

Michigan City Daily Reprieve



The Elusive Origins of the Serenity Prayer

For many years, long after the Serenity Prayer became attached to the very fabric of the Fellowship's life and thought, its exact origin, its actual author, have played a tantalizing game of hide and seek with researchers, both in and out of A.A. The facts of how it came to be used by A.A. A half century ago, are much easier to pinpoint.

Early in 1942, writes Bill W., in *A.A. Comes of Age*, a New York member, Jack, brought to everyone's attention a caption in a routine *New York Herald Tribune* obituary that read:

*God grant us the serenity to accept
The things we cannot change,
Courage to change the things we can,
And wisdom to know the difference.*

Everyone in A.A.'S burgeoning office on Manhattan's Vesey Street was struck by the power and wisdom contained in the prayer's thoughts. "Never had we seen so much A.A. In so few words," Bill writes. Someone suggested that the prayer be printed on a small, wallet sized card, to be included in every piece of outgoing mail. Ruth Hock, the Fellowship's first (and nonalcoholic) secretary, contacted Henry S., a Washington D.C. Member, and a professional printer, asking him what it would cost to order a bulk printing.

Henry's enthusiastic response was to print 500 copies of the prayer, with the remark: "Incidentally, I am only a heel when I'm drunk...so naturally, there could be no charge for anything of this nature."

"With amazing speed," writes Bill, "the Serenity Prayer came into general use and took its place alongside our two other favorites, The Lord's Prayer and the Prayer of St. Francis."

Thus did the "accidental" noticing of an unattributed prayer, printed alongside a simple obituary of an unknown individual, open the way toward the prayer's daily use by thousands upon thousands of A.A.s worldwide.

But despite years of research by numerous individuals, the exact origin of the prayer is shrouded in overlays of history, even mystery. Moreover, every time a researcher appears to uncover *the definitive* source, another one crops up to refute the former's claim, at the same time that it raises new, intriguing facts.

What *is* undisputed is the claim of authorship by the theologian Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, who recounted to interviewers on several occasions that he had written the prayer as a "tag line" to a sermon he had delivered on Practical Christianity. Yet even Dr. Niebuhr added at least a touch of doubt to his claim, when he told one interviewer, "Of course, it may have been spooking around for years, even centuries, but I don't think so. I honestly do believe that I wrote it myself."

Early in World War II, with Dr. Niebuhr's permission, the prayer was printed on cards and distributed to the troops by the U.S.O. By then it had also been reprinted by the National Council of Churches, as well as Alcoholics Anonymous.

Dr. Niebuhr was quite accurate in suggesting that the prayer may have been "spooking around" for centuries. "No one can tell for sure who first wrote the Serenity Prayers," writes Bill in *A.A. Comes of Age*. "Some say it came from the early Greeks; others think it was from the pen of an anonymous English poet; still others claim it was written by an American Naval offi-

AUGUST BIRTHDAYS



Wendy P	8/07/2008	4 years
Bicycle Jack	8/08/1975	37 years
Angela S	8/12/2008	4 years
Sharon C	8/18/2008	4 years
Walt C	8/18/2003	9 years
Alan M	8/21/1983	29 years
Kath R	8/21/1983	29 years
Ashley S	8/22/2009	3 years

Happy Birthday to All!

To publish announcements of AA Birthdays celebrated by members each month, send name and number of years to: District 21, P.O. Box 58, Michigan City, IN 46360 or email to info@michigancityaa.org

The District has the following AA Conference Approved Books available for the groups to purchase at reduced rates.

- The Big Book (hard cover) \$8.00
- The Big Book (soft cover) \$7.00
- The Twelve and Twelve (hard cover) \$7.00
- The Twelve and Twelve (soft cover) \$7.00
- Living Sober \$4.00
- As Bill Sees It \$8.00
- Daily Reflections \$8.00

Our Local Area District 21 Business Meeting

and the Public Information Meeting

7 PM on the 2nd Thursday of every month

at the Michigan City Christian

Church at 11232 W. Earl Rd.

Next meeting: August 9, 2012

EVERYONE IS WELCOME

Other attributions have gone as far afield as ancient Sanskrit texts, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and Spinoza. One A.A. Member came across the Roman philosopher Cicero's Six Mistakes of Man, one of which reads: "The tendency to worry about things that cannot be changed or corrected."

No one has actually found the prayer's text among the writings of these alleged, original sources. What are probably truly ancient, as with the above quote from Cicero, are the prayer's themes of acceptance, courage to change what can be changed and the free letting go of what is out of one's ability to change.

The search for pinpointing origins of the prayer has been like the peeling of an onion. For example, in July 1964, the A.A. Grapevine received a clipping of an article that had appeared in the Paris *Herald Tribune*, by the paper's correspondent in Koblenz, then in West Germany. "In a rather dreary hall of a converted hotel, overlooking the Rhine at Koblenz," the correspondent wrote, "...is a tablet inscribed with the following words:

'God give me the detachment to accept those things I cannot alter; the courage to alter those things I can alter; and the wisdom to distinguish the one thing from the other.'

These words were attributed, the correspondent wrote, to an 18th century pietist, Friedrich Oetinger (1702-1782). Moreover, the plaque was affixed to a wall in a hall where modern day troops and company commanders of the new German army were trained "in the principles of management and...behavior of the soldier citizen in a democratic state."

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Here, at last, thought A.A. Researchers, was concrete evidence—quote, author, date—of the Serenity Prayer’s original source. That conviction went unchallenged for fifteen years. Then in 1979 came material, shared with G.S.O.’S Beth K., by Peter T., of Berlin. Peter’s research threw the authenticity of 18th century authorship out the window. But it also added more tantalizing facts about the plaque’s origin.

“The first form of the prayer,” Beth wrote back, originated with Boethius, the Roman philosopher (480-524 A.D.), and author of the book, *Consolations of Philosophy*. The prayer’s thoughts were used from then on by “religious-like people who had to suffer first by the English, later the Prussian puritans...then the Pietists from southwest Germany...then A.A.s....and through them, the West Germans after the Second World War.”

Moreover, Beth continued, after the war, a north German university professor, Dr. Theodor Wilhelm, who had started a revival of spiritual life in West Germany, had acquired the “little prayer” from Canadian soldiers. He had written a book in which he had included the prayer, without attribution, but which resulted in the prayer’s appearance in many different places, such as army officer’s halls, schools and other institutions. The professor’s *nom de plume*? Friedrich Oetinger, the 18th century pietist! Wilhelm had apparently selected the pseudonym Oetinger out of admiration of his south German forebears.

Back in 1957, another G.S.O. Staff member, Anita R., browsing in a New York bookstore, came upon a beautifully bordered card, on which was printed:

“Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, give us Serenity to accept what cannot be changed, Courage to change what should be changed, and Wisdom to know the one from the other; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.”

The card, which came from a bookshop in England, called it the “General’s Prayer,” dating it back to the fourteenth century!

There are still other claims, and no doubt more unearthings will continue for years to come. In any event, Mrs. Reinhold Niebuhr told an interviewer that her husband was definitely the prayer’s author, that she had seen the piece of paper on which he had written it, and that her husband—now that there were numerous variations of wording—“used and preferred” the following form:

“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 others.”

While all of these searchings are intriguing, challenging, even mysterious, they pale in significance when compared to the fact that, for fifty years, the prayer has become so deeply imbedded into the heart and soul of A.A. Thinking, living, as well as its philosophy, that one could almost believe that the prayer originated in the A.A. Experience itself.

Bill made this very point years ago, in thanking an A.A. Friend for the plaque upon which the prayer was inscribed: “In creating A.A., the Serenity Prayer has been a most valuable building block—indeed a cornerstone.”

And speaking of cornerstones, and mysteries and “coincidences”—the building where G.S.O. Is now located borders on a stretch of New York City’s 120th St., between Riverside Drive and Broadway (where the Union Theological Seminary is situated). It’s called Reinhold Niebuhr Place.

July 2012 Report From The Indiana District 21 Area 22 GSR Meeting

Facilitator Dan R.
Note taker Dan R.
Attendees George P., Laurie O., Dan R., Jennie H., Tom W., Scott B., Helen G.,
James F.

The meeting Opened at 7:00 PM with a moment of silence followed by the Serenity Prayer.

The Minutes from June 14, 2012 were read. The Phone number listed in the minutes was corrected to 219-879-8808. The minutes were approved.

George gave the financial report for June. The May 2012 report was amended to correct a \$0.55 error concerning the answering service. The reports are attached. The report was approved.

It was discussed and decided to send \$500.00 to Area 22 from our current operating funds.

Dan paid the current cell phone bill and was reimbursed.

The current hired answering service has been terminated.

Jennie and George are going to work on putting together procedures and informational material for the district cell phone volunteers.

We have some organizational changes. Laurie O. will be taking over as treasurer. James has volunteered to take over the newsletter.

Scott and Tom have volunteered to take meeting lists and information pamphlets to local hotels and to the information booth at the Marquette mall.

It is nice to have new faces and involvement in the district.

The next meeting is scheduled for August 9, 2012 at the MC Christian Church.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:00 PM with the Lord's Prayer.