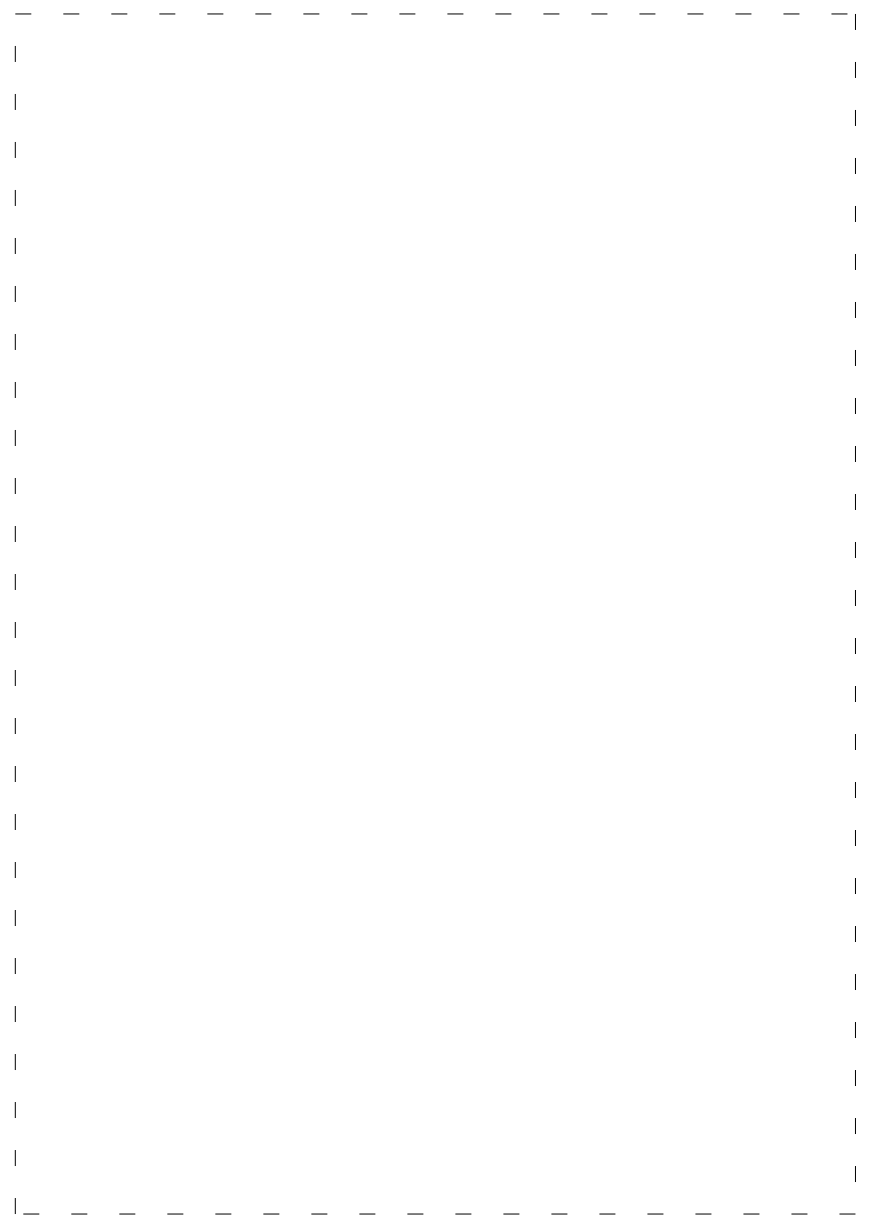


OUR HOLY YEARNINGS



JOAN
CHITISTER

OUR
HOLY
YEARNINGS

•❧ LIFE LESSONS ❧•
FOR BECOMING
OUR TRUEST SELVES

*For more information
about Joan Chittister, OSB,
please visit her website:*
www.joanchittister.org

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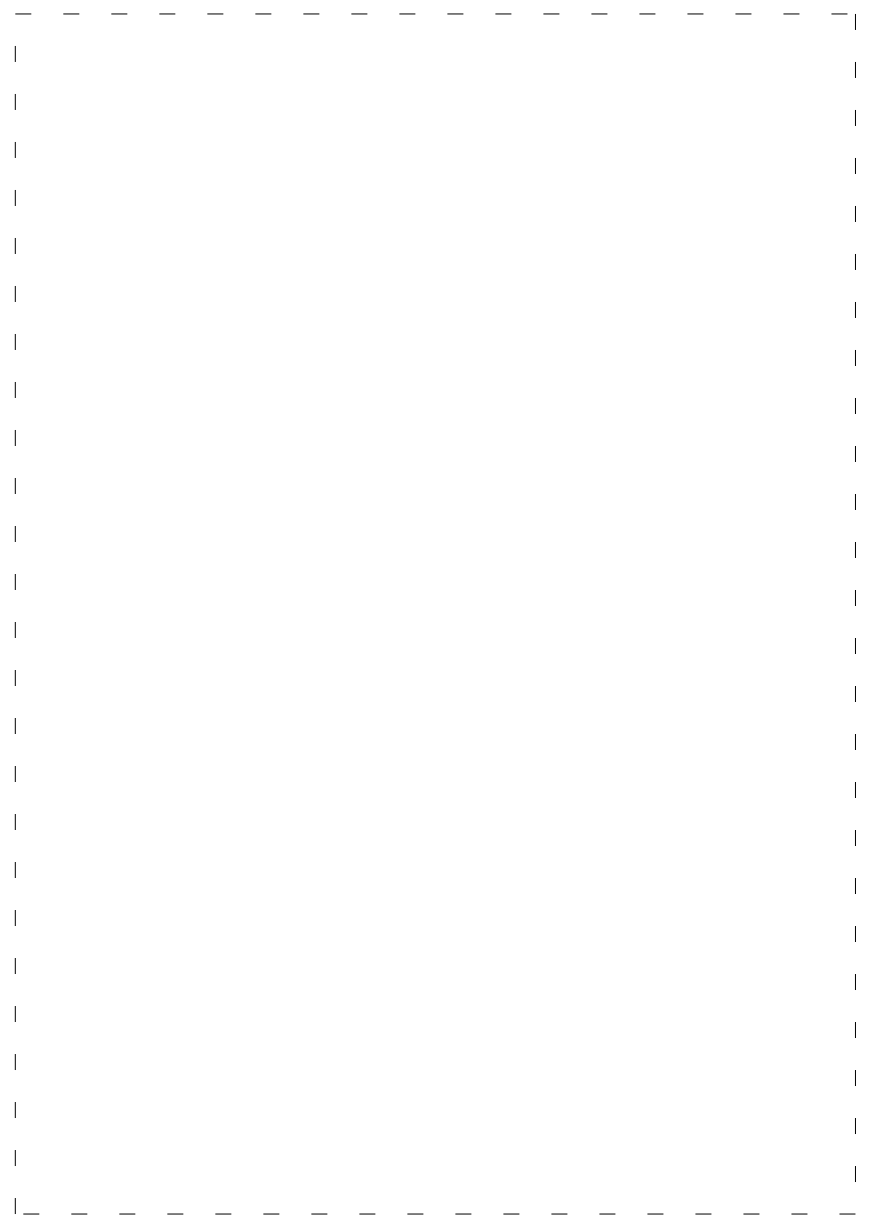
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❧ INTRODUCTION ❧

*I looked for that which is not, nor can be,
And hope deferred made my heart sick in truth;
But years must pass before a hope of youth
Is resigned utterly.*

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

The poet Christina Rossetti points to the truth it can take a lifetime to learn: that what we get in life is far too often not what we're looking for at all. But we can and often do go on looking, regardless. Then, years later, having looked in all the wrong places, we at last discover that it is letting go of all those things that finally frees us. Then we come to understand that it is the look-

ing itself that is of the essence of the spiritual life.

The pursuit of human fulfillment drives us from one thing to another, yearning, relinquishing, and searching again. It nips at our heels, prompting us down the twists and turns of life, inexorably, indomitably, until, exhausted, we finally learn to settle for what is, rather than go on seeking what we think we must have but never find.

In the meantime, between those two points in life, between the looking and end of looking, we stretch ourselves to the ultimate lengths of the self. We go through fatigue and confusion to the very edges of despair in our unquenchable thirst for more. The soul simply refuses to cease the fruitless search for what is not in the land of What Is.

And the world around us is only too happy to feed our needs.

We want to be beautiful, so the ads promise us beauty. But under everything they sell us,

we remain forever the same. We want to be wealthy, so the stock market and the lottery and the bank offer us money. But when the numbers come in and the costs go out, we are no richer now than we were before. We want to be successful, but when we achieve success, we either fail to recognize it or refuse to consider it enough. There is, we are sure, more and more and more.

So perfection doesn't work, because it can't be achieved. Failure we take as total loss and lose heart for the rest of life. Humility we confuse with humiliation and avoid it like the plague. Entertainment we mistake for joy and wonder why it doesn't last.

But then, if we're lucky, the confusion dissolves in us. We begin to understand. And all the disappointments in life become more bearable as we go. They come to hurt less, to trouble us less and less. We begin to realize that there is more to yearning than simply

wanting what doesn't exist. Yearning, in fact, is the holy sign that we are made for more than the apparent, the tenuous, the temporary. We begin to know now that nothing in life can ever satisfy the human need for the eternally incomplete, the tinker toys of life.

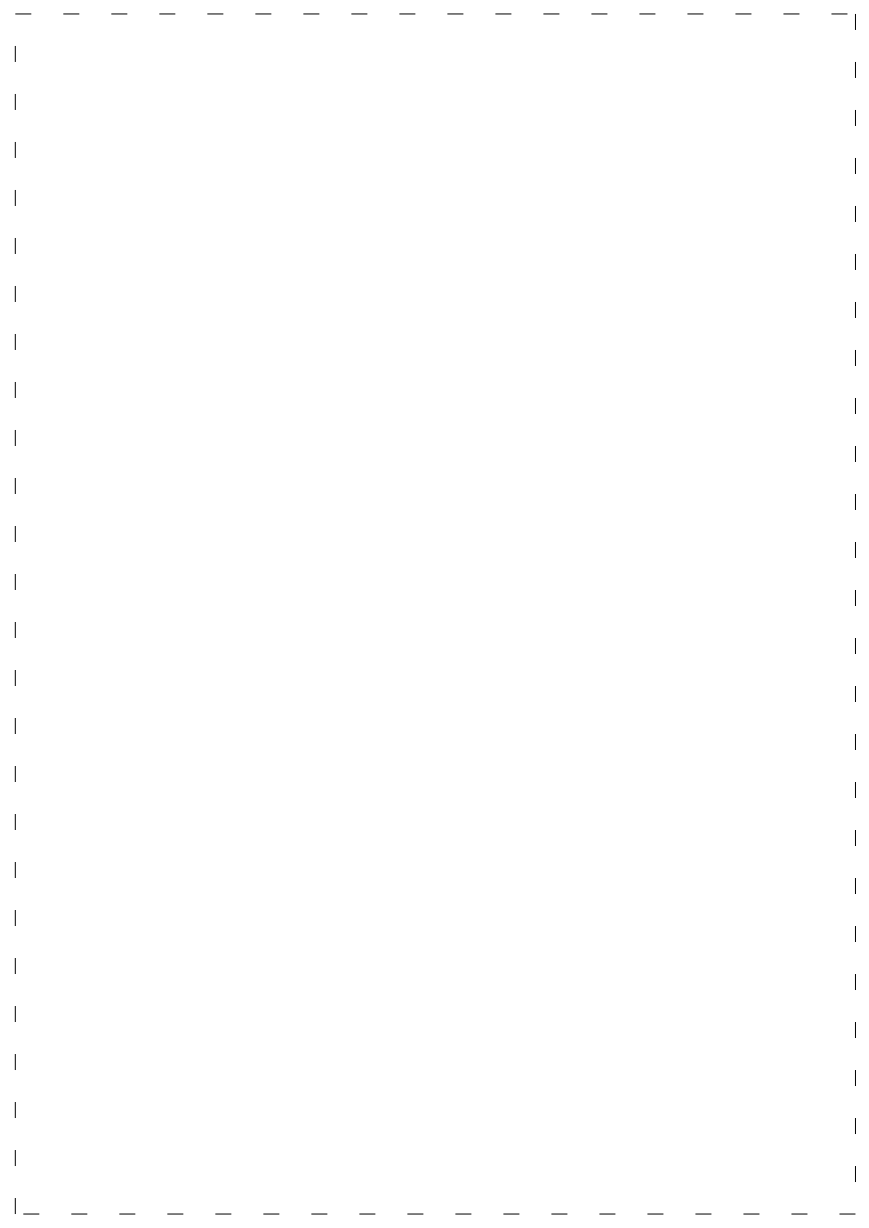
Yearning is what tells us that we are made for holiness. Yearning is holiness itself in disguise. It keeps us looking for the God who is Complete Satisfaction. For the God who is Everything. For the God in whom we lack nothing and because of whom everything else pales into the nothingness it is.

And when we finally discover that God is all that really is, that nothing else can ever satisfy, that everything else is empty however full we want it to be, we are finally home.

Then, life sinks into Mindfulness. Darkness, we find, is only the invitation to Light. Enlightenment comes: everything we wanted and did not get was only prelude to what it

means to want nothing but the Good. And when that happens, behold—we suddenly recognize that we have had everything all the while.

Indeed, as Rossetti writes, “Years must pass before a hope of youth / Is resigned utterly.” Indeed, the yearning is unending and the search is eternal. But in the end, as the soul matures, it is the yearning itself for Everything, for the Fullness of Life, that saves us.



*I wanted a perfect ending...Now I've learned,
the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some
stories don't have a clear beginning, middle,
and end....Delicious ambiguity.*

GILDA RADNER

Perfection

In those days, absolutely everything about the marriage was wrong: She was Catholic; he was Protestant. She was a young widow; he had never been married. She had a child whom he adopted, but he loved children and wanted his own. That never happened. Both of their families lived in the north of the state. Because of

his work, they moved to its very southern edge where there were no cousins, no aunts, no family. She sent the child to a Catholic school; his Protestant mother did not approve. She wanted the husband to become Catholic; he didn't. The tensions were everywhere.

So, one day I said, "Mother, tell me about my real father." She looked at me long and hard. "You have a father," she said to me. "I know," I said. "But I want to know what my own father was like." She thought a moment. "Joan, your father was very young when he died. I have no idea what he would have been like had he lived, and I don't want you idolizing a myth." I was ten years old. "But, Momma," I argued, "we would all have been Catholic and that would have been better." I was the only child in my class with a Protestant father, and I was clearly tired of explaining to people how such a strange thing could ever have happened. "Joan," she said firmly, "life goes on. We don't know

why your father died. That is for a reason that we can't understand yet. But we do know that God is in it with us. That's all we need to know. There is nothing else to say." And she didn't.

But if it had not been for that strangely skewed beginning, I know when I look back, my own life would never have developed the way it has. The insight that life is about "now" could never have come so young. The awareness of otherness would not have come for years—maybe never. The understanding of what it means to be different and marginal—light years ahead on some things, completely out of it on others—might never have seared and stretched my soul. I might have grown up thinking that I was normative, that everybody was supposed to look like us, that anybody who didn't was inferior or bad or out of step. I might have grown up thinking that only Catholics went to heaven. But with a laughing Protestant grandfather and a lov-

ing Protestant stepfather, I learned young that that couldn't be true, wasn't true, would never be true.

As Gilda Radner says, my life wasn't neat; it didn't evolve the way the social scripts said it should. There was no clear beginning, middle, or end. It was not "The-Catholic-Family-of-the-Year" story. But it was just what I needed. Both then and now. And so, in the end, is everybody's life, I think.

The sad thing is thinking that there's something perfect against which we must model ourselves—and then fail to meet it.

"Perfection" is the neurosis of those who believe that life was made for us to control rather than to grow into. No, life is not about becoming perfect. It is about becoming whole, becoming complete, becoming fully alive human beings. And that is never "perfect." That is messy to the max.



Perfect is a warped shadow of what really is. Life consists of twists and turns, a maze of possibilities through which we wind our way to becoming everything we are.

There is a difference between the perfect and the desirable. Perfect is a plastic imitation of the real, a counterfeit attempt to reproduce someone else's definition of life or standards. The desirable, on the other hand, is an attempt to make the imperfect just a little better. "It is reasonable," Samuel Johnson wrote, "to have perfection in our eye that we may always advance toward it, though we know it can never be reached."

Perfect imitations of past pieces of new awareness are not art. “The artist who aims at perfection in everything,” Delacroix wrote, “achieves it in nothing.”

Perfection, whatever there is of it in life, is not always as holy as it seems. Too often perfection comes more out of ego than it does out of commitment.

Perfection is the end of a process, not its beginning. That’s why they call it experience.

In our compulsion to be perfect, we have driven ourselves to the point where silver medals, the thousandths of a second between athletes on

an Olympic podium, have become more a sign of failure than they are of success. How warped can we get? “No good work whatever can be perfect,” John Ruskin wrote, “and the demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art.”

When we realize what we lack, we are ready to join the rest of the human race. “This is the very perfection of a person,” Augustine wrote, “to find out our own imperfections.”

Beware the temptation to find yourself perfect. That is the day you will find yourself dead—either of body or of soul.

Perfection is not possible on earth, so why do we insist on measuring ourselves by its standards? We set ourselves up only to be disappointed in ourselves or jealous of others.

When I am intent only on being perfect in life, I lose the joy that comes from learning to fail freely. Then, as Tennyson says, I run the risk of becoming “faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null, dead perfection; no more.”

If God expected perfection, would we have been created in the first place? Learning to accept the theology of failure is a far safer road to heaven than the theology of perfection will ever be.

The purpose of my imperfections is to enable me to live well, to act kindly, to be loving with others.

When we drive ourselves to be perfect, we drive ourselves to exhaustion, to temper, to disappointment and a sense of failure. We forget the simple joy of being alive. "Perfectionism," said Hugh Prather, "is slow death." Relax. Just give yourself a break.

Having a goal to aim at is a good thing; requiring of ourselves that we make it, on the other hand, is deadly. "Ideals are like the stars," Carl Schurz said. "We never reach them, but like the mariners of the sea, we chart our course by them."

If we insist on everything in life being perfect, we doom ourselves to unhappiness. Better to find the joy of the nearly good enough than exhaust ourselves on the impossible. “I dance to the tune that is played,” the Spanish say. It’s the grace to go on dancing, whatever the tune, that counts.

To say that a thing is perfect is to say that it cannot be improved upon. How boring. “Growth,” John Henry Newman wrote, “is the only evidence of life we have.”