

THE MONASTIC WAY

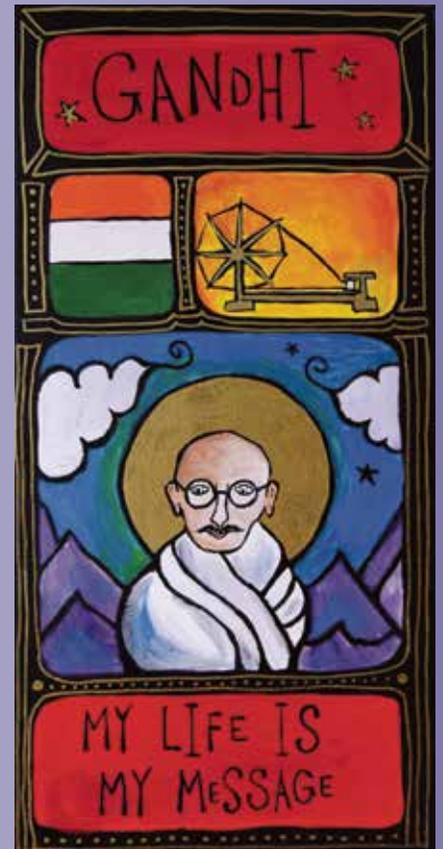
Joan Chittister

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Art by Marcy Hall



The Monastic Way is for people who lead a busy life, but long for greater spiritual depth. In the 2016 monthly issues, Joan Chittister explores quotations from great spiritual figures who dealt with the same kind of soul-stretching questions that each one of us does. You are invited to join her in this simple practice that takes minutes from your day but gives meaning for a lifetime.



My life is my message.

Gandhi

The First Great Step to Meaning

She works at the downtown YMCA, one of those faithful, long-serving people who become part of the woodwork of a place. So quiet, so untiring, so steady that not much attention goes with the job. Except, of course, to those of us who get to know what's behind the placid look, the shy smile, the constancy of her presence.

Her son, the firstborn, was murdered last year, found in the street, face down against the curb. It happened in an upper middle class neighborhood in the middle of the night. And, by the way, he was 32, and African American, and he didn't live in the neighborhood.

A woman behind an upstairs blind heard a commotion and got to the window just in time to see him pushed out of a truck and watch the driver speed away. They caught the driver. But none of that is the story, really. That, in fact, is all too common a story. It happens too often these days for most people to pay more than passing attention.

What is not common is how my friend dealt with it.

The killer was sent to prison for 20-40 years. Case closed. But not quite. Everyone else—two families of living relatives—were left to deal with the aftermath of it: The pain, the anger, the shame, the confusion, the bitterness. Which is where she was so different. “I forgive him,” she said of the killer. “I forgive him. Who knows what really happened there?”

Pressed by others around her to “do something,” her response was thought out, settled. “What good will it do to make more pain for other families?” she says. “The violence has to stop. In the middle of it, all we can do is move on...and hope that the children—the next generation—see what must be done.”

It was an answer born out of years of authenticity: religious authenticity, moral authenticity, human authenticity. Hurt and loss were palpable; venom and vengeance were not. And through it all, she never missed a day of work. Life must go on, you know.

Oh, yes, history is full of names of great people who have been living models of a better way to live for the rest of us.

But, we see in a moment like this, life is also full of neighbors whose names we might not know

but who also live peace. Who practice justice. Whose hearts are open, are soft, and whose minds are non-judgmental.

It's they we must keep an eye on—and then we must ask ourselves the only question that matters: What messages are our own lives giving to the world “as we move on and hope that the children see—in us—what must be done”?



Tuesday, November 1: The way we go about living is the only thing of real importance that we have to give the world.

Wednesday, November 2: We will be remembered for one thing by everyone who ever knew us. And that is how we treated each of them.

Thursday, November 3: What people learn from us as we wind our way through life is the only authentic message we have to give.

Friday, November 4: It is the memory of what people saw us do that is our only claim to immortality. To what and to whom we were faithful, the ways we dealt with others, the mercy we showed to those who hurt us as we went through life. These are the things that measure the gold standard of a life.

Saturday, November 5: Don't preach to people. Just live the best way you know how and people will hear what you never say. “If you would convince someone that they do wrong,” Henry David Thoreau wrote, “do right....People will believe what they see. Let them see.”

Sunday, November 6: Authenticity requires us to do the right things for the right reasons. Not the right things for the wrong reasons—as in wanting to look good in public. It's an important criterion. After all, as Shakespeare wrote of his scheming character, Claudius, in the play, *Hamlet*. “A man can smile and smile and be a villain.”

Monday, November 7: There are no substitutes for models in life. The problem is that too many of us expect to find good ones but we too often forget that we are being one ourselves. For better or for worse. “You have to be brave with your life,” Katherine Center writes, “so that others can be brave with theirs.”

Tuesday, November 8: It's not what we say that changes people. It's what we do that counts. There is simply no such thing as a useless action. Someone is watching at all times. “The world,” Paulo Coelho writes, “is changed by your example, not your opinion.” Do something that makes your own preaching true.

Wednesday, November 9: Never say, “I can't do anything; I have no power, no money.” The fact is that we are all doing something that affects the world at all times. It is simply a matter of our becoming aware that what we don't do when we can do it is also changing the world. As Alice Walker wrote, “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.”

Thursday, November 10: In each of us lies the potential for greatness. Like any seed, however, it must be cultivated, nourished and harvested if it is ever to give life. The only question is this: What does the world need now and how committed to it am I to do something to bring it about? In my family. In my neighborhood. In my church.

Friday, November 11: To live a full and fruitful life, I must consciously attach myself to a shining star and pursue it to the end.

Saturday, November 12: What I value in life—really value—I will do something about to make it even better than it is now. The real tragedy lies in caring about nothing in particular. That is life lived in silhouette, life without substance and seriousness.

Sunday, November 13: Everything we do either advances or weakens the development of humankind. For instance, if I tell children not to swear and then swear about something in their presence, it dims the star they intended to steer by. As the philosopher Epictetus wrote, “We all carry the seeds of greatness within us, but we need an image as a point of focus in order that they may sprout.”

Monday, November 14: The trick in life is not to declare our commitment to goodness. The trick in life is to become what we say we are.

Tuesday, November 15: If my life is my message, then the way I am living life is either making it better—or worse—for everyone who sees me. Think of that the next time you are tempted to contradict your own values.

Wednesday, November 16: There is no such thing as doing nothing. We are all doing something to shape the world, even by doing nothing at all. In fact, that is precisely the point. Or as Albert Schweitzer put it, “Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing.”

Thursday, November 17: No, none of us can do everything. But we can inspire others to take up where we leave off.

Friday, November 18: The great first step each of us must take is to devote ourselves to something worthwhile: to the development of children, to the rights of minorities, to the development of good works, to the support of the important ideas. After that, everything we do becomes one of the engines of society.

Saturday, November 19: It's not having defined anything in life that we wanted to change that is regrettable, yes. But it is never, ever too late to begin.

Sunday, November 20: Influence is the ability to inspire others just by being inspired ourselves.

Monday, November 21: Authority is not a synonym for leadership. Authority is only authority. It can either enable or obstruct development—and often does. John Quincy Adams wrote: If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader.

Tuesday, November 22: It's not my position that determines my influence, it's the degree of my personal commitment to something worthwhile. As Kenneth Blanchard says, “The key to successful leadership is influence, not authority.”

Wednesday, November 23: Rosa Parks, the African-American woman who refused to get up out of a white man's bus seat, inspired a movement that had been simmering for years without ever igniting. Until she did something. “Each person must live their life as a model for others,” she said. And she ought to know.

Thursday, November 24: Most people know what they ought to do to make the world a better place—even in small and local ways. The problem, as Les Brown

said, is that “Too many of us are not living our dreams because we are living our fears.”

Friday, November 25: When all we worry about is what someone else will think if we do or say what needs to be done or said, it is fear that is driving us. Not prudence. Not sensitivity. Just raw fear—the reason it took so long for people to decry racism, for example. Or accept LGBTQ people. Or accept immigrants. Only fear obstructs courage—which is what the world most needs if the rest of us are to grow up emotionally.

Saturday, November 26: Don’t take on a whole problem at once. Go at it one little piece at a time. Then, eventually, you will meet the rest of the world coming over the horizon at you and changing the same thing one small piece at a time, too. St. Teresa of Calcutta said, “I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the water to create many ripples.”

Sunday, November 27: Each of us is here to do something great. Begin it and eventually even you will know how great it is yourself. “The hero,” Felix Adler writes, “is one who kindles a great light in the world, who sets up blazing torches in the dark streets of life for others to see by. The saint is the one who walks through the dark paths of the world, themselves a light.”

Monday, November 28: Know that just by being yourself, you are being either light or darkness in the rest of the world. Choose light. By doing what is right because it is right, necessary, and long overdue in this world, we become part of the revolution the Holy Spirit is straining to begin.

Tuesday, November 29: Don’t be afraid to begin what you know the world needs right now. Don’t be afraid to be your authentic self. Brené Brown says of it, “Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are.”

Wednesday, November 30: Don’t forget the guy who said, “I’ve spent my whole life worrying about what other people thought of me. When I was in my 20s, I worried about what my parents would think of me. When I was in my 30s, I was afraid of what my friends would think of me. When I was in my 40s I worried about what my boss would think of me. And then I got to be 50 and discovered that nobody was thinking about me at all...” Don’t waste your life worrying about what others will think of you if you do the right thing. Just do it. For all our sakes.



— FOR A LISTENING HEART —



My life is my message.

Gandhi

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:

Mahatma Gandhi was born in 1869, in western India, into a merchant class family. Trained as a lawyer, he became the leader of the movement for Indian independence and led nonviolent campaigns against British rule and in favor of greater equality among the castes. He was assassinated in 1948 for his commitment to religious pluralism, but is remembered by many Indians as the “Father of the Nation.”

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