

## ORIGIN OF THE SERENITY PRAYER: A HISTORICAL PAPER

The actual origin of the “Serenity Prayer” has been, over the years, a tantalizing, elusive and, some still feel, an unsolved mystery; intriguing to those of us at G.S.O. who have, at one time or another, attempted to trace the prayer to an authoritative, unimpeachable source.

The prayer entered, unobtrusively, into A.A. history in the year 1941. It was discovered in the In Memoriam column of an early June edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* and the exact wording was: “Mother—God grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, courage to change things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Goodbye.”

Some fifteen years later, reminiscing about this event, Ruth Hock Crecelius, our first non-alcoholic secretary, said:

“It is a fact that Jack C. appeared at the office (30 Vesey St., Manhattan) one morning for a chat and during the course of which he showed me the obituary notice with “Serenity Prayer.” I was as much impressed with it as he was and asked him to leave it with me so that I could copy and use it in our letters to the groups and loners. At this same time, Bobbie B.\* who was also terrifically impressed with it undoubtedly used it in her work with the many she contacted daily at the 24<sup>th</sup> Street Clubhouse...Horace C. had the idea of printing it on cards and paid for the first printing.”

All the local members, including Bill W., felt its relevance immediately;

As Bill said in *A.A. Comes of Age*, “Never had we seen so much A.A. in so few words.” On June 12, 1941, Ruth wrote Henry S., a Washington, D.C member and printer by profession, saying:

“one of the boys up here got a clipping from a local newspaper which is so very much to the point and so much to their liking, that they have asked me to find out from you what it would cost to set it upon a small card, something like a visiting card, which can be carried in a wallet...here it is...would appreciate it if you would let me know right away.”

Henry answered back immediately and enthusiastically:

“...your cards are on the way and my congratulations to the man who discovered that in the paper. I can’t recall any sentence that packs quite the wallop that that does and during the day shown it to the A.A.’s that dropped in and in each case have been asked for copies. I sent you 500 copies in as much as you didn’t say how many you wanted. If you need any more, let me know. Incidentally, I am only a heel when I’m drunk, I hope, so naturally there could be no charge for anything of this nature.”

This prayer, for most of the 1940’s called “the A.A. prayer” by members of the fellowship as well as others (by the late forties it became better known at the “Serenity Prayer”) has, as the Grapevine once noted, “been credited to almost every theologian, philosopher and saint known to man.” The Grapevine also noted that popular opinion in A.A. (1950) favored St. Francis of Assisi as the author.

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\*Bobbie succeeded Ruth as staff member, when Ruth left to be married in Feb. 1942.

But there were numerous other candidates for the honor also. *In A.A. Comes of Age*, Bill said:

“No one can tell for sure who first wrote the Serenity Prayer. 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 Officer; and Jack Alexander, who once researched the matter, attributes it to the Rev. Reinhold Niebuhr...” \*

Indeed, the Greeks did at one time appear to have had the edge in the author sweepstakes, for the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, was cited frequently as the source by many A.A. correspondents, claiming they had read it somewhere or had been told that this was a fact. An example was Jim F., Maryland, who wrote in March 1957 that:

“D...McG., now in Chicago, wrote a lot of letters, trying to trace the origin. I seem to recall that he once said it appeared in some form in ancient Greece, I think, by Aristotle...”

So, too, thought Paul K.H., a scholar and historian, who said he often contemplated writing a background history of the prayer. In a 1955 letter to Clem L., a Chicago newsman, he said:

“...four or five years ago, when I was thinking about that Grapevine article...I did some research on it. St. Thomas Aquinas said it in almost the same words and even the Greeks had a word for it – Aristotle or Sophocles...”

“One point you mentioned is that the prayer seems to spread so quickly. That’s easily understood, I believe. First, it does fit each one of us. Secondly, if Chicago was like Washington in those early days, if any A.A. returned from a visit to another city, all the home A.A.’s immediately besieged him questions, ‘How many in the group there?’ and ‘Do they do things the way we do?’ and so on. Anyone coming back with that prayer, it would spread like wildfire...”

In a letter to a member in the fall of 1948, Staff member Ann M. summed up our thinking at that time:

“The origin of the prayer is somewhat obscure but the consensus of opinion seems to be that it was the product of the pen and brain of Aristotle. You can probably check on this at the public library\*\* but this seems to be the best we can do in identifying the author.”

Anyway, members all over the A.A. world continued to share with us what they believed to be possible origins:

A member, Paddy M., from the Transvaal, South Africa, wrote us that “...mention has been made that it goes as far back as Sanskrit writings...” (Incidentally, both the popular “Yesterday...Today...Tomorrow” and “Look to this Day” have been credited to the Sanskrit source.)

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\*See page 9

\*\*In fact, a few years later, Anna and I were chatting one day about the prayer and the difficulty in locating an author, so we decided to visit the New York Public Library, expecting to spend only a few hours there, locating, once and for all, the definitive source! We found a library assistant who listened to our inquiry, first with interest and then with increasing impatience as we chattered on and on, enthusiastically reciting the background and various theories pertaining to the authorship of the prayer. Soon she stopped us and said quite firmly, “My dears, that will take a lifetime of reading and searching.” We quietly walked back to the office, chastened and disappointed – and with some loss of faith, on my part anyway, in the whole library reference system!

The prayer was also believed by many people to be found in the writings of St. Augustine. An example: many years ago, in 1957, a letter-writer assured us that "...the origin of the Serenity Prayer, or where I first found it, was in the 'Confessions,' at the end of his life story..." (Attempting to verify this source, I started reading the "Confessions" but have to confess I never finished – Augustine is very stimulating but difficult reading. Just searching carefully for mention only of the prayer or a version thereof was a tedious task! I've often intended to return to a more thorough examination, but alas not yet!)

The writings of Baruch Spinoza, the saintly Dutch philosopher (1632-1677) have also been suggested several times as a possible idea source.

And another correspondent said she had a notebook of favorite prayers which carried two Serenity Prayers; one authorship attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and the other to Reinhold Niebuhr.

Members also told us they or their children or friends had found the prayer in various books of prayer, of many different denominations: Episcopal and Parochial Schools and Protestant Sunday School classes. A member from West Virginia wrote us in early 1948:

"About six years ago, I was appointed to the committee of the Youngstown, Ohio Group and in those days, the chairman opened the meeting with a prayer. Occasionally I would read one from the Upper Room\* but something was lacking in the necessary sincerity for the occasion. On leafing through my daughter's prayer book, I ran across this one prayer, and it stood out from the rest...I went to Neil K. and asked him if there would be any objection to using it since it came from a Catholic prayer book...I used it Sunday after Sunday...and we asked a member who ran a newspaper to run off a few for us. That was the last we thought very much about it and never connected ourselves with possibly starting anything. This was in 1942. Now if you have something that will take it further back, I should like to hear about it..."

One newspaper clipping came to us, attributed to the Scottish Rite News, no date, and carrying the headline "Ancient Prayer":

"This ancient prayer of unknown origin was found inscribed on the Chapel wall of the New Mexico Museum and Art Gallery, in Santa Fe, dating back to the 1600's. It may well be inscribed in the mind and heart of each and every one of us, especially in these trying times: 'O Lord, 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.' "

One day in February 1961, I received a call from the New York Intergroup office, saying that a professor from Columbia University had dropped by the office to tell them that they might be interested in knowing that our prayer or something very similar to it had been deciphered from hieroglyphics which appeared on an Egyptian obelisk! I promptly addressed a letter to Eric Young, archeologist and authority on ancient Egypt at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, asking for his opinion and research help. He replied that he "had been cudgelling" his brains to think of an Egyptian source, so had his department, but noted that since there was no Thesaurus or Dictionary of Quotations for Egyptians, it might take a lifetime of reading (what? not

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\*A small, daily devotional guide published by the Methodist Church, published bimonthly in Nashville, Tenn. This publication was very popular daily reading among Oxford "groupers," A.A. members and their families in the early days of A.A. especially, particularly in the Mid-West.

again!) to find anything like this...but he also thought the prayer rather alien to Egyptian modes of thought...did not believe that Egyptian philosophy, or philosophers, could have conceived of human activities changing the order of the world, and would have expressed ideas in much more concrete and particular terms.\*

And more possible sources came to our attention. In January 1961, Hershel G. of Maine shared an interesting experience with us:

“...I went to Quebec to attend the exhibition that they always hold there over Labor Day. I stopped the first night at ‘the Old Fort Motel’ about 4 or 5 miles east of Quebec...later, walking the dog, I noticed an old fort about 300 yards from the motel on the high bank of the river, so I walked over to investigate.

“There I found a little fort, the last remaining one of three that had been built on this side of the river when they were preparing to defend Quebec years ago. This fort is in an excellent state of repair, clean, neat and well kept. When I came to the fort proper, I noticed that, where the casement window had been broken out over the door, it had been repaired with a panel, and on this panel was printed an A.A. slogan in French. I was startled and confused and thought I had translated wrong, but as I went along there were many other panels, including the Serenity Prayer in English and French, and there was no doubt in my mind that whoever caused these panels to be printed was A.A.

“I walked over to the little office and found a fellow, whose face still bore the signs of “pre-A.A.” living, and asked him point blank if he belonged to A.A. He was reluctant to talk at first, but after a brief pause, he pulled himself up to his full five foot three and said ‘Yes, I am’ – he might have added ‘Wanna make something of it?’

“In talking with him I learned that his friend Paul T. (in A.A. seven years) had acquired this old fort from the Canadian Government a few years ago, had repaired it, cleaned it up and made it available to the public at a small fee.”

Another exciting possibility as source material showed up in the 1960's. In July 1964, the Grapevine received a clipping taken from the *Paris Herald Tribune*, and an article written by the *Tribune's* special Koblenz (West Germany) correspondent:

“In a rather dreary hall of a converted hotel, overlooking the Rhine at Koblenz, framed by the flags of famous Prussian Regiments rescued from Tannenberg memorial, 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 which I can alter; and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.’

“These words by Friedrich Oetinger, 1702-1782, an evangelical pietist of the eighteenth century, and the flags set the tone of the School for Innere Führung (best translated as moral leadership), of the Bundeswehr, where battalion and

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\*It may have been Dr. Young who suggested that the philosophy of the Serenity Prayer was more akin to ancient Persian thinking than to Egyptian. Reading a little of the Persian poets and mystics, especially Abdulla Ansari, did indeed give a sense of kinship. A verse of another Persian poet struck me particularly: it spoke of the importance of maintaining a detachment or indifferent attitude towards life situations. Incidentally, it's interesting that many prayers – ancient supplications to deities, poems expressing deep spiritual values or those evoking great aspects of nature's beauty (I think of those lovely Japanese Haiku verses) – often express or consist of, three specific ideas, a natural trinity, so to speak, as does the Serenity Prayer.

company commanders and company sergeant majors are trained in six to eight week courses in the principles of management and of the behavior of the soldier citizen in a democratic state.”

This story, as you can imagine, created a lot of interest! Here, at last, we thought, might actually be the original source for the Serenity Prayer — back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century – whoopee! It sounded great! But...on closer examination, another story was revealed. And it's equally as interesting, since it took a lot of time, patience, and persistence on the part of Peter T. of Berlin to engage in deeper research. Here is a summary of his main points; shared with Beth K. of the GSO staff in 1979:

“...I have got together the most important data about the origin of the Serenity Prayer after a great deal of correspondence and reading.

“The first written form of it, as a thought, originates from A.M.T.S. Boetius\* a Roman citizen in [what is] today's Yugoslavia, in his great writing ‘Consolation by Philosophy.’ He was sentenced to death before writing [publishing?] this book. Ever since, this thought has been in circulation, used most by those religious-like people who had to suffer. These were first of all the English, later the Prussian puritans (who met in New England and made it great!), then the Pietists (Presbyterians) from Southwest Germany (also emigrating to New England). Then the A.A.'s, then by and through them, the West Germans after the Second World War.

“It was a professor (Dr. Theodore Wilhelm) from a North German University (Kiel) who started to revive the German spiritual and intellectual life after the war and was responsible for the new education, especially in the new German army, as well as in higher schools and for nurses. He got this ‘little prayer’ as thought and consolation from Canadian soldiers. He wrote a book (‘Partnership’) published in 1953, and used this little prayer in it without mentioning any exact source for it. Very soon after that, this little ‘saying’ appeared in all official places: in the rooms of high Army Officers as well as in the rooms of nurses and schools.

“The trouble was this. This professor published his book under the pseudonym ‘Friedrich Oetinger,’ He used this pseudonym out of [admiration] for his southern German ancestors, where he himself originated from. Thus the A.A.'s in Germany also used this name of Chr. Fr. Oetinger under the Serenity Prayer.

“The second trouble was committed when carving this inscription at Koblenz. Sensing highly religious feelings in it, they surely looked for further information about the author (‘Oetinger’) in the Lexicon of Churches. Well, there is only one Fr. Oetinger, who lived between 1702 and 1782, a fantastic genius of his time, but was certainly never a serene person but rather a very resentful one, a mutineer and an alchemist besides being a high theologian and philosopher. He was a Pietist (i.e. not Catholic). He is one of the greatest spiritual or mental fathers in the history of German intellectual life. He lived in Swabia, where Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr might originate from. (The Swabians are known as great and zealous preachers!)

“The third trouble has been the negligence of a special correspondent of the *Herald Tribune*. He saw the tablet at Koblenz. Where it exactly stood is not quite

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\*or Boethius, Roman philosopher and statesman, dates estimated 480-524 A.D.

clear but it stands now in the memorial hall of the New German Army at Koblenz, where the 'spiritual father' is Professor Dr. Theodore Wilhelm, pseudo 'Fr. Oetinger.' The tablet is quite a new one! This correspondent simply accepted it at face value without checking the name or mentioning the age of the tablet..." \*

However, no study of the Serenity Prayer origin would be meaningful or valid without a review of the serious claim to authorship by Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, a well-known theologian and for many years, Dean and Professor of Applied Christianity at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City.\*\*

Dr. Niebuhr's connection with the prayer came to our attention in the late 1940's. Henry S., the same Washington, D.C. printer who initially provided the office with the "God Grant Me" cards, as they were often called, wrote to Ruth Hock Crecelius in Dec. 1947, saying:

"...one of our Group...says he has seen this prayer in Reinhold Niebuhr's writing as if it were original with him. I think I shall write him and see what it has to say and also inquire whether he knows how universal it has become with A.A.'s..."

Henry did do some research, checked with the Library of Congress, found that it, as well as the *New York Times* Book section, attributed authorship to Neibuhr. Attempting to contact him early in 1948, he was told that Niebuhr was Germany at the time.

In it's January 1950 issue, the Grapevine carried an article on the prayer, entitled "The Serenity Prayer...It's Origin is Traced..." Concerning Dr. Niebuhr, it said:

"...It was actually written by Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, of the Union Theological Seminary, New York City, in about 1932 as the ending to a longer prayer. In 1934, the doctor's friend and neighbor, Dr. Howard Robbins, asked permission to use that part of the longer prayer in a compilation he was making at the time. It was published in that year in Dr. Robbins' book of prayers. \*\*\*

"Dr. Neibuhr says, '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.' "

The article goes on to explain:

"It appears monthly on the back cover of your magazine and every now and then someone tells us that we have quoted it incorrectly. We have. As it appears in The A.A. Grapevine, it reads:

God grant me the serenity  
To accept things I cannot change,  
Courage to change things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference. \*\*\*\*

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\*While this is a fascinating story in its own right and appears to correct a long-standing misconception, Boethius' connection with the prayer remains unclear and haunting! What were his thoughts and ideas that so affected succeeding generations of religious dissidents? And what was, and where is, the (circulated but apparently unpublished) "Consolation by Philosohy"? (Back to the Library!) P.S. published 2 versions: both in paperback

\*\*Dr. Niebuhr died in 1971

\*\*\*Respecting the publishing date of Dr. Robbins book, 1935 has also been cited in several other sources.

\*\*\*\*Actually, this was the form as it appeared in the In Memoriam column in the 1941 *Herald Tribune*.

“Many tell us that it should read:

God 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.

“The way it was originally written by Dr. Niebuhr is as follows:

God give me the serenity to accept things which  
cannot be changed;  
Give me courage to change things which must be changed;  
And the wisdom to distinguish one from the other.

“Dr. Niebuhr doesn't seem to mind that his prayer is incorrectly quoted...a comma...a preposition...even several verbs...the meaning and the message remain intact. 'In fact,' says the good doctor, 'in some respects, I believe your way is better.' ”

(The Grapevine issued the magazine in a new, small format in Sept. 1948, which was also the first issue to carry the Serenity Prayer. The Sept. and Oct. 1948 issues carried a slightly different version from the “original”— that is, “the's” were inserted after Accept, Change and before Wisdom. Then, for the next few years, they reverted to the 1941 form and starting with the Dec. 1952 issue, another small change was made, that of dropping the “the” before Wisdom and the format has remained this way since that time.

G.S.O has not included the prayer in its pamphlet literature except to quote it in historical context.)

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At least two other members (to our knowledge) early on contacted Dr. Niebuhr regarding the source. Gregory M., I believe an author himself, wrote Bill W. in Sept. 1951 that:

“...A few weeks ago I wrote Dr. Niebuhr and asked if he was the author. His reply, which recently reached me was, ‘...I did write that prayer. It was distributed by the YMVA to soldiers during the war.’ ”

Bill replied:

“It is probable that the Serenity Prayer existed in some form or other prior to Dr. Niebuhr's authorship. Inquiries over many years seem to suggest this...now it is pretty certain that Dr. Niebuhr did write the prayer in its present form and we also have on file a letter from him to that effect. As a matter of fact, very wide-spread credit was given him in Jack Alexander's last piece about Alcoholics Anonymous which come out a couple of years ago.” (1950)\*

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\*(As a matter of curiosity, it might be interesting to quote from that 1950 (Sept.) Jack Alexander article. The reference to the Serenity Prayer comes at the end of the article:

“Originally thought in Alcoholics Anonymous to have been written by St. Francis of Assisi, it turned out on recent research to have been the work of another eminent nonalcoholic, Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, of Union Theological Seminary. Dr. Niebuhr was amused on being told of the use to which his prayer was being put. Asked if it was original with him, he said he thought it was, but added, ‘Of course, it may have been spooking around for centuries.’

“Alcoholics Anonymous seized upon it in 1940 [actually 1941], after it has been used as a quotation in the New York Herald Tribune. The fellowship was late in catching up with it; and it will probably spook around a good deal longer before the rest of the world catches up with it.”)

Jack C. (not the “finder” of the prayer), a newspaperman in New York City, wrote to Bill in Oct. 1957. He said:

“I, too, researched the prayer several years ago when I did an A.A. series for the News...I called up Dr. Niebuhr...he told me he had written the prayer as the ‘tag line’ to a sermon he delivered on Practical Christianity. After church, a man who was to become prominent in the USO, asked Niebuhr’s permission to ‘borrow’ the prayer for the USO. Later, when we got into the war, it was printed on cards and distributed to front – line soldiers only...”

Bill replied:

“I was very much delighted to receive your letter which carried such a splendid rundown on the origin of the Serenity Prayer. This question has always been in dispute and your answer seems more conclusive than any I have yet seen. We are running a research on A.A. designed to help the future historian who wants to do a detailed job, and you may be sure that your letter will be placed in the archives and labeled ‘important.’ ”

Another published article, source unidentified, in answer to a question about the origin, answered by giving Dr. Niebuhr credit as the author, said it was first published in 1935 and quoted the prayer. Concluding, it said: “In addition to being distributed by the USO, the prayer was reprinted by the National Council of Churches and was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous.”

The March 22, 1959 issue of THIS WEEK magazine, quoted the prayer and carried an Editor’s note at the bottom of the page:

“This prayer was sent to us by a reader as a piece of wisdom generations old whose author was unknown. We recognized the prayer as an old friend, not nearly as old as our reader imagined. It was written by Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr...the USO distributed it to American soldiers, and the National Council of Churches printed it too. Later Alcoholics Anonymous adopted it. Gradually the mantle of age descended upon the words and people came to know them as centuries old. We tell the story now as proof that their message has put meaning into many lives.”

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Of recent date, two members from the New England area became especially interesting in contributing information to the background of the prayer, describing the area where the Niebuhr’s lived, I gather, part of the year, and sharing a letter from Mrs. Niebuhr, printed in an undated issue of the Berkshire, Mass. *Eagle*. Since the newspaper used the prayer, or it was used by other people, in a political advertisement appearing in the *Eagle*, minus credit to an author, Mrs. Niebuhr reviewed the background for them:

“...This prayer happened to have been written for use in the village church at Heath, a hill village some 50 miles or more north of here.

“The summertime residents of this village included many theological professors and even three Episcopal bishops. All in turn preached and took service in the village Congregational Church. My husband wrote out this prayer for such an occasion, and afterward a friend and neighbor, the late Howard Chandler Robbins, who formerly had been dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York, asked him for a copy. My husband reached into his pocket and handed it over to Dr. Robbins. Dr. Robbins asked him if he might have it printed in a monthly bulletin which was issued by the Commission on Social Justice of the then Federal Council of Churches of which he, Dr. Robbins, was then chairman. This was in the early days of World War II.



“After this, the prayer had quite a history. The USO or some such organization asked for the use of it, and copies were printed, I believe, in the millions. Various personages – admirals, commanders and others – used it and indeed often authorship was ascribed to them.

“At times, other organizations have asked for the use of it. An Episcopalian sisterhood in the Middle West printed it very nicely on little cards. Also Alcoholics Anonymous have used it widely with permission. When they use it, apparently, in their sessions or in their literature, they do not always give the author’s name. Every so often, however, in their periodicals, they would give the story of the prayer and its authorship.”

“My husband 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 other.’

“When in England last summer, I noted the prayer printed on cards was on sale at most of the bookstores at the cathedrals and abby churches. No authorship was given. So, since then, I have written to the cathedral chapters in the same vein I am writing now...”

Ursula M. Niebuhr  
Yale Hill, Stockbridge

Then claim for authorship on behalf of Dr. Niebuhr is formidable – no doubt about that at all. At the very least, he certainly authored one version, of which the 1941 obit prayer could have been an adaptation.

And yet...

There is still another source to consider, which also needs more investigation. Back in then late 1950’s, a Staff member, Anita R., browsing in a downtown New York bookstore, came upon a small card, beautifully bordered with a scrolled design in which was centered a printed prayer, which read:

#### A Prayer

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. Amen

From a fourteenth century prayer often called the “General’s Prayer”

The card originated from a bookshop in England, called Mobrays. Since that time (1957) we’ve received at least two other references to this particular version. The writer quoted from earlier in this letter (citing versions by St. Thomas Aquinas and Dr. Niebuhr) had further information to offer. She said:

“I then found the prayer in another book, ‘Between Dawn and Dark’, by Frederick W. Kates and the prayer was marked ‘Fourteenth Century’ and the words: ‘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.’ ”

She wondered if this was a valid version, could it then be attributed to Dr. Nieuhr?

We also received, some years ago also, a magazine article, unidentified as to source and date, but authored by Charles F. Kemp, First Christian Church, Lincoln, Nebraska. This excellent article entitled "A Prayer for Serenity and Courage" Begins:

"Some years ago, Russell Dicks, who was then Chaplain of Wesley Memorial Hospital in Chicago, published a little book of meditations for the sick. (Dicks, *Comfort Ye My People*, MacMillan, 1947). In it he included a short, simple prayer, complete in one sentence that contains three ideas... 'O God, and heavenly Father, grant us the serenity of mind to accept that which cannot be changed, the courage to change that which can be changed, and the wisdom to tell the one from the other, through Jesus Christ our Lord.'

"It isn't often that a prayer becomes widely quoted, but this one has been. I have seen it referred to in many different situations. Sometimes it is credited to different authors; often it is quoted anonymously. Not long ago I heard an address by a man who had been a medical missionary. He closed his address by saying something like this: 'What is needed is the spirit of the prayer of Phillip Brooks, "God grant us the serenity of mind to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what can be changed and the wisdom to tell the one from the other.'"

Mr. Kemp mentioned that A.A. also uses this same prayer and he continues:

"...the reason that this prayer has been referred to so widely has been because it is worded so simply and so clearly and because it speaks so specifically to man's needs."

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There seems to remain a touch of mystery still, a lingering uncertainty about whose "pen and brain" first shaped these timeless thoughts.

In any case, the Serenity Prayer, for almost forty years now, has become so deeply imbedded, so closely woven into the fabric, into the very tapestry of A.A. thinking, living, and into its philosophy that it's difficult to remember it did not originate within A.A. itself.

Bill W. said it clearly, many 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."

The thought has been expressed more than once: this prayer, whatever its ancient or modern origin, seems to have been born, at least in spirit, far back in time, out of an ancient perception and a suffering wisdom. Excepting for the Lord's Prayer and the Prayer of St. Francis, no other quotation or concept, at once so practical as well as spiritual, has taken over the mind and heart of every member who begins the A.A. journey to sobriety and rebirth.

In conclusion, let me quote again from Paul K.H.:

"...With all due respect to Doctor Niebuhr, I have the distinct impression that the quotation, other words, perhaps, but the same thought, go away back. I'm sure Doctor Niebuhr would be the first to agree. He would probably say that any such prayer, or any verity, is as we say of the A.A. program, 'as old as eternity and as new as tomorrow.'"

There have been many variations of the prayer, besides the version found in the 1941 *New York Herald Tribune*. Here are a few we've collected over the years:

"God give me the composure  
To accept the things I cannot change  
The courage to change the things I can  
And the wisdom to know the difference between the two."

"God grant us the serenity to accept that which  
we cannot change,  
Courage to change that which we can  
And the wisdom to know the difference."

"Give me the serenity to accept what cannot be changed,  
Give me the courage to change what can be changed,  
The wisdom to know one from the other."

Chester Nimitz made an adaption as follows:

"God grant me the courage to change the things  
I can change,  
The serenity to accept those I cannot change,  
And the wisdom to know the difference.  
But, God grant me the courage not to give up on what I think  
is right even though I think it is hopeless."

This version appeared, according to Jim F., a number of times in the Hagerstown (Maryland) "Almanac." (The last reprint, he thought, was in 1952.) The prayer is credited to Bishop Oliver J. Hart:

"God give us the fortitude to endure the things which cannot be  
changed, the courage to change things which should be  
changed, and the wisdom to know one from the other."

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At the risk of appearing too frivolous, there have been some humorous yet apt endings to the prayer: Erma Bomback, the popular writer, gave this version: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to keep my mouth shut when I don't know the difference..."

Someone else suggested this ending: "...and the wisdom to keep my mouth shut even when I know I'm right"!

Nell Wing, 1981

(Secretary to Bill W.; First A.A. Archivist, 1954-1983)

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 hardship 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.

- REINHOLD NIEBUHR