

ACCEPTANCE

The way to Serenity and peace of mind

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FACING LIFE

Sooner or later, everyone arrives at a point where life seems to have become too big to cope with. Life is never really too much for us, but it can seem to be. When this happens, we have to get life back in focus. We have lost our perspective, but it can be regained. You may have come to think of the world as unspeakably vast--the earth, twenty-five thousand miles around, an outer space, full of unknown worlds. But, practically, the world is limited to your house, your shop, your town. Even if you fly to India or Paris or Hong Kong, your world is no bigger than the interior of an airplane, and no farther away than the nearest airport.

You may have come to regard the world as teeming with millions and millions of people. In reality, your world consists of a very small number of people--those you live with, those you work with, and those your acquainted with. And the awful, menacing future, that unending nightmare of shadowy days and years! Can't even bear to think about it. Well, quit thinking about it at all. You live only a split second at a time; that's right this minute. You can think of only one thing at a time, do only one thing at a time; you actually live only one breath at a time. so, stop living in a tomorrow that may never come, and start living one day at a time--today. Plan for tomorrow, but live only till bedtime.

In short, that big bogey-man, Life, can be cut down to his real size. Life is only this place, this time, these people right here and now. This you can handle-- at least today. But my life is just one problem after another! Of course it is--that's life. I don't know how it is with you, but it took me a long time to realize that at least some of these problems were of my own making. For instance, I thought that it was my duty to try to solve other people's problems, arbitrate their disputes, and show them how to live their lives. I was hurt when they rejected my unsolicited advice. I finally learned that you cannot help people unless they really need help, are willing to be helped, want you to help them, and ask you to help them. Even then, you can only help them to help themselves.

An old Arab, whose tent was pitched next to a company of whirling dervishes was asked, "what do you do about them?" "I let them whirl!"

I caused myself a lot of unnecessary grief by trying to be unselfish, to think of everybody else first, myself last, and to try to please everybody. You can knock yourself out doing this and that and the other thing to please your cousins and your sisters and your aunts, and you find out that they are really not affected one way or the other.

Please everybody, nobody's pleased; please yourself, at least your pleased. Charity begins at home, and enlightened self-interest is a basic endowment of human nature. You can save yourself a lot of grief by admitting the futility of trying to please somebody who just can't be pleased.

A surprising number of people believe that other people can hurt their feelings. They won't believe you when you tell them that it just isn't so--that no one can hurt you unless you let them! If irresponsible or unreasonable criticism causes you unhappiness, that is at least partly your own fault. We all say, "I don't care what people say." But the tragic thing is that we do care, and pretending we don't makes things worse. What to do?

Practice turning a deaf ear to the person who upsets or irritates you; make up your mind that you are not going to let yourself pay any attention to what he or she says, and mean it. This you won't believe until you try it. If you refuse to at least try it, some suspicious and cynical soul (like me, for instance) might suspect that perhaps you've got so in the habit of having your feelings hurt that you be bored otherwise. So much for unnecessary suffering.

How about real trouble, trouble that comes regardless of what we do, think, or say? That terrifying problem that has no apparent solution? Let's stop for a minute and see what the problem really is. A problem is a set of circumstances that threatens your well-being. And what are circumstances? Circumstances are people and things. So, solving your problems really means getting people and things the way we want them. Sometimes we can do it. More often we can't. What then? There are several things we can do. We can look around to

find somebody or something to blame. Or we can put ashes in our hair, wear shabby shoes, accentuate our wrinkles, and make the rounds of our friends chanting, Poor, poor me! We can succeed in making our family miserable. We can haunt doctors. We can waylay our pastor, beat our breast, and blame God: "What have I done to deserve this?"

ACCEPTANCE

These various home remedies--blaming everybody, self-pity and the rest--have but one result: they make everybody including ourselves more miserable and add to our difficulties without solving them. Shall we curse God and die? No. Do what the politician does: If you can't beat 'em join 'em If you can't solve your problems, learn to live with them and in spite of them.

"Oh sure, sure; just like that! All very well to say learn to live with them but it's another thing to do it! Just how do you go about doing that?" Very simple, my friend; so simple you wouldn't try it unless you were desperate. If you are desperate enough, you'll try anything. So, try something that works--try acceptance!

Acceptance is the only real source of tranquility, serenity, peace. It is also known as Surrender, Bowing to the Inevitable, Joining 'em. It can be acquired if you have an urgent desire to help yourself and are willing to ask God to help you.

Luckily for us, the perfect formula for acceptance, simple and practical as a can opener, is ready at hand, waiting for us to use it as hundreds of thousands before us have. Written by Reinhold Niebuhr as *The Serenity Prayer*. * Here it is:

God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change; Courage to change the things I can; and Wisdom to know the difference.

You simply ask God to give you the ability to take people and things as they are, if you cannot change them. We can very seldom change people, though we can change ourselves. We ask God, further, to enable us to convince ourselves that we would not have things otherwise, even if we could. Only God is powerful enough to control all, and he seems to prefer to make things come out right without changing them. In practice: face up to the problem that is driving you

wild, and say, "Is there anything I can do about it right now, today?" If there is, do it! Don't put it off another minute. If there is nothing you can do about it today, accept it and forget it. You don't get over a twenty-foot wall by banging your head against it--you just get a headache. If you sit down in the shade of the wall and say, "Maybe I'm better off on this side," after all, you may be sure that God will make things turn out better for you and for everyone else. This ability of His to make things work out for the best is known as Divine Providence, or The Kindness of God.

THE KINDNESS OF GOD

Divine Providence is that quality of God's action by which He brings good out of evil, or by which He permits us to do evil so that He may eventually bring good out of it. The Kindness of God is the best answer to the age-old complaint, "Why does God let them get away with it?" We are all aware that people just don't act the way they should. Some are mean, arrogant, selfish, vicious, ungrateful and malicious all the time. Even the very best (are you listening?) are mean, arrogant, etc. part of the time.

Why doesn't God do something about it: He could alright; but, strange to say that would ruin everything. He created us with free will, that is, the power of choosing to good or to do evil. He realized very well that some people would abuse free will, but He gave it to us anyway, because without it we'd be robots. His plan is to reward us with Heaven, but you don't reward a machine for doing well--it can't do otherwise. No free will, no reward. [Ed.: *and no love.*]

We may as well accept the fact it's a sinful world! We don't have to remind God of that; indeed, no one ever suffered more from it than He Himself did when He was on earth. The big difference is that He accepted the injustice and did not rebel against it. It was through that very acceptance that He was to save us. Everything was done to Him was permitted by His Father for our salvation. For His part, He accepted it as the will of His Father. "Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me; but not My will, but Thine be done."

Do you claim to be the victim of a greater injustice than He? Or more important than He You gladly escape your unbearable situation, but cannot. He could have, but did not! Is the disciple above the master?

The Providence of God turned the most horrible injustice of all time into the greatest blessing of all time. Divine Providence is still turning evil into good, if the victim of injustice accepts his lot, even as Christ accepted His. When you bow to the inevitable and accept injustice, you are not ignoring it or excusing it or explaining it away. You are simply accepting the indirect permissive Will of God.

God does not will evil or condone injustice; He merely permits it, even while He works the marvel by which it results in good. So, if we find ourselves in an apparently hopeless situation, with every avenue of escape blocked, we must not rebel. Instead, we must realize that God has His reasons, in His infinite goodness and wisdom, for permitting it. And so, we must accept it, saying, "Thy Will be done!" Immediately the load drops from our shoulders, and the assurance that all will be well brings peace to our soul.

Look back over your life. Honestly, now, can't you see how the loving Hand of God has brought a happy ending to many events that seemed unmitigated tragedies at the time? Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?

SUFFERING

Some humorist once said, just because we have the right to the pursuit of happiness is no sign we'll ever catch up to it. Sometimes it almost seems that God doesn't want us to be happy here on earth, that He demands misery and suffering in this life as the price of happiness in the next. The puritans believed this, but don't you believe it! God wants us to be happy right here on earth, and even points out the way. Sometimes however, we refuse to look where He is pointing.

The trouble is that most of us think happiness consists in the fulfillment of our wants and desires, or at the very least in freedom from pain and suffering. Actually, it consists in the serenity that comes from conforming our own will to the Will of God. We achieve happiness by forcing ourselves to accept what God wants for us.

It's obvious that such course would make for happiness in the next life, but it's hard to see how it would make us happy in this life. That's because we're convinced that happiness lies in getting what we want--satisfying our instinctive appetites and desires--all of which is the

exact opposite of the truth. Actually, even if we could satisfy our every desire, we would not be happy.

Self-gratification, far from making us happy, makes us miserable, as we learned long ago from the tale of King Midas and the Golden Touch. If you have been making the universal mistake of trying to appease the drive of your self-will, stop it! Stop catering to it, and start controlling it. Easier said than done! No, it's not too difficult when you know how. God has provided us with the perfect means to eliminate self-will and free ourselves from the slavery of our insatiable desires. It is suffering--the perfect tool to cut us down to our proper size. Instead of going the limit to dodge pain, we had better start using it. Pain is the only instrument sharp enough to prune away the excesses of our wayward will and to fashion it into a reasonable facsimile of God's Will; which is to say into the shape of a cross.

Very few people carry a cross of heroic proportions, since God makes each one to measure, and there are very few heroes. More usually it consists of daily annoyances and petty frustrations, disappointment, loneliness, and recurring disillusionment with everybody, ourselves included. You might term it a combination of the bodily aches, spiritual twinges, and mental hotfoots that go to make up everyday living. The Way of the Cross may be hard, but it remains the only road to happiness, serenity, and peace in this life, on this earth. And at its end there awaits you: happiness without measure, without limit, without end.

CONTENTMENT

Baby screams because Mama won't let him play with the nice, big, shiny butcher knife. Baby is very unhappy; he can't have what he wants, and he doesn't want that silly old rattle. Baby has yet to learn that contentment consists not in getting what he wants, but in enjoying what he has. If we grown-ups are contented only when we're getting what we want, we're going to be discontented most of the time. That way, our happiness depends on circumstances over which we have no control. No human being is so wise and powerful that he can control circumstances.

Then we had better see what we can do about finding our own enjoyment. Since we can't get everything we want, we must learn to enjoy what we have. Well, what have you? You're alive, and you have five senses in

more or less good working order. Even if you were deaf, dumb and blind, you could at least take enjoyment from the sensation of breathing. I am not deaf, dumb and blind. I can even look at a smoldering dump and enjoy the realization that I can see it and I can smell it. I can listen to a cat yowling outside my window at three a.m. and enjoy the realization that there's nothing wrong with my hearing. I can walk: I can enjoy the sensation of picking up my feet and putting them down. I can be color-blind and tone-deaf and still enjoy a little baby's gurgling.

As a matter of fact, we can find something enjoyable in any situation, no matter how disagreeable, if we look for it. If we try hard enough, we can even enjoy the drudgery of our work. Don't make the mistake of postponing your enjoyment until vacation time, or even till the weekend. Some people have to go to movies or night clubs for amusement and laughs, when their own children can provide more amusement than an army of emcees. Let's enjoy here and now.

Perhaps the most difficult thing to bear is loneliness and aloneness. What to do when circumstances force us into a solitary existence? First, if you are fortunate enough to have a variety of interests, physical or mental, you must make a real effort to develop them. Failing that, you can search out and help the less fortunate. If you are not up to that, you are thrown back on the conscious cultivation of your five senses and intellectual powers. At the very least, you can tell God every morning that you hold yourself available for use as His instrument, if only by praying Him to bless everyone whom you meet.

If these alternatives don't work, there is only one thing left, plain, simple, rock bottom acceptance. Stop pitying yourself, stop rebelling, throw in the sponge, and surrender to the obvious fact that since God allows it and you can't escape it, it must be best for you and for everyone. Pray for the faith to believe it and to accept it.

LORD SAVE US...

God is infinitely wise: He knows what is best for us. He loves us with an infinite love; He wants what is best for us. He is infinitely powerful; He can achieve it for us. We, on the other hand are ignorant, weak, and wayward. Yet in weakness lies our strength. Are we

licked, beat, flattened, hopeless? Fine! It is only when we admit our utter helplessness that we can be sure of God's help.

No one but a monster could pass by a starving, naked infant freezing in a snow bank without picking it up, sheltering, feeding, and clothing it. So it is with us. As long as we insist, I can handle it! God says, Go ahead! But when we appeal to him as a helpless infant, He picks us up in His gentle hands, cradles us in His powerful arms, and our worries are over.

A very wise old Scotsman used to put it this way: "As long as I insisted on driving, I ran into trouble. After the last crack-up I said to God: 'O.K. you drive it!' Since then, I have been riding in the back seat enjoying the scenery. I place myself completely in His hands every morning and say, Thank you, Lord! and every night! And that's it."

In praying, we must remember that Father knows best. Suppose, for instance, I think I think I am about to lose my job? Should I pray? What should I pray for? God may have ordained that if I do not pray, He will let nature take its course and I will lose my job; if I do ask him to save my job, He will. However, with greater faith I may pray, "Dear God, do what is best for all concerned." In turn, he may permit me to lose my job, only to get a better one. I have nothing to lose by leaving it up to him. After all, He can't possibly do a worse job of running my life than I have myself!

We all are inclined to make the mistake of thinking that the few minutes we spend in actually talking to God are all that count. In reality, the attitude of mind we maintain throughout the day is every bit as important.

If you place yourself in God's hands in the morning, and throughout the day you hold yourself ready to accept His will as it is made known through the circumstances of your daily life, your attitude of acceptance becomes a constant prayer. To cultivate this attitude, to remind yourself how to live with yourself, start today to recite every day the serenity prayer.

THE SERENITY PRAYER *

God grant me the SERENITY
to accept the things I cannot change;
COURAGE to change the things I can;
and WISDOM to know the difference--

Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as he did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it:
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him forever
in the next. Amen.

* Here is the complete, unabridged,
original version of *The Serenity Prayer*
by Reinhold Niebuhr:
*God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.
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. Amen.*