



*A sermon by Stephen Atkinson, Minister*

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## **LIVING IN SERENITY**

Although the idea of living serenely is ancient, especially in the religions and philosophies of Asia, here in the west it has entered our cultural consciousness largely through 12 Step programs and the Serenity Prayer. This prayer was actually written by Reinhold Niebuhr, an American, liberal, Protestant theologian who was a giant in his field in the middle decades of the last century. Bill W, the alcoholic who'd experienced what to him was a miraculous loss of his compulsion to drink after having a spiritual experience, at some point turned to Niebuhr to help him understand what had happened and how to harness such spiritual energy to help others.

Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer could just as easily be called the Serenity *Affirmation*, as in fact it works in that sense for many people, especially those in recovery who do not turn to a supernatural Higher Power for assistance, but find it in the more immediate presence of the group, in healthier habits and the cognitive reconditioning that can result by the frequent repetition of these words.

*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.*

Say that several times a day every day for months upon years and it definitely does begin to change the inner life. One of the results is that these words of Niebuhr's are now an almost universally practiced part of every 12 Step meeting in the world. Through it, serenity has changed the lives of millions of people.

So what is serenity? Interestingly, the Latin root of this word has the implication of both calmness and clearness, hence, the possibility of calling a day *serene* because there are no clouds in the sky. Perhaps one reason why there is so much addiction in Vancouver – apart from it being a port city and a fair haven for so many who have real trouble adjusting to daily life – perhaps one reason is because there are so many *clouds* here. Cloudiness; lack of clarity; lack of serenity.

In literature, it's called pathetic fallacy when weather is used to reflect a person's inner state – the storms surrounding King Lear, for example. So I find it quite fascinating that this word, *serene*, can as much refer to a cloudless sky as to a cloudless mind. A Charlie Brown without those little dark puffs over his head. Any of us when we're not absorbed in a concern or worry. A clear mind. Clear thinking.

To go back to Niebuhr: the acceptance of what we can't change. Think about it. Would any of us obsess so much over our worries if we could actually *do something* about them? No. We'd solve them if we could; we can't, so we end up worrying. Creating clouds in our minds. To *accept* that we can't change them is to let those clouds blow away in a breeze of calm.

Now, I'm qualified to talk about clouds and serenity because I'm a master worrier! At one point, I realized out of the blue that there are a lot of things that I don't worry about that many people do. Flying doesn't scare me a bit. Getting to the *airport* on time not to miss my flight drives me insane! The clearest example of this came to me years ago, long after I'd made serenity a conscious goal of my own. I was in a taxi on a Friday afternoon heading to Toronto airport. Every time the traffic slowed to a halt, I felt this band of muscle tighten around my forehead; every time we started moving again, I could feel it loosen. Just noticing that helped me let go a bit, but the point was driven home. When I feel stuck and helpless, I'm likely to worry.

So why don't I worry when I'm 35,000 feet up in the air? I'm as helpless there as I am in the taxi, but at least I'm on the plane. The funny thing is that when we start to approach landing, I start to worry again – about a safe landing? Nope. About *getting* a taxi to get to wherever I'm staying!

You know, yesterday as I was writing this, the odd thought occurred to me that, at 35,000 feet, there are no clouds in the sky above you! If there are any, they're far below. Could that possibly have something to do with when I worry? I have no idea, but it's an interesting thought. Perhaps part of what so many of us feel during a long period of dark cloud is the oppression of the clouded mind that comes with it. The sun comes out, the interior clouds disappear, too. Could pathetic fallacy actually work in the other direction? When a person's inner state reflects the weather?

Many of you have talked with me about how to get through a Vancouver winter. "Act as though it isn't raining. No umbrella. No hat. It's just rain." Or "You'll get used to it." Or "The great thing is that it always stays green here." I think the suggestions you're making are forms of acceptance of what you can't change. It's raining; accept it. It'll be November soon; it'll pass. The rain's a good thing; it makes the vegetation so lush. You've found the serenity to accept this particular thing that you can't change.

How hard then would it be to apply that acceptance to other parts of life? The bridge traffic is backed up all the way to the Upper Levels. The obsessive man in line in front of you at Safeway is counting out 73 pennies to give the cashier the exact change. Your thirteen year old child is testing every rule every day. Once again, your alcoholic spouse isn't home at 2:30 in the morning. The waiting list for surgery that only might relieve your pain is months upon months long. The things we cannot change.

There are times when we are helpless; when there's nothing we can do to change or solve a problem; when the *only* solution is to accept that we can't change it. Some of you may wonder how that solves anything. Well, it solves the *problem* of lack

of serenity. It solves the problem of the clouded mind. Sometimes that even means that room becomes available for a previously unrecognized solution to appear, but even without that, it brings us back to ourselves, to our own power, to what we *can* do. Which often enough is to just sit and breathe through a time of helplessness.

To live in serenity is to choose a positive over a negative. Stop watching the phone and... what? Do the laundry. Mend that broken dish you bought the glue for months ago but is still sitting in the corner of the kitchen counter. Take a walk. Go for coffee with a friend. Drop into the church just to sit in the sanctuary for awhile.

You may be thinking that I'm suggesting silly contrivances as a solution to your overwhelming anxiety or dilemma. Of course, contrivances don't do that. They simply move our minds into a different place. They change our focus if only for five minutes. They give us a short breather, which is such an apt term for what we need at such times. We need to breathe. Our breath physically relaxes our system. It cleanses our blood and delivers energy to us. It helps us sink into our bodies, into the moment in which we exist here and now. In this moment there is the possibility of peace – even in the line up at Safeway; even in the taxi stuck in traffic; even in the hospital waiting room.

This month I have spoken to you about gratitude and abundance, and now about serenity. These are shifts in attitude; changes in our *gestalt*, our ground of vision. I am not claiming that these are easy, only that they are simple. I don't promise that they work quickly, only eventually. I know they don't solve every problem, only the ones that we can't solve ourselves.

We Unitarian Universalists love to solve problems; it's our religious commitment to work to do that. Sometimes, it's just that the work begins by accepting the parts of the problem that we can't change. That's the spiritual approach of serenity.

May we all find a moment of it today.