

# How to Live

## What the Rule of St. Benedict Teaches Us About Happiness, Meaning, and Community

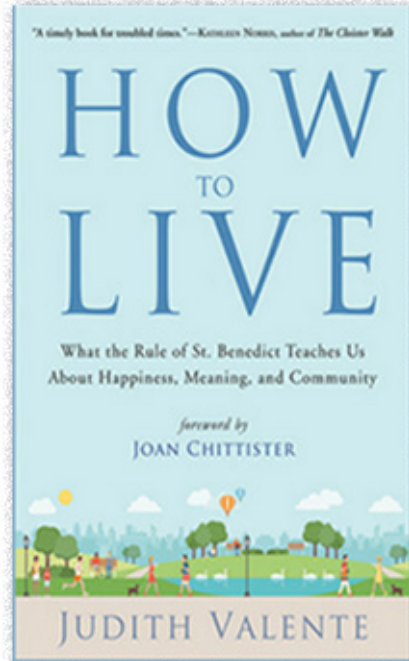
with a foreword by Joan Chittister  
afterward by Martin E. Marty



### Monastic wisdom blended with contemporary vision

In *How to Live*, Judith Valente explores how the Rule of St. Benedict can change the quality and texture of our lives. Valente suggests that this ancient wisdom offers a way forward from the divisions gripping our country. Her fresh and profound explorations are inspiring and thoughtful as she draws on her experience as a Benedictine oblate and a successful journalism career.

The Rule of St. Benedict arose during an era when a great civilization was threatened by violence, economic forces that favored the wealthy, political leaders that lacked the public's trust, and rampant xenophobia. Similar to anxieties and frustration during the 6th century, we are living in a time when community needs to be emphasized instead of competition, consensus instead of conflict, simplicity instead of complications, silence instead of constant chatter and distraction.



#### Publication information

Hampton Roads Publishing  
ISBN: 978-1-57175-798-3  
Paperback. Pages: 224  
6 x 9. \$16.95

### Praise for *How to Live*

"This is a timely book for troubled times, showing how the values and practices established by St. Benedict in the 6th century can help us lead happier lives. A self-professed workaholic, the author allows the reader to see how her life has changed for the better since she took this ancient wisdom to heart."

Kathleen Norris,  
author of *The Cloister Walk*,  
*Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*,  
*Acedia & Me*, and *Saving Grace*

"Like all of Judith Valente's writing, this beautiful actualization of the Rule of St. Benedict is accessible, inviting, challenging, inspiring and wise. Even if you've never once set foot in a Benedictine monastery, this book will help you live a more contemplative and centered life in the busiest of worlds—your own."

James Martin, SJ  
author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*

"In this accessible guide to the good life, journalist and poet Valente (*Atchison Blue*) illustrates how St. Benedict's sixth-century monastic manual for healthy communal living can address contemporary conundrums, such as the echo chamber of social media, information overload, and the challenges of 'Workaholism and Over-Achieverism.' "

PW Starred Review (March 2018)

"*How to Live* is a warm, inviting, and accessible introduction to the wisdom of Saint Benedict and its continuing relevance for our time. Whether you are new to the Rule or have been following the Benedictine path for many seasons, this book will enrich you with its insights and charm."

Carl McColman,  
author of *The Little Book of Christian Mysticism*  
and *Answering the Contemplative Call*

### About Judith Valente

Judith Valente is an award-winning author, poet, and journalist. She is the senior correspondent for WGLT Radio, a National Public Radio affiliate in Illinois. She writes for *U.S. Catholic* and *National Catholic Reporter*, and is a former staff writer for *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post*. She also worked as an on-air correspondent for Chicago Public Radio and *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly* on national PBS-TV. She is the author of six books.

Valente is a lay associate of the Benedictine monastery Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, KS, which is the subject of her 2013 memoir, *Atchison Blue: A Search for Silence, a Spiritual Home and a Living Faith*, chosen by Religion Writers Association as one of the best spirituality books that year.

Valente grew up in Bayonne, NJ. She holds a B.A. in English and classical languages from St. Peter's University in Jersey City, NJ, and an MFA in creative writing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Valente is married to Charles Reynard, an Illinois Circuit Court Judge and poet. The couple lives in Chicago and Normal, IL. They operate an alfalfa farm in central Illinois, where Judith is a member of the Grand Prairie Master Naturalists, a group that maintains the Illinois prairie.

### Connect with the author

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# Positive reviews for *How to Live: What the Rule of St. Benedict Teaches Us About Happiness, Meaning, and Community* by Judith Valente

“To have such a gifted writer live and report through the lens of The Rule of St. Benedict is a blessing for all of us. Judith Valente offers more than perspective. Her life’s work is monastic. To read, reflect and report is the role of a professional journalist. As an author and journalist, Valente has The Rule of Benedict for her editor. What a gift for us.”

Mary Margaret Funk  
author of *Thoughts Matter; Tools Matter; Humility Matters; and Out of the Depths*

“How to Live is a vital call to a higher order in the turbulence and division of the times.”

Meagan Logsdon  
*Foreword Reviews*

“Suddenly, St. Benedict of Nursia, who lived 1600 years ago, is popular again. First was Rod Dreher’s *The Benedict Option*, which encourages a reinvigorated faith based on classic Christian values as illuminated in the Rule of Saint Benedict. This similar work by journalist and media personality Valente is liberally peppered with Benedict’s Rule, which she asserts provides ‘a veritable guarantee of the good life’ in its focus on a balanced

personal humility and individual spiritual growth. This is not a cry for retreat from the world; rather, Valente’s own harried personal life serves as a microcosm through which to understand the value of everything in moderation, while focusing on simplicity and silence. The author finds that “silence sets down a place for wisdom to find a home” and with insight suggests that “sooner or later, we all need to let our souls catch up with the rest of our lives.” VERDICT Comforting words for anyone in need of a period of reflection, for both individuals and book groups.”

*Library Journal*  
Sandra Collins  
Byzantine Catholic Seminary Library,  
Pittsburgh

“For those of you who suspect that it is ‘high time to rise from sleep’ this book holds much promise. Filled with the practical wisdom of St. Benedict it is a work that can help you discern ways to enrich your daily life. With keen insights into monastic living the author shares her own journey of discovering that the Rule of Benedict is not just for monks.”  
Macrina Wiederkehr  
author of *Seven Sacred Pauses*



## Judith Valente’s media interviews for *How to Live*

Judith Valente has been giving media interviews about *How to Live* since the first week of its publication.

Here’s a selection of the interviews:

- Busted Halo with Father Dave on Sirius Radio’s Catholic Channel.
- Gary Goldberg’s “In the Spirit” radio show, WPRI in Troy, New York.
- Orv Graham’s “Sunday Morning Easy” on WEZC in Decatur, Illinois.
- WGLT’s Sound Ideas
- Sam Wood’s afternoon show on WJBC in Bloomington, Illinois

Judith Valente is honored that *How to Live* is featured on Joan Chittister’s BenetVision along with Maria Shriver’s *I’ve Been Thinking* during Spring 2018. These are the only books not by Chittister on BenetVision.

## Judith Valente speaks on balance, mindfulness, Rule of St. Benedict



Here are some of Judith Valente’s upcoming speaking engagements

**July 6-7** Bellarmine University, Louisville. Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society.

**July 11-15.** Annual Oblate Institute, keynote speaker. Sophia Retreat Center, Atchison, KS.

**July 18-22.** American Benedictine Academy Conference. St. Benedict Monastery, St. Joseph, MN. Co-presenter with Kathleen Norris

**Sept 12.** St. Margaret Mary Parish, Naperville IL. “How To Be Any Everyday Contemplative”

**Sept. 19.** Viterbo University, Lacrosse, WI Guest Lecturer, Religious Studies Dept.

**Sept 27.** Theosophical Society of Chicago. “How To Be An Everyday Contemplative.”

**Oct. 3.** St. Mary’s College, Newburgh NY. Guest Lecturer. “How To Live Like A Mystic.”

**Oct 6.** Glastonbury Abbey, Boston. Oblate Day of Reflection Presenter.

**Dec. 7-8.** “Disappear From View? Thomas Merton Fifty Years Later and Beyond: Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of Thomas Merton’s Death.” Catholic Theological Union, Chicago. Interview with Brother Paul Quenon, OCSO, on his memories of Thomas Merton.

# Yearning for Life – On Beginning with The Rule

To delve deeply into The Rule is to discover just how astutely Benedict was writing in the 6th century. Recent discoveries about how the brain works buttress ideas he espoused before neuroscience was even a word. Paul Zak is an economist and brain researcher who has studied the effect on the human psyche of a powerful hormone called oxytocin. This is the chemical released in lovemaking, in women who have just given birth, as well as in people who have just acted in some way that benefits others. Zak calls oxytocin “the morale molecule.”

Using a variety of research experiments, Zak found that those who give usually end up receiving in return. One person’s generosity can even increase the oxytocin levels in another. In other words, human beings appear hardwired for community. We prosper most when we extend trust and receive it in return. The economic models we learn in MBA programs would have us believe the opposite—that self-interest is the fundamental human motivator. Zak, by contrast, found that trusting and exhibiting generous behavior leads to reciprocal generosity and trust.

“The most important factor in determining whether or not a society does well or is impoverished,” Zak concluded, “is not natural resources, education, quality health care, or even the work ethic of its people. What matters most in determining outcomes is actually trustworthiness—a moral consideration.”

## **The Rule also has a message for those of us on call twenty-four seven,.. It beckons us as a plea for balance.**

This sounds a good deal like the community Benedict sought to create, and the one he entrusts us to build today. He foresaw the dangers of radical self-interest of the kind that led to the economic meltdown of 2008 and to the Great Depression (as well as other economic crises before and since then), to practices like slavery and apartheid, and to so many of the world’s wars. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself (to the detriment of others). This Benedict counseled nearly two millennia before

An excerpt from  
*How to Live*  
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by Judith Valente

oxytocin was even discovered.

The Rule also has a message for those of us on call twenty-four seven, swirling in a maelstrom of email, texting, Twitter and Snapchat. It beckons as a plea for balance. Benedict carved the monastic day into distinct periods for work, prayer, reading, leisure, and rest. He believed there is a time to work, and a time to stop work. As someone who has long suffered from a dual diagnosis of workaholic and overachieverism, The Rule showed me that it is possible to pause, to care for myself, and still be productive. With its focus on balance, The Rule helps orient my

## **The Rule helps orient my attention toward the sacred in the ordinary.**

attention toward the sacred in the ordinary. It propels me to live every day.

In many ways, Benedict and his predecessors—the early monastics of the Egyptian desert—were among history’s first psychologists. They understood that in order to live in community—or even as hermit—they would have to confront the emotional demons that haunt us all. They discovered ways to leaven our natural tendencies toward anger, self-absorption, greed, depression, unhealthy appetites, and obsessions. They did this not by repressing those tendencies, but by recognizing we are not our thoughts and we are not our feelings. We can redirect our thoughts and feelings into constructive actions. Doing this allows us to confront life’s inevitable turbulence with equanimity. The emotional tools that The Rule lays out have been more valuable to me than any self-help book or therapy session.

The reflections in the pages that follow are my attempts to draw out the major themes of The Rule in practical takeaways

that can lead to personal transformation. For many centuries, men and women who entered monasteries were expected to memorize The Rule in the same way they committed to memory the Psalms or traditional prayers. But as the Benedictine writer Mary Margaret Funk points out, The Rule is not something to be absorbed intellectually. It has to be lived. It has to take up residence in our inner life.

“Benedict’s great insight,” she writes in

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her memoir *Out of the Depths*, “was that the work of the monastery was not simply about men and women living apart from society in a community. The true work lay in how one developed the interior life.”

The happy news is that this also applies to people who don’t live in monasteries—people like you and me who are trying to nurture a family, succeed in a rapidly changing workplace, and grow old with a sense of purpose. The true monastic enclosure is the human heart.

Happily too, St. Benedict promises to demand of us nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. He reminds us we are always only beginners on the path to a deeper interior life. The spiritual journey is not a flight on a supersonic jet, but a slow steady trek, like hiking the Appalachian Trail or walking El Camino de Santiago de Compostela. “The spiritual life is this,” a monastic elder from the Egyptian desert once said, “I rise and I fall. I rise and I fall.”

I used to think of monastic life as a hopeless throwback to the past, a case of let the last monk or sister standing turn out the lights. Now I look upon it as a window to the future we desperately need in our society: one that stresses community over competition, consensus over conflict, simplicity over self-gain and silence over the constant chatter and distractions of our lives. And so we begin.

*Is there anyone here who learns for life and desires to see good days?*