

The Monastic Way

Joan Chittister

August 2018

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 to 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.



*I am not afraid of the pen,
or the scaffold, or the sword.
I will tell the truth wherever I please.*

—Mother Jones

Speak Truth from Your Heart

Listen carefully to the words of Mother Jones who a congressman called, “the most dangerous woman in America.”

She’s important, not only because she tells you what it takes to be dangerous, but also because, in doing it, she gives you a way to be the same.

She says, “I will tell the truth wherever I please.” The Truth. Wherever. Dangerous.

When women stood up and told the truth, when “Me, too” became a reality rather than a deep, dark secret held by men who themselves told no truth about the world-wide sin against women, the timbers shook.

When women began to teach little girls who were not welcome in the men’s schools, the timbers shook.

When women created their own businesses and decided to become financially independent, regardless of who tried to stop them, the timbers shook.

When women became public as well as invisible private figures, the world began to shake: in the United States, yes, but in England, Ireland, Italy, China, Japan, Saudi Arabia...even in Afghanistan and Iran where just this year women have demanded to be allowed to attend male soccer games in the public stadium.

No, the struggle isn’t over. Women around the world are still waiting for you and me to do our part in bringing the human race to the fullness of humanity.

As long as the parliaments of the world, the religions of the world, the committees of the world, are male dominated, and women are paid less than men, as long as the rape culture is dismissed as a “boys will be boys” enterprise, and women themselves go on saying with a huff, “Well, I would never vote for a woman just because she’s a woman...” despite the fact that they have been voting for years for men—just because they were men—the world will go on limping toward the fullness of development on one crippled leg.

No, Mother Jones, emigre from Ireland in about 1847 whose husband and four sons died from cholera, who lived in tenements in New York but who told the truth everywhere about unfair labor practices, slave wages, and a world that lives

through the lens of half the human mind—the male one—leaves us with both a legacy and a heritage. The legacy is to truth. The inheritance she leaves—to both women and men who believe that God’s will is the Law above the law—is the commitment to tell the truth ourselves “wherever we please.” Like Mother Jones: everywhere.

Those who do not call for their own fullness will themselves never be full, true. But worse, they also hold keys to the chains that bind others to a lesser life than God wills for them.



Wednesday, August 1: What we do not require in the name of justice—for women, for immigrants, for children captured and put in government detention camps on our border, for those who are working two jobs to get enough money to live as if they had one full one—we will not get.

Thursday, August 2: To live passively hoping for someone else to save us from the evil of institutionalized greed is to wait in vain. Speak up. Everywhere.

Friday, August 3: As long as people in their gated communities are too far away from the pain of insufficiency to hear it, we must din the structures with the reality they do not see.

Saturday, August 4: The important thing to understand about “freedom,” Toni Morrison writes, is that “its function is to free someone else.” The suffering I do not understand I must begin to explore. Otherwise, whose voice shall I be: the voice of the victim or the voice of the oppressor?

Sunday, August 5: In the richest country in the world, women and their children go to bed hungry at night. Go figure. John Steinbeck, in the midst of the Great Depression, wrote, “Must the hunger become anger and the anger fury before anything will be done?” The point is that silence in the face of need is a collaborator with misery.

Monday, August 6: No one of us who hears about the human struggle for justice and does not add their name of concern to the list of truth-tellers, is innocent of the crimes that follow. “You must do the thing you think you cannot,” Eleanor Roosevelt reminds us.

Tuesday, August 7: To see houses without electricity, kitchens without stoves, children without winter clothes, and families without a family wage is a call to humanity. “The heart,” T. E. Kalem writes, “is the only broken instrument that works.” Is there nothing you see in the world around you that breaks your heart? And if so, in what way have you put your shoulder to its change?

Wednesday, August 8: The single mother who gets a woman’s wage knows that there is no justice in us. And no one who has avoided signing petitions, asking political candidates what they do to equalize women’s wages, or contributing regularly to social service institutions in lieu of public support, can possibly call themselves innocent of this injustice.

Thursday, August 9: People working two jobs to raise two children in hot and bare apartments need all the help they can get. After all, this is an age where families cannot even grow enough tomatoes on apartment window sills to keep alive, let alone find the time to organize political rallies.

Friday, August 10: How can people “get a job” when they do not have health, could not get a needed education, do not have the high-level technological, professional, business or scientific skills it takes to get the high-end jobs that society offers? What’s left—if a machine

or a robot is not already performing the task—are minimum wage jobs that cannot support a family. “Concern,” the psychiatrist Karen Horney wrote, “should drive us into action, not into depression.”

Saturday, August 11: Are you disturbed about racism, sexism, consumerism, militarism, economic inequality, anything? Good. For your daily moral exercise, say it to someone.

Sunday, August 12: Mother Jones is an antidote to ageism. She is a clear sign that no age is too late to live for justice. No season of life is too late to give the gift. No generation is without responsibility for the sins of its times. She did not cede her obligation to be a human being to anyone.

Monday, August 13: The male concerns for competition, profit and control bring the world closer and closer to extinction as one group after another seeks to upend the present system in their favor. Then the world will teeter between outbursts of violence and government by control. As we are now.

Tuesday, August 14: Every piece of legislation passed by any government on earth must be evaluated and graded by the public for what it will do for the weakest, the poorest, the least secure of us all. Any grade under a B must be vetoed. Only then can the poor flourish. No, not only the poor: if the country itself is to flourish.

Wednesday, August 15: It is not that all governments are evil. It is that most long-term governments get out of touch with their most vulnerable citizens that corrupts a society. Any government committee should be challenged to be inclusive and to reflect the voiceless in the community.

Thursday, August 16: The point is not that everybody should be needy. It is that everybody should be secure and nobody should be needy. That is the human goal of a truly human society. Why? Because, as Simone Weil wrote, “The ones who do the crushing feel nothing; it is the person crushed who feels what is happening. Unless one has placed oneself on the side of the oppressed, to feel with them, one cannot understand.”

Friday, August 17: There are spokespeople in every society who call out the dark and empty places in the world. It is learning to hold them up that is part of the task of the rest of us. Then everyone may be heard and no one may be ignored.

Saturday, August 18: Mother Jones organized miners’ wives to stand outside the mine shafts, kitchen pans and steel spoons in hand. As the coal-carrying donkeys started down toward the coal tip, the noise threw them into hysteria and they dumped the new coal over the ledge. Then, suddenly, the mine owners recognized the new unions, raised the miner’s wages and started to include safety equipment in the shafts. Not one coalmine owner died—as had so many sick miners before them. It’s called nonviolent, peaceful protest. Beautiful. Any ideas?

Sunday, August 19: Mother Jones—old, female, grandmotherly, widowed, childless, and financially destitute—is the phantom of all our powerless lives. If she could do it, so can we. We need ordinary people like Mary Harris Jones, uncommonly common folk, clerks and waitresses, lathe operators and flight attendants, nurses and assembly line workers, to speak out against exploitation, corruption, and injustice and then, piece by little piece, change it.

Monday, August 20: Television is a stream of need, of suffering, of the human cry for a humanizing humanity. As the poet Anne Sexton pleads, “Put your ear down close to your soul and listen hard.” We need you.

Tuesday, August 21: There is nothing we cannot achieve if we know what it is and give ourselves to getting it. Like the elimination of slavery, the end of segregation, medical care for mothers

and infants, public education, literacy, labor laws, international war crimes legislation, and civil rights. Well, we got them. And now we need to protect them.

Wednesday, August 22: There is a greater sin than injustice. And that is failing to stay aware of injustice. For when the rest of us become calloused to the suffering of others, our own soul has gone dry. As May Sarton writes: "The hardest thing we are asked to do in this world is to remain aware of suffering, suffering about which we can do nothing."

Thursday, August 23: Loneliness, ironically, is one of the major social effects of urban life and its grand scheme of housing, highways, malls, and multiple ethnic communities. Pressed together in a mass of transients, genuine human contact is one of our greatest lacks. So how can we care enough about anyone unless we put our minds to it?

Friday, August 24: And yet, ironically, the support of other people is one of life's greatest needs. It's time for us to find something human that needs us. For our sake as well as for theirs. The length of our own lives and the depth of our happiness actually depend on it. As Dag Hammarskjöld said, "Pray that your loneliness may spur you into finding something to live for, great enough to die for."

Saturday, August 25: To give of myself for one other person or group of people that I am not required to care about in life is the lasting mark of a great soul.

Sunday, August 26: When I make life better for others, I automatically make life better for myself. I get the grace of feeling good about myself.

Monday, August 27: Someone is waiting for you to do something for them today. Don't just sit here. Get on with it.

Tuesday, August 28: Nothing worth doing—the search for equality, peace, global community, is done in a day. Sometimes not even in a lifetime. Which is why we must begin as soon as possible. Samuel Johnson writes: "Great works are performed not by strength, but perseverance."

Wednesday, August 29: Delay is not defeat unless we make it so. Success depends on our ability to get up and begin again, no matter how long the delay. In fact, if I had a coat of arms, its motto would be, "If not for us, then because of us."

Thursday, August 30: It takes as much courage to stay in the fray as it ever did to begin it. To continue in the face of defeat until the wrong is righted, takes a brave heart. It takes great courage to endure the unendurable. As Maya Angelou writes, "While one may encounter many defeats, one must not be defeated."

Friday, August 31: When they asked Mother Jones what they needed to do to change things for the better, her answer was the most human of them all. She said, "Mourn for the dead and fight like hell for the living." Not every battle is won, no, but no one can win from us the battle we refuse to surrender.

— FOR A LISTENING HEART —



I am not afraid of the pen, or the scaffold, or the sword. I will tell the truth wherever I please.

—Mother Jones

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:

MOTHER JONES (1837-1930), born Mary Harris, was a community organizer who became known as "the grandmother of all agitators." She was called "the most dangerous woman in America" for helping miners unionize, and organizing a children's march from Philadelphia to New York to call attention to the problem of child labor.

JOAN CHITTISTER is an internationally known author and lecturer and a clear visionary voice across all religions. She has written more than 50 books and received numerous awards for her writings and work on behalf of peace and women in church and in society.

MARCY HALL is an artist from Erie, PA, whose vibrant, whimsical, yet deeply reflective paintings have sold worldwide. She developed the Dancing Monk series for the Abbey of the Arts website (abbeyofthearts.com). Marcy is an animal lover who works on pet portraits. Her work is available at www.etsy.com/people/rabbitroomarts

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