

The Monastic Way

Joan Chittister

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Art by Marcy Hall



The Monastic Way is for people who lead a busy life and long for greater spiritual depth. Each month in 2018, Joan Chittister invites you learn from the wisdom of a woman who spoke out against injustice and forged a path of righteousness in difficult times. In the daily, heart-stretching insights, find courage for our times.



*How else would God speak to me,
if not through my imagination?*

—Joan of Arc

Imagine...

To begin with, let's establish two things: First, imagination and fantasy are two different things. Second, the story of Joan of Arc is profound but basically simple at the same time.

In the course of a long-standing war, (1337-1453) France and England struggled over which country actually had claim to the throne of France. Joan of Arc, a young French peasant girl, felt a call from God to lead an uprising of French soldiers to retrieve the crown for France. And she did.

In the course of those struggles, however, she was wounded in battle and turned over to the English by French collaborators. In England she was referred to an ecclesiastical court and charged with heresy, witchcraft and "dressing like a man."

The French did not defend her and the Catholic episcopacy in England, in a shameful display of church politics, condemned her to be burned at the stake. It was 500 years later, in 1920, that

she was finally declared a martyr and saint of the church. Politics, betrayal, and abandonment are the simple part of the story.

But, in the course of her trial when she was accused by her bishop interrogators of "imagining" her call to win the crown for France, she replied, "How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?" And that is the profound part of the story.

You see, as Joan said, God speaks to all of us through our imagination. That's what our imagination is for: to determine how to make what is better out of what we have at present.

Fantasy deals in the impossible: pigs that fly, buildings made out of gingerbread, people with three heads, frogs that turn into people, lead that can be turned into gold.

Imagination is learning to see beyond what we have to what could be if we simply rearranged our present resources in other ways: foster parenting rather than orphanages, computers rather than typewriters, water piped from wells through dry areas rather than crops left to die from drought, basic housing for the poor rather than rain-sogged tents.

Imagination comes out of new ways of seeing old things done differently. It takes the resources we have and makes new and better ways of using them. It is God speaking to us through human ideas reshaped through the creative energy of the human soul. “Tap the rock with your stick,” God says to Moses and the waters roar through the dry land. “If someone would only lead us to rise up,” Joan of Arc hears her soul saying and the French are liberated. Point: change requires that we listen to our imagination and follow it.

Clearly, one of the great spiritual tasks of our time is to re-imagine the way we do things. Then, everyone could benefit from the gift of life given to us by a creative God who brought the earth into being and then left us to complete it.

Question: Where are the Joan of Arcs who will lead us now out of this place called inequality, injustice, racism, sexism and national narcissism?



Monday, January 1: If we can agree on how to put the parts of life together in better ways, we can change the world. But we have to think about what we want to have happen. Then, we will begin to understand what we will need to change in order to get it. That’s what it means to “imagine” something.

Tuesday, January 2: Imagination is the rearrangement of life as we know it now. It is not about the magical or fantastic. As Pablo Picasso writes, “Everything you can imagine is real.” Get it? Real.

Wednesday, January 3: The interesting thing about imagination is that we let what is in front of us too often obscure our possible futures. We fail to re-imagine what life could be like if we changed at least one thing—like the time we go to bed, or the things we eat, or the people we choose to associate with.... Think about it.

Thursday, January 4: Joan of Arc was betrayed by a segment of her own people. Imagine what life would be like if we could get beyond our own experiences of betrayal and simply begin life over again—with another group, a new friend.

Friday, January 5: Joan of Arc was called a heretic because she believed that a relationship with God could shape the way a person saw life. Imagine what life would be like if we made the life of Jesus a model for our own relationships. Then, rather than simply following the social and political climate around us, we would find ourselves doing things for entirely different reasons than we once did.

Saturday, January 6: Joan of Arc was condemned because “she wore men’s clothing”—and that by all the churchmen around her who were wearing dresses. Imagine what life would be like if we lived our own truth loud and clear. Then, comfortable in our own skin, we would enable other people to do the same. Then we would all be people, not sheep.

Sunday, January 7: The world must choose either to live on imagination or to die from dullness. “Imagination,” Maria Montessori said, “does not become great until human beings, given the courage and the strength, use it to create.”

Monday, January 8: It doesn’t do a bit of good to sit around thinking up new ideas or desiring new things unless we do something to make them real. As Charlie Chaplin says, “Imagination means nothing without doing.”

Tuesday, January 9: To recognize imagination as a discrete gift from God is the beginning of new life. Now we know that we really are agents of God for the good. Problem: The good things we want, we must begin to do ourselves.

Wednesday, January 10: Democracy is nothing but an empty ideal unless people begin to participate in it.

Thursday, January 11: Even if we are not the people who are deputed to create new American policies, we are the ones who should be evaluating and critiquing them. “Imagination,” Joseph Joubert writes, “is the eye of the soul.” Unless we push back on the un-American values of an “America First” attitude, we may well end up soulless.

Friday, January 12: Those who set out to create another way of living are the people on whose shoulders the future depends.

Saturday, January 13: Everyone has an imagination. It’s learning to use it that counts. Otherwise we become straw shadows of our best selves.

Sunday, January 14: Dictators despise imagination. It threatens the status quo because it never ceases to evaluate the present and seek to improve on it. It undermines authoritarianism and saves humanity from inhumanity. “Imagination,” Henry Miller wrote, “is the voice of daring.”

Monday, January 15: Those who dare to imagine a life different from the one we live prod us to rethink life as it is. It may not be better than it was. Some new things make life even worse than it was. But at least it gives us all an opportunity to choose the kind of life we want to lead rather than simply become pawns of the system. Any system.

Tuesday, January 16: Imagination is a call to freshness of thought. It enables us to renew our own way of seeing things even if we never change a thing as a result of our mental meanderings.

Wednesday, January 17: To suggest new ways of doing old things is often a recipe for social suicide. Don’t worry. Just requiring people to think through new possibilities is gift enough for any society. As Henri Matisse said, “Creativity takes courage.”

Thursday, January 18: Without imagination there is no hope for advance—either personally or culturally. John Dewey taught us, “Every great advance has issued from a new audacity of imagination.”

Friday, January 19: Daydreaming is the mother of imagination. To allow our thoughts to drift out beyond the structures of the world around us is to make new ways of seeing life possible. G.K. Chesterton mused, “There are no rules of architecture for a castle in the clouds.”

Saturday, January 20: When children draw a house upside down or on water, we correct them. And that is society’s first mistake. Where would houseboats and skyscrapers come from if someone hadn’t defied the conventional and the commonplace somewhere along the way?

Sunday, January 21: Here’s a good idea: Think three new possibilities a day—one social, one physical and one spiritual. Now talk about them to someone else. What happened in that

conversation? “We do not need magic to change the world,” J.K. Rowling writes, “we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better.”

Monday, January 22: Those who think differently see the world in new ways. They make change possible. The problem for them, as for Joan of Arc, is bringing other people to consider what would happen if we all imagined life anew. Heraclitus wrote: “Dreamers have each a private world of their own.”

Tuesday, January 23: There is no way to become creative except by taking everything we see and forcing ourselves to imagine it differently. Like couches that can be folded up and put away or elongated when necessary. Or a woman as Pope. Or a television that collects everything on a chosen subject for your review. “True imagination,” Ernest Holmes wrote, “is not fanciful daydreaming; it is fire from heaven.”

Wednesday, January 24: Remember always that imagination is based on what we already know. It is simply the reassembly of reality. After all, the SUV is simply another way to think “car.” And the space station is simply a house that flies. As Corita Kent wrote, “Consider everything an experiment.”

Thursday, January 25: If we can’t imagine anything different in anything around us, we can, at least, re-imagine ourselves: what we do, what we think, the kind of person we want to be. Golda Meir put it this way: “Create the kind of self that you will be happy to live with all your life.”

Friday, January 26: Some people idolize consistency. But consistency only means that we never change. To be inconsistent,

on the other hand, leaves room for us to think what we have never thought before. What could be more exciting than to be architects of our own minds? Walt Whitman said of it, “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.”

Saturday, January 27: It is the imagination of the self that leads us to heights once thought impossible. What we dream of doing is already in process in us. “Look inside yourself,” the poet Rumi writes, “everything that you want, you are already that.”

Sunday, January 28: Someone asked Thomas Edison what it would take to become an inventor. And Edison’s answer is the definition of imagination. He said, “To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk.”

Monday, January 29: To think of another use for something you already have and are not using is the essence of imagination.

Tuesday, January 30: It’s thinking the unthinkable that makes imagination the artist of holiness: Someone somewhere, for instance, began to think of things like the elimination of slavery, perhaps. Or the literacy of women, perhaps. Or the state of the world if men became househusbands and women took over all the institutions in society—government, business and church. Soldiers could come back home. Children would have fathers to guide them. The world would cease to operate on force.

Wednesday, January 31: The most serious obstacle to the revolution inherent in imagination is to forget, as Pearl S. Buck said, “all things are possible until they are proven impossible.”

— FOR A LISTENING HEART —



How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?

—Joan of Arc

Spend a few minutes with this quote and then ask yourself:

- What do these words say to me? What feelings or memories do the words evoke in me?
- What do these words say about my spiritual journey?

• My journal response to this quote is:

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