

JOAN
CHITTISTER

The ART *of* LIFE

Monastic wisdom *for* every day

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THE ART OF LIFE

SAMPLE

JANUARY



DEER IN THE SNOW » (REHEIM SCHNEE 1911) » PUBLIC DOMAIN » BY FRANZ MARC

TO GO LIGHT-FOOTED THROUGH LIFE

There is a deer in me—made for running, for scampering while the rest of the world around me walks. I am made to find and drink from foreign streams. I am meant to go light-footed through life. So what am I doing in “stability” and “community,” in a lifetime of “Rules” and hierarchy and patriarchy masking as “a woman’s lifestyle”?

But then, on the other hand, how can anyone move freely unless they are rooted in a worldview that is stable and a community that is empowering and a discipline that is strengthening? Disciplined, meaning stretched beyond ourselves to the best of ourselves. Like the well-trained Olympian, like the well-schooled scholar, like the well-formed soul.

It’s easy to bounce through life—going here, trying that, tasting this. What is difficult is trying to figure out what we are supposed to do with what we find, or learn from where we go what will make life even richer. For ourselves, of course. But for the rest of the world, as well.

Don’t be fooled: Deer run, yes, but they never run very far away from the stream at which they drink. The problem with running through life is that it’s possible to outrun our spiritual nourishment. Then we become an empty person in an even emptier place. “The sea is only beautiful,” Patrick Field writes, “if there is a shore.”

Deer run,
yes, but
they never
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To go through life light-footed—moving quickly from one place to another—does not mean that we go without baggage. We meet ourselves there when we finally arrive; and so, in the end, nothing really changes unless we change it first.

If, when people say “settle down” they mean you should stop reaching for the stars, ignore them. If, on the other hand, they mean know what you want when you say “reach for the stars,” as in reach for something worth reaching for, that kind of advice is invaluable. It reminds us that we can’t get anywhere unless we have a destination in mind.

Life is not meant to be a series of resolutions designed to make us someone we’re not. It’s meant to be a series of explorations which, in the end, finally bring us home to ourselves. “The life so short,” Hippocrates says, “the craft so long to learn.”

It’s not easy to know where you want to be in life. But you can’t discover where you’re meant to be by simply standing nowhere in particular staring into space. “Life is a process of becoming,” Anaïs Nin says, “a combination of states we have to go through. Where people fail is that they wish to elect the state and remain in it. This is a kind of death.”

In order to know life, we need to experience life—both its dark and its light sides. Too many of us, perhaps, choose grey. We never risk, so we never fail. But, if truth were told, we never really win either.

Try what you’ve always wanted to try—secretly, silently, deeply. It has something to teach you about you.

When we arrive at where we’re supposed to be in life—where we know that we have finally come home to the fullness of ourselves—there will be no desire to leave it, only the need to plumb it.

It is what we love most to do that makes us ourselves. Then we lose all track of time; then work disappears; then there is nothing but me becoming what I am. The poet William Butler Yeats says of such a state: “O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, how can we know the dancer from the dance?”

There is a magnet in us driving us on to become more of who we really are. The only problem with that is that there is a danger of losing some of who we are as we go, if we have

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Don't expect to be perfect. Failure is built right into
life so that we can learn as we go. Just expect it.
That way you won't be disappointed in yourself.

It's easy to be defensive about what we've done
when we didn't know, to begin with, where we
were going. What a shame. That way we miss the
fun of it. "You grow up," says Ethel Barrymore,
"the first day you have your first good laugh—
at yourself."

Getting stuck in life—refusing to experiment; being
afraid to try something new; becoming cemented
in what is, rather than excited by what could be—is
the difference between living and being alive. "This
is life's greatest moment," Isaac Hecker wrote,
"when the soul unfolds capacities which reach
beyond earth's boundaries."

To become what we are, after years of searching,
hours of learning, and decades, perhaps, of inch-
ing toward the moment when what we know and
what we love to do intersect—it is then that the
fullness of life begins.

Our best gifts do not feel like "gifts" to us. It is
other people who must tell us that. All we know
is that there is nothing else in life that we can
possibly do. As Fred Astaire said when asked why
he did what he did, "I have no desire to prove
anything by it. I have never used it as an outlet or
a means of expressing myself. I just dance."

The best advice we can ever get or give in life is
precisely this: "Just dance."

Life is not one dance; it is many. The trick is to
move from one to the other with ease and the faith
to believe that more are left to come, all of them
meant to teach me more than I ever thought I
needed or wanted to know.

Getting unstuck in life requires the grace to laugh
at both where we've been and where we are,
opening ourselves to an outrageous, unthinkable
tomorrow. Jean Houston says of that moment, "At
the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a
kaleidoscope of new possibilities."

Try not to be too serious about life. It is
really equivalent to taking a ride on a
Ferris wheel, a whirl on a roller coaster





and a couple rounds of dodgems. None of it is without risk, maybe, but all of it is fun.

Deer know that freedom is the capacity to leap the boundaries of life. They teach us, too, that freedom is also the capacity to stay within boundaries when what lies beyond them is more danger than opportunity. “Freedom,” Hephzibah Menuhin says, “means choosing your burden.”

There is no kind of life that does not bring with it the burdens appropriate to its challenges. All we gain when we change our situations is a new set of burdens. “It came as a shock in life,” Anne Morrow Lindberg writes, “to learn that we usually exchange one set of restrictions for another. The second set, however, is self-chosen, and therefore easier to accept.”

The function of life is to allow us to discover the scope of the universe within ourselves.

It isn’t true that we are where we are because we can’t be anywhere else. The real truth is that we are where we are because, for some reason, we do not want to do, to lose, or to attempt what it would take to be somewhere else. And that’s fine;

that’s freedom. The problem comes when we call that captivity.

Life is not necessarily a smorgasbord of opportunities, but it is a plethora of choices. It’s failing to make them, choosing instead simply to slide from one thing to another, that makes the difference. “You don’t get to choose how you’re going to die. Or when,” Joan Baez writes. “You can only decide how you’re going to live. Now.”

There’s something you’d like to do in life. Why don’t you do it? Really? Is that a good enough reason?

It’s not the great decisions of life that determine the emotional quality of our lives. It’s the decisions we make day by day that will measure our total happiness quotient as life goes by.

Life is a marathon. Fortunately, running is good for your heart, good for your body, good for your lungs. Yet it’s where you’re running to—and why—which, in the end, will determine whether you win this race or not.

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Running can be dangerous, of course. But to sit down in the middle of life when you should be running is even worse. As some unknown philosopher of life wrote: "Runners just do it—they run for the finish line even if someone else has reached it first."

E.e. cummings wrote: "The most wasted of all days is one without laughter." Run through life, head up and laughing. Then life can never defeat you.

Just remember that whatever boundaries you're breaking, they will bring their own challenges with them. Or to put it another way:

Archie: Did you hear about the guy who decided to fly an airplane?

Roy: No, I didn't, Archie, but that's good.

Archie: No, that's bad. He was learning to fly when his airplane caught fire and he had to jump.

Roy: Whoa! That's bad!

Archie: No, that's good. He was wearing a parachute.

Roy: Oh, that's good.

Archie: No, that's bad. The parachute didn't open.

Roy: Oh! That is definitely bad!

Archie: No, that was good. He just happened to jump out right over a farmer's big ol' soft haystack.

Roy: Oh! That's good!

Archie: No, that was bad. As he was falling, he spotted a pitchfork in the middle of the haystack.

Roy: Oh-oh! That's bad!

Archie: No, that was good. As it turned out, he missed the pitchfork.

Roy: Now, Archie, I know that's good!

Archie: No, Roy, that wasn't good either. He missed the haystack.

As you begin the New Year, remember that the point is not to win the race. The point is to run the race, fresh and hopeful at every turn, bright and learning at every turn.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Franz Marc (1880–1916) was a German painter and printmaker, one of the key figures of the German Expressionist movement and a founding member of the journal *The Blue Rider*. Most of his mature work portrays animals, usually in natural settings. His work is characterized by bright primary color, an almost cubist portrayal of animals, stark simplicity and a profound sense of emotion.

