

bread for the journey

'Acceptance' is a Gift

"God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

One thing I am not going to attempt to change—because I cannot and would not—is this historic prayer. It has brought so much comfort to recovering people who have experienced both serenity and healing through working the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA has theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, of the 1940's, to thank for the prayer's original formulation made available to troops serving in WWII. As Niebuhr said, the essence of the prayer "has been spooking around for centuries." The prayer is a staple and a regular presence for our patients at Rosecrance.

"Acceptance" is an elusive target. Few of us experience it when things do not go our way. Fewer still understand what we ask when we ask God for the serenity of acceptance. It is because we really don't want to accept stuff as it is; we desperately want to change it to fit our desires and needs. Who wouldn't want to change for the better tragedies and losses we've experienced along the way: a rotten marriage, alienation from parents, or grief over untimely deaths. We ask God for the serenity of acceptance. Do we mean what we say? No. Not always.

Most of us understand how the addictive mind works; we are impulsive and tactile: seeing is believing and touching what we see is better. Ingesting and consuming what it is we see and want, and then touch it and feel it all over again is heaven on earth. We don't talk ourselves out of that mindset easily. We

don't want to. When we ask God to remove our cravings from us—for more smoke breaks to warm fuzzies that accompany our use of our drug of choice—we are not certain we want that prayer answered.

Since it takes at least a year for the addict brain to heal, stabilize, normalize and even *equilibriumize*, our enthusiasm for answered prayers, for the serenity of acceptance, for the way things are drifts into catatonic states of complacency. If we had our druthers, we would just as soon use that which makes us feel good and grants us instant relief. Why seek a mindset of acceptance when what we really crave is only a hot spot and an arm's length away?

Suffering consequences for our addiction drives us underground and causes us to perform all sorts of mental gymnastics to force our psyche and lives into compliance with acceptable ways of thinking and behaving. If it were up to us and we could live conscience- and consequence-free, we would continue along the path of the quick-fix lifestyle to which we've become accustomed. Recklessly determined to meet our short-term goal to feel good/high/happy, we squander opportunities to accomplish long-term goals. We fail to do what it takes to experience peace and the shalom that comes from learning and doing the right thing for the sake of doing the right thing.

The prayer for God to grant the serenity of acceptance goes unanswered when we virtually shuck the opportunity to do our moral inventory, address our character defects, and make amends to the ones we have hurt along the way. The serenity of acceptance comes with a price to pay. There is no such thing as cheap grace.

"Living life on life's terms" is another idiom we use in recovery. It is closely related to the serenity of acceptance. Again, who
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wants to live life on life's terms? Most of us would much rather live life on our terms. Every light should turn green and traffic should move along at our pace. When spouses or significant others hurt our feelings or make us angry, they need to straighten up and fly according to the desires of our hearts. Again, it is always about us and, of course, we are most always right.

Living life on life's terms and acceptance of things we cannot change is not easy; it is not a piece of cake, primarily because we don't want to accept the stuff we can't change. We want life to happen in accordance only with our expectations. All the time. No tragedy. No consequences. No problems. Never.


Tough noogies. Life does not work that way: Recovery does not work that way. Here's how it works: Do the hard work ... and an experience of acceptance may well come to you—as a gift. The more we strive for the serenity of acceptance the less of it we experience. Pray day and night for the serenity of acceptance and we will succeed only in developing lots of stress, anxiety, and still more disappointment with God. Acceptance comes after doing what we can, a hard day's night of doing the right thing for God's sake. It comes to us only when we are rigorously honest about what we want when we want it. Admit that we can

be selfish, impulsive oafs. Admit to the flaws we flaunt in the public arena. Own up to constant craving. Face the music that comes with the consequences.

Acceptance comes when all our resources for resisting change are exhausted.

Acceptance comes when we face our failures and own the mistakes we've made.

Acceptance of reality comes when we honestly face it.

So God answers that prayer for the serenity of acceptance by first saying, "I'll get back to you on that." And when does God get back to us on that? When we come to the end of ourselves, when we realize our own cleverness and capacity to survive no longer works for us. This process of learning acceptance is purely a matter of being practical minded—what works, works. That discovery will save our lives and make it possible for us to experience the serenity of acceptance. Reality bites, but it can also save our lives. We need to take the bull of reality by the horns, look it in the eye and admit we've been beaten by a bull bigger than our own. 



The Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain

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is a bi-monthly news and views letter from Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain at Rosecrance. Bread for the Journey is written on behalf of people who live with addictions. Together, and by God's grace, we will try to make a difference.

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