

Using the Serenity Prayer

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On the walls of thousands of A.A. meeting rooms, in any of a variety of languages, this invocation can be seen:

God grant me the serenity to accept
The things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

A.A. did not originate it. Versions of it seem to have been used for centuries in various faiths, and it is now widely current outside A.A. as well as within the Fellowship. Whether we belong to this church or that, whether we are humanists, agnostics, or atheists, most of us have found these words a wonderful guide in getting sober, staying sober, and enjoying our sobriety. Whether we see the Serenity Prayer as an actual prayer or just as a fervent wish, it offers a simple prescription for a healthy emotional life.

We've put one thing right at the head of the list among "the things we cannot change": our alcoholism. No matter what we do, we know that tomorrow we won't suddenly be nonalcoholic –any more than we'll be ten years younger or six inches taller.

We couldn't change our alcoholism. But we didn't say meekly, "All right. I'm an alcoholic. Guess I'll just have to drink myself to death." There was something we could change. We didn't have to be drunk alcoholics. We could be sober alcoholics. Yes, that did take courage. And we needed a flash of wisdom to see that it was possible, that we could change ourselves.

For us, that was only the first, most obvious use for the Serenity Prayer. The further away we get from the last drink, the more beautiful and the more packed with meaning these few lines become. We can apply them to everyday situations, the kind we used to run away from, into the bottle.

By way of example: "I hate this job. Do I have to stick with it, or can I quit?" A little wisdom comes into play: "Well, if I do quit, the next few weeks or months may be rough, but if I have the guts to take it - 'the courage to change' -- I think I'll wind up in a better spot."

Or the answer may be: "Let's face it – this is no time for me to go job-hunting, not with a family to support. Besides, here I am six weeks sober, and my A.A. friends say I'd better not start making any drastic changes in my life just yet – better concentrate on not taking that first drink, and wait till I get my head straightened out. Okay, I can't change the job right now. But maybe I can change my own attitude. Let's see. How can I learn to accept the job serenely?"

That word "serenity" looked like an impossible goal when we first saw the prayer. In fact, if serenity meant apathy, bitter resignation, or impassive endurance, then we didn't even want to aim at it. But we found that serenity meant no such thing. When it comes to us now, it is more as plain recognition – a clear-eyed, realistic way of seeing the world, accompanied by inner peace and strength. Serenity is like a gyroscope that lets us keep our balance no matter what turbulence swirls around us. And that is a state of mind worth aiming for.