happiness is

what you have when you don’t have unhappiness.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 30: It’s when we try to pin a happy moment down, to cage it and keep it forever, that we are most in danger of losing it, because then we are most in danger of missing the next one. William Blake said it this way, “One who binds to themselves a joy/Does the winged life destroy.”

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31: A man once asked his buddy, “How come you never married?” “I was always looking for the one perfect woman,” he replied. “Never found her?” he asked. “Oh, yes, once I found a gal who was just the right one. I mean she was really perfect,” he answered. “Why didn’t you marry her?” asked the friend. “Because she was looking for the perfect man,” he said. Point: perfection does not equal happiness.



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. In the introduction, Sister Joan presents two crucial spiritual questions: “Am I spending my life on something meaningful enough to give joy to my existence?” And, “whether or not I am doing something that taps the best and most natural gifts in me.” How would you have answered these questions at an earlier time in your life? How would you answer them now?

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. “Pianists need pianos, artists need paint, writers need time, fisherfolk need good water and fresh air to be happy,” Sister Joan writes. “Who are you really and what do you need to be it? Answer that question and you will be happy.” Answer that question. Are there barriers that prevent you from being who you really are? What options might remove those barriers?

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.

- "Happiness is a mystery, like religion, and it should never be rationalized."
- "Search for the deepest inclination of your heart and follow it."
- "Happiness is the key to happiness."

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

I bow to the sacred in all creation.
May my spirit fill the world with beauty and wonder.
May my mind seek truth with humility and openness.
May my heart forgive without limit.
May my love for friend, enemy and outcast
be without measure.
May my needs be few and my living simple.
May my soul rejoice in the present moment.
May my imagination overcome death and despair
with new possibility.
And may I risk reputation, comfort and security
to bring this hope to the children.

—Mary Lou Kownacki,
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SCRIPTURE ECHO

"I will henceforth regard myself as happy....Happy the people who enjoy such blessings, happy are all who put their faith in God."

—LUKE 1:46-55

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.

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