



Living *The Serenity Prayer* In Times of Darkness **by Philip St. Romain, M.S., D. Min.**

It's March 19, 2020 as I write — a time of global pandemic! A new and deadly strain of coronavirus popped up in China late last year, and has since spread throughout the world. To date, there have been tens of thousands of cases with thousands of deaths, and it is expected to grow worse. People are staying home to avoid catching or spreading the virus, for which there is no vaccine.

The response in the U.S. and other nations has featured schools, libraries, and businesses closing. This has aroused fear in many. Hoarding goes on in stores, and people seem wary of each other. The stock market has plummeted, erasing years of gains. People see their life and retirement savings decimated. Some who are told to stay home will have no income; others who can work have no child care options, so use up their leave time, hoping things will return to normal soon. No one knows how long all this will go on. Will the virus be killed off by warmer weather? How long before a safe and effective vaccine will be available?

It is a dark time on a wide scale. Sometimes the scale of darkness in our lives is not global — loss of a job, discovery of a serious health problem, death of a spouse or child, and so forth. How do we live through these times? It's impossible not to be stressed by them, but we need not let them

define us. In addition to seeking support and assistance from others — including helping professionals — we can always find, in every situation, opportunities to grow spiritually.

That's where *The Serenity Prayer* comes in. It provides an excellent roadmap for helping us sort through the issues at stake while remaining centered through a time of darkness. It even nudges us to become open to new opportunities for joy and blessing. How badly we need this during dark times.

The Serenity Prayer is generally attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, a 20th C. Protestant theologian who taught for 30 years at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The first three lines of the prayer are very well known, showing up on wall plaques and prayed by 12 step recovery groups worldwide.

*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.*

Lots of wisdom there, but the prayer continues:

*Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.*

I've written a book, [Reflecting on the Serenity Prayer](http://shalomplace.com), which goes into each line of the prayer in some depth, so you might want to check that out on my web site, shalomplace.com. What we will do in this work is note how the guidance presented in this prayer can help us to live fully during a time of darkness. I will briefly reflect on each line of the prayer, with a suggestion

for reflection or some action to take after each line.

First, God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

We are never at peace when we are trying to change the un-change-able. What might that be in this time of darkness? Have we set things up in our minds so that we cannot allow ourselves to be at peace in the present situation? Serenity comes to those who have turned everything over to God's care. How can we be more open to God as the source of our peace? For many, it is through faith and prayer. Whatever it is that helps you to find peace — that is the practice to undertake during this time. Resolve to do so.

Courage to change the things I can

What can I do to make the present situation better? Perhaps there is some action to take. With regard to the spread of the virus, I am restricting my activities in large groups, washing my hands more frequently, trying to eat and sleep well — keeping my immune system strong. Sometimes we might also need the assistance of others — a counselor, a doctor, a supportive friend. It can take courage to reach out for help, but there are also consequences for not reaching out. Doing what we can helps us to feel that we are not completely victimized by the situation — that we have some degree of power, and responsibility: that in itself is helpful. So what's to be done? Make a list, and resolve to do what seems sensible or necessary.



The wisdom to know the difference

This is the step of discernment: sometimes we try to change things, then discover we can't, so we must somehow back off and adjust at least our attitude. Sometimes we discover that if we don't try to do something, there's no real serenity . . . that we're copping out . . . playing a victim role. What's our part? What's the other's? God's? The fruit of this struggle is a wisdom that deepens and

supports serenity. We choose, attitudinally, not to disturb ourselves over things we cannot change so long as we are doing all we can and leaving the rest — including the consequences of our actions — in God's care. Make a

decision to turn over to God's care all that you cannot control, and pray for willingness to do what must be done. Ask the Spirit to show you the way forward.

Living one day at a time

Jesus taught about this: In Matthew 6:34, he said, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." What is the work or effort to be undertaken this day? What can wait until tomorrow? We can only do what we can do, and so we need to let go of what cannot be done today. That doesn't mean that we don't make plans for tomorrow, only that we wait until tomorrow to do what must be done then. To do otherwise is to introduce stress, worry, and anxiety into our lives. Daily living also means honoring our basic needs to eat well, exercise, sleep, work, and play. What needs attending to this day? What can wait?

Enjoying one moment at a time

Enjoying! I like to hyphenate that word: en-joy-ing. Living our days in joy. This can only happen if we are open to the moment in love and gratitude, for that is the proper disposition for encountering God, who is the true Source of our peace and joy. Every moment is a gift, to be encountered in loving openness, realizing that God is always here, now, and loving. When we miss the present moment because we are trapped in worry or discouragement, we miss the moment of God. We can tell God how we feel, and that is one way of staying present to God. It is good, too, to practice gratitude for the simple things, and take time to enjoy them — a lovely sunrise, a good meal, flowers and birds, family members. As the Psalmist wrote: "The Joy of the Lord is my Strength." Be open to this joy.

Make a list of gratitudes. Practice gratitude throughout each day. And "do what you're doing" without concern about the rest.

Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace

Accepting — there's that word again. If hardship is a consequence of a thing we cannot change, and we are



practicing daily and present-moment living, then even hardship can become a context for peace. Why? Because that is the reality of our lives, where God is to be found, with peace as a consequence. In Romans 5:3-4, Paul notes that we can “rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” Hardship is what we usually try to avoid, but if we can discover that God is to be found there, too, and that it is a context for deep and powerful growth, then our fear of suffering and dark times diminishes. We can become stronger within ourselves by persevering in the effort to be loving and grateful during times of hardship.

What have you learned during such times? What invitations are there to grow in these?

Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it.

Another summons to acceptance! This is not to deny that the world is indeed sinful, broken, and unjust. It is all of that, and we would certainly prefer that it not be. But it's the only world we have to live in; there's no place else to go.

We can do our small part to change things, knowing that Jesus did the same, opening a way for us to journey, with him, through this life. There is darkness in this world, but Jesus loved this world in all its brokenness and shows us how to do the same.

How do you see Jesus accepting this world as it is? How can you do the same?

Trusting that You (God) will make all things right if I surrender to Your will

Here is the key practice: surrender to the will of God. God's will, as Jesus reveals (and the saints and mystics confirm), is about truth and love. What is the will of God? It is to do the loving thing. God's will is love, not just in an emotional sense, but in truth as well. This is difficult, for it means that God calls us to be loving even when we don't feel like it; when, in fact, we feel the opposite. The Spirit of Truth points the way, prompting us to act in a manner that promotes love: to reach out to someone, for example, or take a break at work, or honestly face our feelings. When we say yes with our will — make a decision with our will to do what is right — we open the door to the flow of love, and serenity is not far behind. This decision to act lovingly is a kind of surrender — even a sacrifice — that opens us more and more to God, who will make our lives right, even during times of hardship.

What kind of surrender-decisions are you being invited to make these days? Pray for the grace to do so.



So that I may be reasonably happy in this life, And supremely happy with You (God) forever in the next.

This part of the prayer puts everything in perspective. As Hebrews 13:14 puts it, "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come." No lasting city! We are here on earth for only a few years, but our life with God goes on forever. We can be "reasonably happy in this life," as the prayer notes, if we practice the principles related in the previous lines of the serenity prayer — faith, acceptance, trust, surrender, taking responsibility for our part, discernment, openness to the present moment in gratitude, exercising the willingness to love.

We note that this "reasonable happiness" is not dependent on external circumstances so much as on our attitude toward the present situation. Dark times can press in on us, but if we call upon God and work diligently to live fully and lovingly through them, we can know serenity and some degree of happiness. Let us embrace the lessons that are given to us and learn from them, even though they might seem bitter and extreme.

The alternative to living as the prayer invites is a shrinking away from reality in fear, hopelessness, and selfishness; there's no "reasonable happiness" in that kind of life. But there is a God who can be encountered here and now, loving us and everything in each moment. Let us, then, *be*

here now in love, no matter what the context of our lives. Then when we die — and we all shall die — the peace and joy we have come to know in this life will be completely fulfilled in a full-hearted union with God. Such is our belief, and our hope.

What gives you the hope and strength to live lovingly and courageously? What part of the Serenity Prayer is the most difficult challenge for you to live? Take some time to consider how you might live life more peacefully and joyously. Ask for the grace to do so.

For more information about Philip St. Romain and the Internet ministry of [Heartland Center for Spirituality](http://shalomplace.com), see <http://shalomplace.com>

Your tax-deductible donation helps to support this ministry.
<https://37371.thankyou4caring.org/HeartlandCenterforSpiritualityInternetMinistry>

Send checks to: Heartland Center for Spirituality. Internet Ministry. 3600 Broadway. Great Bend, KS 67530.

Permission to reprint this reflection is granted to any individual or group so long as it is offered for no fee and re-printed as-is, with no editorial changes made.

Thanks to Katherine St. Romain and Theresa St. Romain for editorial assistance.