

## **Living Up to the Serenity Prayer**

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[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.

I almost don't know how to begin and certainly don't know quite how to assess how well I live up to the Serenity Prayer. The prayer mentions three elements – serenity, courage, and wisdom. Hidden is at least a fourth element, namely fear, because whenever the issue of courage arises, so does the matter of dealing with fear and possibly overcoming it.

It would be nice to handle each of these elements individually but that is impossible because they all interact. It takes time, effort, and experience to acquire the wisdom. Serenity too does not come quickly or easily, at least to me. I don't see many serene teenagers. And ambition, which also makes serenity difficult to achieve, marks us until old age and its attendant worries about death teach us ambition's futility. Of course, serenity cannot arise if worries about death and illness replace ambition. Serenity and irrational fear are incompatible emotions.

My definition of courage is, “doing what is difficult for you”. I have flown into three hurricanes. I was excited to experience the adventure and didn't feel that it took any courage. The only thing I was afraid of was that my instruments might not work. But it almost always took me courage to ask a girl out on a date, and there were many I didn't ask because I didn't have enough courage to overcome my fear and almost certainty of rejection. I also have a great fear and constant worries about time. Life is finite – that we all know – though so long as we are not in great pain we hope it is infinite. It would be nice to just live and not think about time but I obsess about it. And when I stand up in front of a crowd, I am afraid that I am taking too much of other people's time, which is one factor that keeps me from being a public speaker – the other is that I simultaneously crave and doubt the approval of others, for I can pontificate beautifully when alone. From this and other examples I would have to judge that I have too often lacked courage to do the things that I feared. Furthermore, looked at rationally, I must be a bit insane, because while flying into a hurricane does pose a risk of death there is no risk of death in being rejected for a date. And worrying about time does not slow it and the worry does not give me any more control over the situation.

Courage is wonderful but courage alone doesn't get things done. We also need the will power or better, the drive (without obsession, for that makes it more pleasant) to do things that have to or should be done. I would like to become fluent in Spanish. There are other things I would like to learn or do. But I have come up short not because I lack the courage or ability, but because I lack adequate will power and drive.

Then there is wisdom. Ah! Is it mere knowledge of the world and of life or does it involve holistic acceptance, hopefully without sad resignation? I have a bit too much of Captain Ahab in me, railing at the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, which, by opposing I cannot end.

Let me try to conclude. I now judge myself harshly but perhaps not as harshly as when I was younger. I now recognize the talents and abilities of others with more admiration and less jealousy

than when I was younger. I now appreciate what I can do more than when I was younger while recognizing that I cannot do as much or as well in many ways. I still am too stressed – retirement has not helped reduce my stress one whit – and still get too easily frustrated, perhaps even more than when I was younger. I have lost some youthful confidence, for the buffets of aging have taken a toll on me. But if I had to assess myself overall, I would hope that I am perhaps a bit more than 50% of the way toward living up to the serenity prayer, and perhaps that ain't bad!