

JOAN CHITTISTER

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✻ FOREWORD *by* PAULA D'ARCY ✻
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ASPECTS
OF THE

heart



The MANY PATHS *to a* GOOD LIFE


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C O N T E N T S

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Foreword	1	An enduring heart	28
The heart	4	An evolving heart.	30
An attentive heart.	6	A free heart	32
A broken heart	8	A gifted heart	34
A celebrating heart.	10	A grieving heart	36
A compassionate heart	12	A heart for beauty	38
A connected heart	14	A heart for nature.	40
A converting heart.	16	A heart that remembers.	42
A cosmic heart	18	A hopeful heart.	44
A creative heart.	20	A hospitable heart	46
A desiring heart	22	A human heart	48
A discerning heart	24	A humble heart.	50
A doubting heart	26	An imperfect heart.	52

FOREWORD

An intimate heart54	A questioning heart. .82
An invested heart. . . .56	A reflective heart84
A joyful heart58	A scarred heart.86
A kind heart60	A seeking heart88
A loving heart62	A self-realized heart.90
A mindful heart64	A silent heart92
A mystical heart. . . .66	A simple heart94
A non-judgmental heart.68	A stable heart96
An open heart70	A trusting heart98
A passionate heart . . .72	A truthful heart100
A patient heart74	An unchained heart.102
A peaceful heart. . . .76	An understanding heart.104
A prayerful heart . . .78	
A purposeful heart. . .80	A wise heart106

It was years ago, my life bursting with grief at the sudden loss of my husband and daughter in an automobile accident, that I first met the power of the human heart. Finding the heart's "yes," its willingness not only to go on but to fully meet the great force of love moving through life, was a great challenge. Only decades later would someone use words that underscored that moment: *There are two things of great importance in life: Your intention and the opening of the heart.*

Unfortunately, there are no notes on this in school. To learn about the human heart, we all rely on life experiences and the guides we meet along the way. Eventually some of us begin to investigate for ourselves, allowing the journey to bring many things into question. Whether or not we decide to go deeper, none of us are exempt from the heart's invitation. At times the heart shouts its wisdom, but very often it assists us so quietly that we're at risk of not hearing its voice at all. One thing seems clear: To help the movement of love find its way in this world, we must develop a different and deeper relationship with the heart. We must risk our own

vulnerability and respond to the heart's beckoning. We must learn that whatever takes us to the limits of our strength is there for our own sake.

In these beautiful and spare reflections, Joan invites us to sit at the world's table and decide what our hearts will offer. She wisely reminds the reader that "there is no such thing as an isolated act." We are each responsible for "doing everything we can to make the world whole." Still, it's not necessary to do something heroic. In making a pilgrimage to the heart, we don't initially struggle with world issues and injustices; we wrestle first with the love struggling to break through our own unique circumstances. We notice how easily and reflexively the heart begins to close when we feel threatened in any way. We notice that bringing love when we confront hatred, as St. Francis prays, is not for the faint of heart. But the result of our effort to meet life fully is that we ourselves become the space through which love can move in the world. We only have to do one thing: Let the heart call us back to love.

These pages will help you recognize many characteristics of the heart: *A kind heart. A humble heart. A non-judgmental heart. A celebrating heart. A trusting heart...* They will assure you that the storms of life

are the very place to look for God. They will offer the wisdom that "real peace requires resistance to evil. But not in evil ways." They will show that you must "risk becoming new." They will help you acknowledge and value the treasury that is yours.

Under Joan's expert and prophetic pen these powerful reflections are like an owner's manual for understanding the power of the heart and the force of love. Her accumulated wisdom becomes the sub-text that reminds us that even though dedicated practice and saying "yes" to love won't make our problems go away, it *will* help us recognize Light as it moves through the darkness, able to penetrate our struggles when they come. In the act of opening the heart, the deep, altering stillness of God begins to move. Live to the limits of your heart, Joan tells us. Since she continues to do this with her own life, these offerings have great power. Spoken from the authenticity of her considerable contribution to the world, her admonition "Today is the whole of life. Don't miss it" becomes the guiding voice of these potent teachings. Slow down, she reminds us. Look around. Live life deeply. It is open to us all.

PAULA D'ARCY



The heart

**A good person produces good from
the treasure of the heart.** LUKE 6:45

EVERYTHING WE DO IN LIFE, the Scripture reminds us, goes into the treasury of the heart. The ideas with which we fill our hearts determine the way we live our lives. Those are the things we draw on in those moments when we need to reach down deep inside ourselves for character, courage, endurance, and hope. That's why what we read, what we see, and what we do from day to day counts so much in life.

The heart is not an arrow. It is an amalgam of magnets, all pulling in different directions. It is commitment to family, commitment to self, commitment to success, commitment to life, commitment to God, commitment to security, commitment to approval—all jangled and knotted and demanding.

Goodness is the ability to choose one over the other when it counts.

And when does it really count? It counts when someone else's life will suffer if we do not muster the courage to make the right choice in this situation at this time in this place.

The onetime Buddhist patriarch of Cambodia, Maha Ghosananda, saw his entire family killed by the Khmer Rouge. And he is the one who initiated the Walks for Peace through the Khmer Rouge countryside in the hope of bringing the country to reconciliation. Now that's goodness.

Courage can be a hidden virtue. Faith can be personal. Goodness is the kind of character trait, however, that cannot be practiced alone. Goodness requires a public posture. To be good you have to be good to someone else. And most essential of all, perhaps, to the nature of goodness is the fact that not to choose—not to get involved, not to decide, not to bother—is the most serious choice of all.



An attentive heart

**Let us so live that when we come to die
even the undertaker will be sorry.**

MARK TWAIN

IT IS ONE THING TO BE GIVEN LIFE BY GOD. It is another thing to live it in a way that is a tribute to the possibilities in life.

While we're working so hard and running so fast and buying so much and planning "for the future," today passes us by. Life passes us by. It becomes a list of things we'd like to do—but don't: see the plays, visit the relatives, invite neighbors to a barbecue, sit by the bank and fish, listen to the small, still voice of God in our hearts. But if that's the case, what are all those other things really about?

For life to be life, I must do at least one thing a day for my soul, one thing a day for my heart, one

thing a day for my mind. Count them every day for a month and you'll know what's missing in you when you hear yourself say, "There's something not quite right in me but I don't know what it is."

The key to today is to live it well, live it happily, live it with surprise. Something good is coming. All we have to do is to recognize it when it does. The good life is the life in which every single strain of it has been lived with a good heart, an open mind, and the faith that tells us that God is behind every new and different door.

Today is the whole of life. Don't miss it.



A broken heart

A rabbi always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, “Why ‘on’ our hearts and not ‘in’ them?”

The rabbi answered, “Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your hearts, and then when the heart breaks open, the holy words will fall inside.”

SO MANY THINGS BREAK A HEART open in life. Sudden bursts of beauty lift the scales from our eyes. We begin to see differently. A rose enduring through early winter snow can do it every time.

A graveyard agony is sure to stop our stride a bit, make us think again about what life is about, shake us to our moorings.

Passion turns life a brighter gold than we ever

imagined it could be. It leaves us full of wonder, full of faith, full of the consciousness of a smiling universe.

Long, slow, unyielding burdens—a child whose problem no one can name, a purse forever thin, distance where we would hope for help—can be a challenge. Eventually the heart dries out from the lack of nurture, and the fissures begin to form. Then what happens to us? The rabbi in the story says it all depends on what we have been putting on our hearts all these years. If it is the Scripture, we will know that God is with us now as God has always been active in the world since the beginning of time. If we have stayed close to the story of God’s presence in life, we can bear any burden, survive any loss, absorb however much beauty without dying from the breathless glory of it, and give ourselves to the other side of love—the side that gives as well as takes.



A celebrating heart

**One of the very nicest things about life
is the way we must regularly stop whatever it is we
are doing and devote our attention to eating.**

LUCIANO PAVAROTTI

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW whether or not you're living a balanced life, ask yourself whether your feasting and your fasting—your sense of praise and trust—come in common measure.

Learning to celebrate life is one of the best lessons a person can learn. Celebrations are an excuse to enjoy the world and to enable others to enjoy it too. When we dot our lives with unscheduled as well as scheduled feast days, we remember that we are able to make joy as well as to expect it.

In this country we are conditioned to think that taking time to eat together, to make a meal an event

rather than an act, takes time from the important things in our life. That may be exactly why we are so confused now about what the important things of life really are. To love good food is a measure of our love of life. Food preparation teaches us to do everything we can do to make life palatable, spicy, comforting, full of love.

The oyster stew and the watermelon, the fresh bread for sandwiches and the bottle of wine to go with them, the smell of a Christmas ham and a turkey on Thanksgiving, the weekly meal with the crowd, and the holidays and birthdays and picnics and family specialties all serve to remind us still of the glory of God, the bounty of God, the blessedness of life, the proof that life, in the end, is always good.

To be feasted is to be loved outrageously. Feasting is a divine imperative. It says, "Thou shalt not ignore the joys of life."



A compassionate heart

**The capacity to care is what gives life
its deepest significance.** PABLO CASALS

IT IS EASY TO BE RELIGIOUS; it is difficult to be spiritual. A religious life requires that we be just to the other. The spiritual life demands that we be compassionate to the other.

To be deeply spiritual, wholly compassionate, we must remember that the one in need is simply another version of ourselves that we may have yet to meet in life but someday surely will.

The world will not heal itself. Only a compassionate heart can do that.

Compassion oils the astronomy of the human condition. It brings us into touch with one another, finds the light in each, and magnifies it to the point that the world brightens with a new kind of under-

standing, a better kind of human community.

Knowledge does very little for life. It is compassion that makes it livable, compassion that gives it the kind of vision that gives us all a reason to be alive.

No one of us is here for ourselves alone. That is the single most important lesson of life. Compassion, to be real, must be universal, not selective. I cannot claim to be compassionate if I leave anyone outside the boundaries of my care. Only if my heart is large enough and my vision wide enough can I ever hope to be bigger than my own small agenda. Then I have something worth living for, giving to, suffering with, forever. Then I am a gift to the rest of humankind.



A connected heart

**Each small task of everyday life is
part of the total harmony of the universe.**

ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

HINDUISM TEACHES THAT EVERYTHING in creation comes from the breaking of the Divine Egg. We are all, therefore, fragments of the Divine and related to everything else in life.

There is no such thing as an isolated act. It isn't true that nothing I do matters, that I am powerless, that I have nothing to do with the big things in life. Without the little things, the big things in life fail—like marriage and world peace and the ecosystem.

What we ourselves do not do well cannot possibly be done by someone else. That's why everything we do—washing dishes, babysitting, donating food, visiting the elderly, helping a coworker, sharing a

gift, tending the yard—is so important.

There is no such thing as being “neutral.” We are either for something and so promote it, or we are against something and resist it. Even doing nothing is doing something. By our silence we either encourage or obstruct exactly what we claim to be neutral about.

Harmony is not a matter of refusing to participate and so refusing to do our part in the world. It is a matter of doing everything we can to make the world whole. We are not worlds unto ourselves, indivisible parts in orbit around one another. And yet, every person we pass in a hallway is affected by us one way or another. We either pollute or we perfume an atmosphere. There is no other choice.

Once we see that everything is connected, we see the purpose of life. Our own and everybody else's.