

Serenity/Courage/Wisdom: A Gift from 12-Step Programs to People Who Don't Need Them

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Reading 1: A 1695 Mother Goose rhyme (changed from your program):

For every ailment under the sun
There is a remedy, or there is none;
If there be one, try to find it;
If there be none, never mind it.

Reading 2: A poem by Adrienne Rich (463 in your hymnal):

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed.
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age,
Perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Almost 20 years ago, when I was a member of Overeaters Anonymous, I prayed the so-called serenity prayer many times a day. I don't know if any of you have been involved with 12-step programs, but one of their wiser slogans is, “take what you want and leave the rest.” Well, eventually I did just that. I took what I wanted, namely the serenity prayer, and I left the rest. I left OA, to be specific: the meetings, the working with a sponsor, all that stuff. But I've kept the serenity prayer all these years and damn if it hasn't been a lifesaver for me.

I don't presume that anyone in this room necessarily needs a 12-step program. But if you like the idea of taking what you want and leaving the rest – which has always seemed to me a very Unitarian Universalist kind of approach to life – maybe you will find the serenity prayer helpful. You can even take off the word “God” if you want and make it a prayer to yourself: may I develop the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Perhaps some of you are thinking, this is incredibly obvious, not to mention kind of corny. Of course, we should try to accept the things we can't change, since – surprise – we can't change them. And of course, if there is something we don't like that we can change, we should muster the courage to have at it. And of course, we need the discernment to know whether to cultivate acceptance or courage in a given situation. How much simpler does it get?

Well, I'll tell you: it may be the simplest thing, but most of us don't do this simplest thing very well or very often. We expend a ton of energy trying to change things we can't change. We don't

actually put our power where it would be most useful, whether for personal or social change. Maybe it's because we aren't wise about the difference, or maybe it's something else. What I'd like to do today is talk about each of these three strengths in turn, where they challenge us, and how we might work toward treating them as the gifts they can be.

One other thing: I know that a lot of people who find the serenity prayer problematic are concerned that it is an apolitical way to look at life, that it fosters an inward-focused self-obsession that turns us away from making a difference in the real world. So, I'll also say something about the potential politics of the serenity prayer.

I'll start with serenity and spend the most time there. I find it interesting that serenity appears before either courage or wisdom in the prayer, while the prayer itself is frequently referred to as the serenity prayer. Maybe this doesn't mean anything, or maybe it means that, while all three concepts are equal, serenity may require more of our attention than the other two. Certainly, I find serenity and acceptance profoundly difficult and I know many other people who do as well. Perhaps it's human nature to keep looking for loopholes when we are unhappy about something and yet have evidence that changing it is not in our control. Part of this response may simply be about wanting to change whatever is bothering us, but I think another part is about the extent to which we can control things. We feel safer when we have more control, which makes sense. After all, we live in a crazy world where terrible things happen, people die and suffering is all around us. It's natural to want to seek control, since the more we control, the less we will suffer. Right?

Maybe not, at least according to Buddhism. The first of the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha is that life is suffering. The second is that suffering arises from craving, and the third is that suffering ceases when craving ceases. The Buddha was talking about many kinds of suffering and many kinds of craving, but I'm quite sure that he would smile if he walked into a 12-step program and heard the serenity prayer. One way to ease suffering, after all, is to stop craving control where we can't have it. We even get some serenity in the bargain. Give up trying to control what you can't control, accept the things you cannot change, and the suffering attached to that particular kind of craving abates.

Another related lesson, I think, is that the relationship between serenity and acceptance is a two-way street. If we have serenity – if we have peace like a river in our souls – that will make acceptance of the things we cannot change easier. After all, the power of the peace will strengthen us in our ability not to grasp after what we can't have, and the joy of being peaceful is a good disincentive for doing anything that will make us feel less peaceful, like, say, grasping after what we can't have. Maybe this is why the serenity prayer frames the concept in this direction: the serenity to accept the things we cannot change. At the same time, the ability to accept the things we cannot change will probably make us more serene and more peaceful. To go back to the Buddha's teaching, if craving something we can't have causes suffering, ceasing to crave it should reduce or eliminate suffering. Less suffering, more peace.

It's one thing to agree that there might be some benefit to accepting the things we cannot change and another thing entirely to succeed at such acceptance. How do we do it? Presuming we already have the wisdom to know what we can change and what we can't, it seems to me we

must face squarely those things we can't change, name them for what they are, and understand why we can't change them whenever such an understanding is possible. For all I know, I will always have the inclination to overeat whether or not I'm doing it at a particular time. I'm also pretty sure that, no matter how much insight I think I have about someone else, I cannot make them change; I have to accept them as they are. Can I sit with these facts? Can I acknowledge that, along with having joy like a fountain and love like an ocean in my soul, I also have pain like an arrow and tears like the raindrops there? Can I make peace with the things that cause me the most pain to admit, the things that I want desperately to change but can't? Each of us must answer these questions ourselves, using whatever tools make sense to us: introspection, meditation, conversation, therapy, prayer. Like anything else, the more we practice accepting the things we cannot change, the better we'll get at it. And finally, we will be able to say that we have strength like a mountain in our souls as well.

What about the courage to change the things we can change? The word "courage" might seem a little odd here. Most of us probably agree that our challenge in breaking bad habits, for example, is that we don't have the will and the discipline to keep at it. We're lazy; we're distracted; we tend to take the path of least resistance. I think all of these are real obstacles to becoming the people we want to become. But I think courage has a special role in this, because part of what we think of as laziness or lack of discipline may actually be fear in disguise. If we try to change the things we can change, two things might happen: we might succeed or we might fail. And I can't speak for you, but personally I'm afraid of both outcomes. If I try to change something that wisdom tells me I can change and I fail, does that mean I really am lazy and undisciplined and self-destructive? Does it mean I'm not willing to work hard? Doesn't it basically reflect badly on me? And doesn't it mean that I was wrong in trying to change whatever this was in the first place? Most of us are afraid of failure. It's easier just not to try. We need courage to confront our fear of failure when we try to change something about ourselves that we can actually change. We need to be willing to fail, maybe once, maybe many times, because maybe we can't get it right until we get it wrong.

But we also may be afraid of success. Does that sound crazy? There's something I don't like about myself and I try to change it and I succeed. Who would be afraid of that? Well, maybe I'm used to who I am now and how I maneuver in the world. I've compensated for my handicaps. I have narratives that justify what I'm good at and what I'm not good at. If I succeeded in changing myself, things would be different. The world would be different. I would be different. I wouldn't have excuses anymore. Maybe I would have to work harder. Maybe people would expect more of me. Maybe it's just that I really can't predict how my life would be different if I changed, and the loss of control – yes, that again – is scary. Another wise thing I heard in 12-step programs was that people are not really willing and able to change themselves until the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of changing. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't, right? And so, we need to cultivate courage to help us address the fear of success if we are to change ourselves for real.

How do we build up our courage muscles? By going to the courage gym for a workout. By practicing being courageous. And by confronting squarely the fears that courage is going to have to work on. I may know where my courage muscles are flabby but I can't speak for you. That's your work to do.

Having spoken at some length about serenity and courage, I'm not sure there is much to add about the wisdom to know the difference between these two concepts. We cultivate the discernment that allows for wisdom through the same wide range of spiritual, ethical and intellectual practices that allow us to become serene and courageous. Wisdom involves knowing ourselves well, warts and all. We can practice wisdom; we also attain it to some degree over the course of our lives if our eyes are open while we live. Ironically, because we need wisdom to distinguish what we can change from what we can't, it must in some way precede our work on acceptance and change, and yet I do believe our wisdom grows as we practice acceptance of the things we cannot change and courage to change the things we can.

Thus far I have only spoken about change at a personal level. We want to be more empathic people. We want to exercise more often. We want to stand up for ourselves more effectively. And so on. In 12-step programs, people focus extensively and often exclusively on personal change, and this is something that drives politically-minded people crazy about 12-step programs. Focus so much on changing yourself, such people say, and you ignore the evils and sorrows of the world around you. Fair enough, but perhaps we can apply the serenity prayer to our communal and political life as well.

Consider our opening words today: I may be only one person in the world but I will do what I can do. That's a statement of political commitment. But in order to do effectively that which I can do, I need to be able to distinguish it from what I can't do, both individually and working in communities or political organizations. I need to be able to pick my battles, to be strategic, to know when it is time to push for some form of social change and when it is too early – or too late – to succeed. Social activists who've never been to a 12-step meeting would agree with these points, and yet they all flow naturally from the serenity prayer. A social change movement will burn itself out, self-destruct, or alienate needed potential supporters if it does not have the serenity to accept what it cannot yet change. It will be ineffective if it does not change the things it can change. And it needs discernment to know which battles to fight. Indeed, the battles, both personal and political, change over time. What you cannot change at one point, as an individual or as a political organization, may be changeable sometime later along. The wisdom of discernment includes the ability to read the spirit of the day. Who knew five years ago how many states would allow same-sex marriage today, after all?

Consider also the poignant poem by Adrienne Rich. I'll read it again:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
So much has been destroyed.
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age,
Perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.

I have no idea whether Adrienne Rich has ever had anything to do with the serenity prayer, but I find it threading through her poem. My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed. Rich accepts the fact that there is much that she cannot save, and she grieves for what has been destroyed. And yet, she has the courage to cast her lot with those who reconstitute the

world. This is a wise poem. Rich knows what cannot be saved as well as where she can work with others to reconstitute the world. The serenity prayer does not have to be apolitical.

There is an essence of holiness within us. It invites us to reclaim all the energy we waste trying to change what can't be changed. It invites us to reject the fear that keeps us from changing the things we can change. Are we willing to turn back to our best selves? Are we willing to become glad and wise? And are we willing to take up serenity, courage and wisdom so that those after us can say that we made the earth fair and all people one? I wish these things for all of us, now and always.

Amen, and blessed be.